

# EDWARD WESTON

THE MATTER OF FORMS

Author of a vast and diverse body of work spanning five and a half decades, Edward Weston (1886–1958) is one of the great figures in the history of modern photography also because his work allows us to reflect on the distinctive qualities of photography as a technical, aesthetic and perceptual category.

His first creative experiments reveal a momentary adherence to the pictorialist trends of the time, to later stand out as one of the protagonists of a new generation of American photographers who sought to refocus the artistic axis of photography based on his extraordinary ability to represent the most diverse subjects in the world with rigor, clarity and sobriety.

In their extreme simplicity and originality, the exceptional quality of Weston's images is also due to the way in which he was able to reframe and articulate the extraordinary realistic and objective capacity of photography with its aesthetic, poetic and phenomenological potential, contributing to broaden the horizon of the subjective experience of the image. In doing so, Weston enunciated the unique role of photography in the imaging arts landscape of his time.

Weston was an immensely prolific photographer, and his work brings together a set of photographic subjects, types, and genres: portraits, nudes, still lifes, natural and urban landscapes, object photography, architecture. This anthological exhibition aims to cover the entirety of Weston's photographic career, which began in the early TWENTIETH century and was only interrupted in the late 1940s. This selection of works aims to go far beyond the period in which Weston made most of the images that earned him wide critical and institutional recognition. Indeed, a more complete and heterogeneous approach to his work allows other layers of aesthetic valuation to be summoned, broadening the understanding of the depth and articulations that Weston developed in the various fields he explored. In addition, it allows us to point out the aspects and affinities (in the gaze, in the construction of the image or in its peculiar relationship with certain subjects) present throughout his career, emphasizing the coherence of his imaginary, as well as the nuances and moments of transition that have occurred in his career.

From an early age, **Edward Weston** showed interest in developing a creative side of photography apart from his commercial work. His early experiments reveal the influence of painting and reveal his attention and adherence to the pictorialist environment of the time. These photographs include impressionistic views, pastoral themes with a soft or slightly blurred focus, numerous staged portraits exploring expressive poses, and combinations with shadows and graphic elements of the environment.

The two periods he spent in Mexico, between 1923-1924 and then between 1925-1926, were decisive in **Edward Weston's** creative career. There he began to explore new themes and genres and his visual horizon broadened significantly. It encompasses a wide variety of themes and types of places, figures and things, details, appropriate objects, motifs taken from their original context and relocated in another interpretive framework. At the same time, his visual style is completely detached from any reminiscence of the pictorialist phase. A photography of great technical, formal and compositional rigor is consolidated. Weston realizes that he has the ability to transform the trivial into something suggestive and extraordinary. It is clear to him that the art of photography lies fundamentally in the moment of taking the image, in how the photographer contemplates the subject and makes decisions according to the variables inherent to the photographic device. For him, the process was instinctive. This way of seeing – intuitive, intense and immediate – that seeks to isolate the subject, eliminating the accessory, the unnecessary, what can divert or attenuate the intensity of the photographic vision, constitutes the essence of Weston's creative talent.

From 1927, **Weston** began a series of still life photographs. In these images he fully reveals the principles and characteristics of his work: the desire to represent the timeless essence of a natural object and, correlatively, to underline the duplicative and perceptual capacities of the photographic medium.

The compositions are meticulously conceived. In the image space there is a calculated conformity between the dimension of the shapes and the format of the image. Here it is important to reiterate the focus on detail as a defining aspect of Weston's imaginary, evident in these still lifes and also in other aspects of his work. Weston understood the vision of detail as a way of fragmenting, isolating and bringing our gaze closer to certain things, accentuating the two-dimensional character of the image, its closed and opaque nature, without depth or horizon, especially evident in still lifes with dark backgrounds, such as photographs of peppers, but also in the various images of plants, trees, rocks and stones that he made from the early 1930s.

**Weston** left Mexico in 1926. In the following years, he made several series of nudes. It is not a new issue. He had already made some important nudes before, including a shot of the back of Anita Brenner and another of her son Neil, whose torso is cut out in an image that evokes ancient Greek statues. In nudes, the photographer's gaze varies depending on the model. In some cases, the frame is wide, even showing the faces, while in others the gaze is more segmented, focused on parts of the body as a way of cutting out and accentuating the shapes within the frame. We can recognize that eroticism is a quality present in some of these photographs. However, it is incorrect to conclude that this look prevails in most of the nudes he made. Weston sees the body primarily as a formal reality. The beauty and sensuality suggested by these bodies are based above all on the play of lines, shadows and contours that they provide.

From the late 1920s, and with greater intensity in the following decades, the landscape genre occupied a central place in **Weston's** photographic production. In 1927, Weston photographed in the desert around Palm Springs, California. In the years that followed, he traveled through New Mexico, Arizona, and other areas of California, including Oceano, Death Valley, Yosemite, the Mojave Desert, and Point Lobos, near his home in Carmel. In these different places, he recorded wide views of inhospitable territories in which there are no signs of human presence or intervention. The horizon line and the breadth of the territory become structuring motifs in his work. These images are also driven by a sense of awe at the epic and immeasurable character of these natural landscapes. Beyond their choice of panoramic shots, the images reveal other aspects and elements of nature, such as weather phenomena, rain, cloud configuration and variations in sunlight, often in conjunction with their visual effect on the arid land or the vegetation and unique morphology of these territories. It is a sensitive vision of the transformative nature of the landscape, subject to environmental and geological changes.

Little by little, and with greater intensity from the 1940s onwards, **Edward Weston's** imagery became denser and more melancholic, not only in terms of the selection of subjects, but also in the tonalities of the images. This tendency is particularly evident in the photographs he took for the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, the masterpiece of the poet Walt Whitman. He traveled all over the United States for two years taking photographs. He revisited many of the recurring themes in his work, but highlights a large number of images he took in cemeteries in Louisiana and Georgia. They are photographs in which his interest in formal aspects, texture and light predominates. Each issue is seen as an integral part of a geography that is simultaneously physical, social, and mental. On the other hand, images abound of abandoned, destroyed and burned buildings, garbage and things destined to disappear. We can identify that the themes of finitude and death contribute to an imaginary increasingly characterized by loneliness, melancholy and decadence. For the first time in his work, the images suggest a disillusioned and critical commentary on American reality, on the relationship between nature and culture, continuity and change, alienation and social tension.



In 1938, **Weston** moved with Charis Wilson to the wooden house built by his son Neil in Wildcat Hill, near Point Lobos, California. He spends long periods photographing in this coastal region. He wanders through areas he knows well. The images show a nature imbued with cycles, rhythms and forces, a macrocosm where the artist finds the material to continue his work. At Point Lobos, Weston encounters a wild, dazzling, ineffable beauty that he had always sought out in faraway places. In the trees, forests, stones and rocky landscapes, the photographer finds a vital energy that leads the perception towards a diffuse time, contrary to the linearity of history, alien to modernity. Nature then emerges as a theme and scenario that allows us to think and experience a renewed gaze (spontaneous, intuitive, aesthetic), a gaze that is both concrete and metaphysical that allows us to rediscover nature.

«Tina sat to me yesterday morning. We had long planned that I should do her as I have often seen her, quoting poetry – to attempt the registration of her remarkably mobile face in action. There was nothing forced in this attempt, she was soon in a mood which discounted me and my camera – or did she subconsciously feel my presence and respond to it? Within twenty minutes I had made three dozen Graflex negatives and caught her sensitive face with its every subtle change.»

Edward Weston, October 1924

«I have been photographing our toilet, that glossy enameled receptacle of extraordinary beauty. It might be suspicioned that I am in a cynical mood to approach such subject matter (...). But no! My excitement was absolute aesthetic response to form. For long I have considered photographing this useful and elegant accessory to modern hygienic life, but not until I actually contemplated its image on my ground glass did I realize the possibilities before me. I was thrilled! - here was every sensuous curve of the "human form divine" but minus imperfections.»

Edward Weston, October 1925

«I have on occasion used the expression, 'to make a pepper more than a pepper.' I now realize it is a misleading phrase. I did not mean 'different' from a pepper, but a pepper plus, —an intensification of its own important form and texture,— a revelation.»

Edward Weston, February, 1932

« These simplified forms I search for in the nude body are not easy to find, nor record when I do find them. There is that element of chance in the body assuming an important movement: then there is the difficulty in focussing close up with a sixteen inch lens: and finally the possibility of movement in an exposure of from 20 sec. to 2 min.,—even the breathing will spoil a line.»

Edward Weston, March 1927

«I worked all Sunday with the shells,—literally all day. Only three negatives made and two of them were done as records of movement to repeat again when I can find suitable backgrounds. I wore myself out trying every conceivable texture and tone for grounds: Glass, tin, cardboard,—wool, velvet, even my rubber rain coat!»

Edward Weston, May, 1927

«Each medium has its own limitations. Photography has proved that nature offers an endless number of perfect “compositions,” —order everywhere.»

Edward Weston, October, 1931

My interest continues in the sand and soil patterns, but rain keeps me from work. These patterns are elusive: formed by soil washed over sand they change continually,—no use going out to search for them unless I take my camera,—they are changed by the time I could return.»

Edward Weston, January, 1936



«Clouds, torsos, shells, peppers, trees, rocks, smoke stacks, are but interdependent, interrelated parts of a whole, which is Life. Life rhythms felt in no matter what, become symbols of the whole. The creative force in man, recognizes and records these rhythms with the medium most suitable to him, to the object, or the moment, feeling the cause, the life within the outer form.»

Edward Weston, April 24, 1930

«Photography as a creative expression—or what you will—must be seeing plus. Seeing alone means factual recording. Photography is not at all seeing in the sense that the eyes see. Our vision is binocular, it is in a continuous state of flux, while the camera captures but a single isolated condition of the moment.»

Edward Weston, January, 1932

«Besides Neil's companionship ... he afforded me a visual beauty which I recorded in a series of Graflex negatives of considerable value. He was anxious to pose for me, but it was never a "pose," he was absolutely natural and unconscious in front of the camera.»

Edward Weston, October 1925

«... my negative of the juniper tree detail: it has exciting rhythms plus exquisite detail which no painter could record,—or if attempted must appear niggling, while in the photograph—an exact transcript of Nature and therefore exactly true—it is honest, convincing.»

Edward Weston, March, 1929

«My personal viewpoint, my individualism comes forth, in the parts I select to present the fundamental structure I feel and extract from nature, isolate in my negative. I have been related in articles to Brancusi in my use of "abstract form." Yet they are all forms abstracted from nature: my seeing of life, recognition of cause, intuitive understanding.»

Edward Weston, October, 1930

“An idea, just as abstract as could be conceived by sculptor or painter, can be expressed through ‘objective’ recording with the camera, because nature has everything that can possibly be imagined by the artist: and the camera, controlled by wisdom, goes beyond statistics.»

Edward Weston, January, 1932