

Lumiere Press

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From its earliest incarnations as a paper-based medium, photography has been closely intertwined with book publishing. Just five years after William Henry Fox Talbot patented the first viable positive/negative photographic process in 1839, he published one of the earliest photography books. Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*, a six-volume fascicle published between 1844 and 1846, proposed a variety of uses for the new medium in the service of science, art, archaeology and history, illustrating each example with one of Talbot's own tipped-in calotypes. The text of *The Pencil of Nature* is pointedly didactic, and the subtext is a clear defence of the paper calotype against its rival, the French daguerreotype, a process that was unsuitable for reproductions of any kind, particularly book illustrations. Indeed, instead of labelling Talbot as the first person to employ photographs in the service of a book publication, we might more accurately describe him as the first person to employ a book publication in the service of photography.

Reflecting on the oeuvre of contemporary book-maker and photographer Michael Torosian brings to mind Talbot's incunabula. This is not due to any overt similarities between their publications, but because *The Pencil of Nature* implies a conviction that Torosian articulates: 'The book is the medium of photography.' This dictum has proved a successful formula for Torosian's Lumiere Press – the only fine print book press devoted solely to photography – which in 2011 marked both the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publishing programme (beginning in 1986 with *Edward Weston: Dedicated to Simplicity* [1]) and the release of its twenty-first title. Beneath the outward simplicity of Torosian's statement lies a complex and multifaceted history of a hybrid medium – the photography book – that is more than the sum of its parts. In this context, Lumiere Press stands poised between two different photography book traditions: on the one hand, that of the hand-printed artists' books of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and, on the other hand, the widely produced photography books that began to proliferate prior to World War Two. The bridge that spans these two genres is modernism.

In the terms of the history of photography, modernism signified the rejection of the painterly qualities and subject matter of pictorialist photography that had predominated in artistic photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernist photography practice and theory between the wars focused on the inherent qualities of the medium, such as the distortions created by the camera's optics; the effect of different perspectives; and the detail and sharpness of the photographic negative/print. The compatibility of books and photographs logically begins with their mutual flatness and paper bases. Photographs, as Torosian points out, unlike media such as painting and sculpture, can be printed in such a way that the reproductions remain true to the aesthetic (and, at times, even the size) of the original print. It was by way of his own photography that Torosian

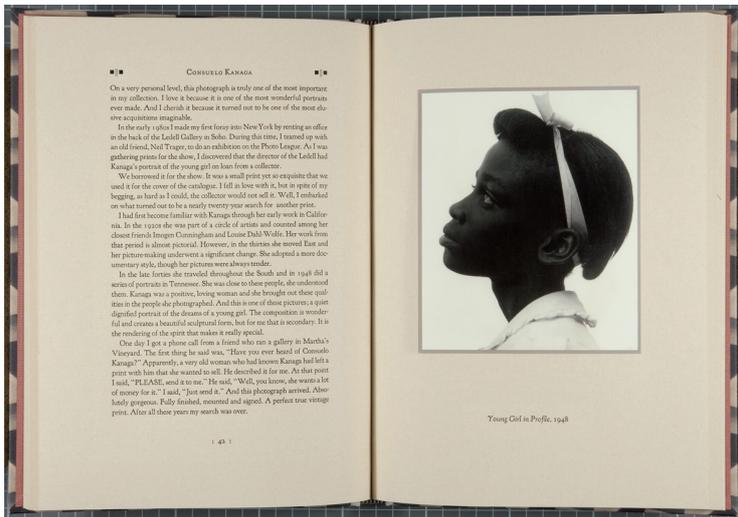


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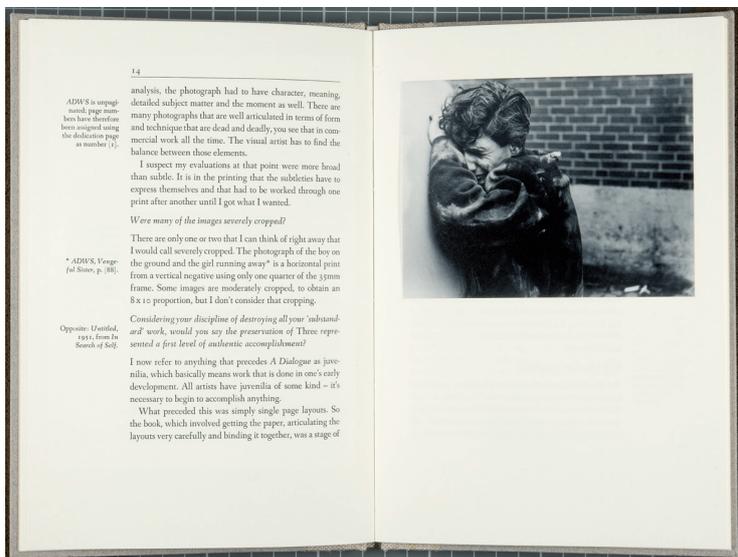
came to book-making: frustrated by his lack of input into the design of a catalogue of his work, he began studying bookbinding at evening classes, and immersed himself in the community of small presses that existed in Toronto in the late 1970s.

Torosian's artistic vision stretched beyond the ability to reproduce his own images: in photography books, he recognised the potential to 'be a part of the dialogue of my medium'. Lumiere Press books are undoubtedly a collaborative effort between Torosian and the artists he chronicles, but they are executed through Torosian's singular aesthetic vision and literary voice, bringing his subjects into a realm of intimacy rarely broached by other scholars. However, Torosian is not attempting to write a history of photography of the last century; rather, his books elaborate on the *story* of modernist photography. United in their overarching theme of the investigation of the nature of artistic photography by examining the work of exceptional individual practitioners, these books are, in essence, descendents of the great modernist traditions of the mid-twentieth century. Printed in editions ranging from 150 to 250, each book is a unique object of great beauty, executed with incredible workmanship and painstaking effort.

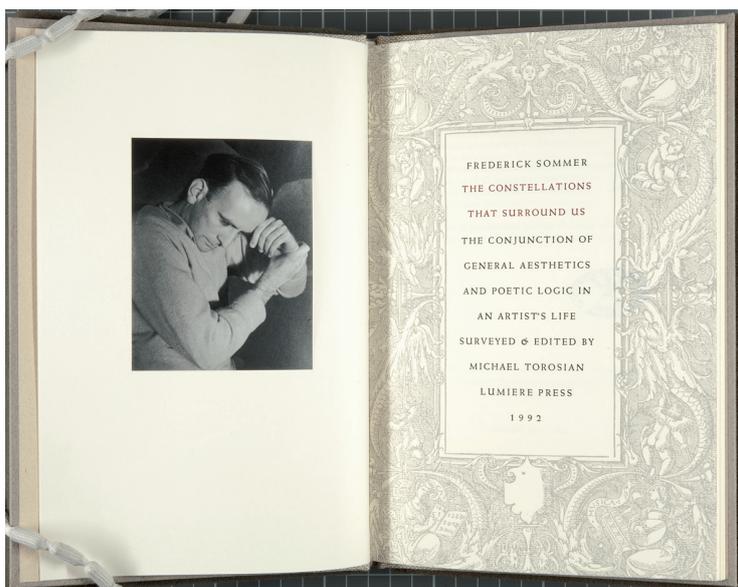
The transition to modernism in photography is one that is paralleled by the evolution of the photography book itself. As Talbot predicted in *The Pencil of Nature*, photographs were put to all manner of documentary uses in the late nineteenth century. Photography simultaneously fuelled and



4



5



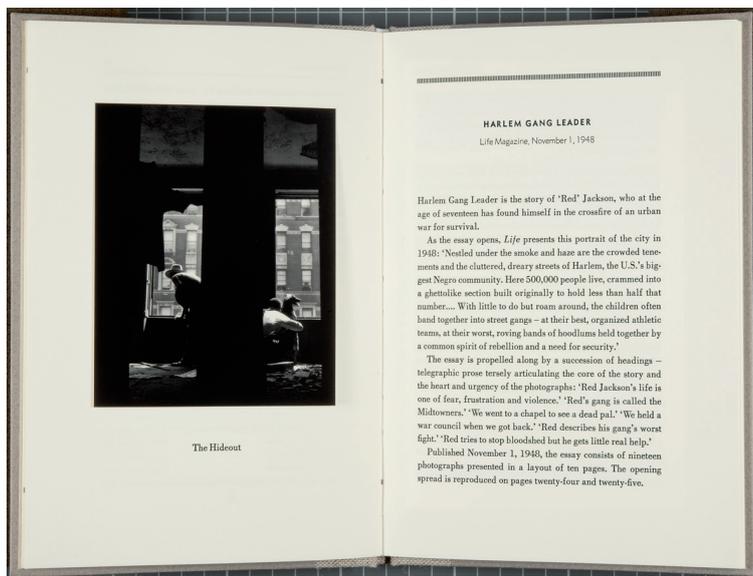
6

cities. Torosian has not neglected his personal artistic practice, either. The publications *Aurora* (1987) and *Anatomy* (1993) arose from Torosian's own photographic projects, and his series of portraits accompanies *Toronto Suite* (1989).

While the design, the photographs and the hand finishing are critical components of every Lumiere Press publication, the books are nonetheless never merely aesthetic ornaments: the accompanying text is always of the highest literary standard. If the photographer is living, the text often takes the form of an interview conducted by Torosian, such as in the cases of Dave Heath (*Extempore*, 1988 [5], and *Korea*, 2004), Frederick Sommer (*The Constellations that Surround Us*, 1992 [6]), Gordon Parks (*Harlem*, 1997 [7]) and Edward Burtynsky (*Residual Landscapes*, 2001 [8]). In addition to countless hours devoted to conducting archival research, Torosian frequently spends days speaking with his subjects, collecting hundreds of hours of audio recordings. As an interviewer, Torosian's voice is muted but always present, influenced in tone and tenor by the interviews of *The Paris Review* and *The New Yorker*. Through his clear respect for and rapport with his subjects, Torosian elicits remarkable insights, coaxing his subjects to reveal themselves through their recollections and in their own voices. In cases where the photographer is no longer alive, reminiscences from an intimate relation or friend provide the necessary insight to evoke the personality behind the artist. Even decades after their deaths, Lumiere Press books about Edward Weston, Paul Strand and Edward Steichen provide insights into the art of monumental figures in twentieth-century photography and offer valuable scholarship to the history of photography.

Along with the release of *Steichen: Eduard et Voulangis* and the Press's twenty-fifth anniversary, the year 2011 presented another remarkable occasion for Lumiere Press when the Department of Special Collections of the University of St Andrews Library in Scotland acquired the last complete set of titles in the Lumiere Press archive. The acquisition marks a new initiative between the Rare Books and Photography collections at the University of St Andrews to build upon an already impressive archive of photography books that stretches back to *The Pencil of Nature* itself. As reproducible media, book-making and photography are analogous in many ways, and perhaps have never been more so than in our current age of digital printing and publishing. Photographs and books can be mass-produced in large quantities or hand made as limited edition originals; both are available for consumption in hard copy or electronically; and both can be either ubiquitous and commonplace, or unique and irreplaceable. This acquisition both recognises and reinforces the historical link between these two forms of creative expression, while pointing towards a renewed interest among book-makers, publishers, photographers and collectors to strengthen and sustain this close association in an increasingly digitally oriented future.

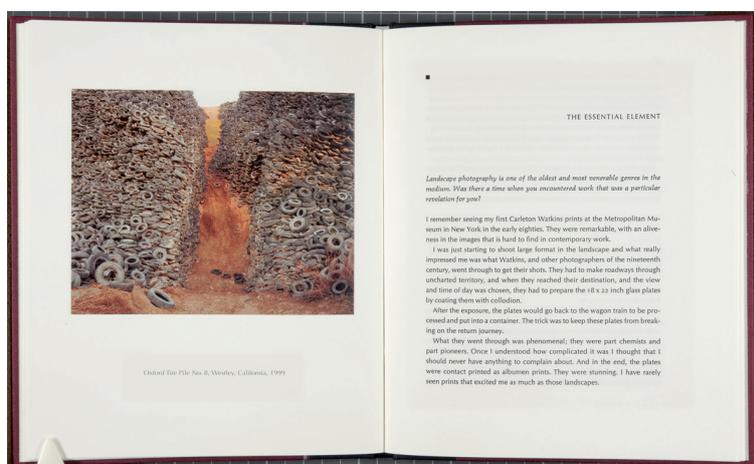
Every book published by Lumiere Press exists as a unique object of artisanal skill and great beauty. Although the themes addressed by these books may be universal, the journey is nonetheless an intensely personal one, clearly derived in large part from Torosian's own expertise as a photographer and connoisseur of photography, but also fuelled by his intellectual and artistic curiosity. Torosian casts and sets every letter, punctuation mark and space in every book he publishes, a process he likens to 'an archi-



7

tect setting every brick in a building he's designed'. There is no doubt that Torosian has made great contributions to photography scholarship. But with his work through Lumiere Press, he also continues to influence and transform the very specialised medium of fine press photography books, of which he is an uncontested master.

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8

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