

summer fun: looking for the zeitgeist in stock photography



LATE JULY, 1991. The second week of the heat wave. Too hot. Too hot for me. Too hot for my computer. (Computers don't say "Hot enough for you?" They say "Fatal error." Means the same thing.) Too hot to write in complete sentences. When the temperature is 102, grammar becomes irrelevant.

By the time you read this, it will be September. And it will be cooler. Much cooler. But, at the moment, it feels as if coolness (the climatological condition) is as extinct as coolness (the sociological condition). We seem to be experiencing (culturally speaking) a very uncool time.

Which is why the pictures are so interesting. The pictures are from a time when coolness (sociologically speaking) was still a subcultural phenomenon, not a mass phenomenon. The pictures, which were intended for a mass audience, don't acknowledge the existence of coolness. The people shown in these photos have no idea what it means to be cool.

In these pictures, people, adults, are overjoyed at the sight of a beach ball and grown-ups are forever playing party games such as blindman's bluff. In these pictures, everyone smiles.

The pictures are stock photographs from the late 1950s and early 1960s. They are pictures that, in the last couple of years, have become fashionable. They've become popular among designers who use them to add an ironic touch to their posters and brochures. They were the inspiration for the Marvin Heiferman, Carole Kismaric picture book *I'm So Happy* (Vintage, New York, 1990). They were used in the Seventh Avenue windows of Barneys this month, as backdrops for mannequins (who, for the most part, do not smile). These pictures, stock images of an America that never quite existed, are now, more or less by accident, cool.

STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY isn't like other kinds of photography. Not like photojournalism, or art photography, or amateur photography. Stock photography is message photography. Each image has a theme, recognizable and unambiguous. "The stock mindset is oriented to singularity: one clear, unequivocal message per image," writes disgruntled stock photographer Stuart Cohen in a recent edition of the *Photo District News*. "The most productive stock pictures, the ones that sell time and again, fairly scream SUCCESS or PARIS or DOMESTIC BLISS."

Stock photographs, the ones shown in contemporary catalogues, seem to be images borrowed from big-budget advertising. What better source of pictures calculated to communicate very specific ideas in a way that is completely in harmony with mainstream styles and mores? Just look at the people in today's stock photos—a "mature" man leaning on his mailbox reading a letter (Have we seen this moment in a commercial for Publishers' Clearing House or AT&T Long Distance?), the forthright-looking woman in the earthy rag sweater (Hasn't she been in an ad for bran cereal?), the shirtless man clutching a naked infant to his bare chest (I know: Calvin Klein's Eternity). These archetypes from advertising are

replicated in stock photos, which are sold to advertisers who can't afford to set up a photo shoot and generate archetypes of their own. It's a cycle.

Contemporary stock photos appear to be neutral, saying little besides that one thing they're intended to say. When you look at older stock photos, however, you realize that the images are not neutral. Stock photography always has a point of view. It just takes time for us to see it. Imagine a photo from the latest FPG International catalogue, a yuppie father in round horn-rimmed glasses clutching his overalls-clad preschooler with one hand and zooming a toy airplane in front of his face with the other, 30 years from now. This photo will someday look every bit as stilted, as freighted with assumptions as the FPG photos from the late Fifties and early Sixties.

ONE HOT MORNING. I go over to the offices of FPG International. In a cool, cool room overlooking Union Square Park I sit at a big light box, looking at pictures and talking with Jessica Brackman, who is now chairman of the photo agency that was founded by her father, Arthur Brackman, in 1937. We're looking at the work of one stock photographer, Dennis Hallinan. Hallinan sold his first photos to FPG in 1957 and he's still shooting.

Brackman says that Hallinan was a photographer at Cypress Gardens in Florida where he took pictures of water-skiers. Selma Brackman, Jessica's mother, became Hallinan's mentor.

"My mother was running the company and she took him [Hallinan] on this whirlwind of shooting everything clients were looking for. He would come up North and shoot houses in peak rhododendron season...."

On the light box in front of us are Hallinan's shots: a blond-haired kid in a red-and-white striped shirt and red baseball cap, his mouth stretched as wide as it can possibly go in some cross between amazement and joy, leapfrogging over a silver fire hydrant against a background of blue sky and cumulus clouds; three hammocks—red, yellow, green—strung between cypress trees, each occupied by a smiling model in a white swimsuit; a smiling blond mother teaching her smiling son how to ride a fire engine-red bicycle in front of a modern Floridian house. All of these photos are oversaturated: with light, with color, with good cheer, with the fantasies of an uncool world.

In another shot, a family is packing their car for a driving vacation, and mom stands holding the youngest child, who is wearing a crown. "And this is me with the crown," says Brackman.

These aren't just anonymous stock shots. These are family photographs.

ONE OF THE CRAZY THINGS about these photos, which look so stilted and so unnatural that it is difficult to think of the people in them as people, is that in the case of Hallinan and many stock photographers, the children are often his own, or those of friends or clients.

The little blond boys in the sprinkler or on the pogo stick are Hallinan's boys. When his boys grew to be teenagers, Hallinan's subject matter became surfing and beach-blanket-movie antics. By the 1970s, Hallinan's professional models begin to look almost (sort of) natural; the men sport sideburns and the ideal father now resembles Burt Reynolds. There is a rose-tinted photo of a couple in a rowboat, the girl has long dark hair parted in the middle, and she isn't smiling. Cool has hit the mainstream.

"These are the ones we liked enough to duplicate," says Brackman. "There are some in the files where they're wearing hideous bell-bottoms." She adds that the Seventies revival in stock photography has yet to happen.

JESSICA BRACKMAN started to realize that the Fifties photos had value when Marvin Heiferman and Diane Keaton were putting together a book of period movie stills (*Still Life*). Then, Brackman showed Heiferman the Fifties photos, and files that had been long dead were reopened for *I'm So Happy*. FPG is now encouraging this reemergence in their *Historical Selects* catalogues, which also feature black-and-white celebrity and human-interest shots of the Forties and late Thirties.

"Why now, in the Nineties, is there such a resur-

gence of these images, such a renewed appreciation for the styles and manners of an earlier day?" asks Brackman in an introduction to the second FPG *Historical Selects* catalogue. "Perhaps it is a reaction to the chaos and impending peril of our time—a longing to return to a nostalgic world of simplicity, optimism, harmony. Or perhaps it is a reconciliation with our past—an owning of our heritage that will enable us to set forth on a more mindful and conscious path."

Actually, stock shots are still characterized by simplicity and optimism. It's the nature of the business.

FROM MY HOT LITTLE OFFICE. I telephone Dennis Hallinan at his home in Winter Garden, Florida. Hallinan, now in his 60s, is affable and he's unassuming about his work. A few weeks earlier he had been in New York looking at photos by him and other stock masters such as L. Willinger, blown up large in the Seventh Avenue windows of Barneys.

"It was fascinating to see them," he says. "I assumed anything I did in the Fifties was doomed."

Hallinan calls this revival a "resurrection" and says of his photos, "They're like the old *Life with Father* where everyone was perfect, G-rated."

I asked him if it wasn't a little confusing that these images that he characterizes as "schmalzy," these pictures that seem to be stills from a very sugary sitcom, were often of his own children. Does that mean his real life was *Life with Father*?

But Hallinan was just using the available resources. "We have four sons. They were stair-stepped in size, and we'd just line them up in front of the fireplace at Christmastime...."

He also shot regular family photographs of his kids, generally in black and white, he says. The difference was that for the professional ones he would get out all the props, often sent to him or suggested by Selma Brackman, and get the kids dressed up and smiling the big smiles. Always with a 4x5 camera. The regular family pictures were a little more casual; the boys were not obliged to wear red-and-white shirts or straw hats.

Part of the reason those 1950s photos have a stilted look has to do with the quality of the color, which was not true to life, and the speed of the film, which was slow. The models, Hallinan recalls, "were like statues." Frozen, grinning, perfect.

Of that tinted Seventies photo where the dark-haired girl and her boyfriend, almost scowling, look like they've been listening to too much Leonard Cohen, Hallinan says, "If they're not smiling, I must have goofed up. The things I did were on the positive side." Matter-of-factly he admits, "I have a postcard mentality."

When asked if he has a favorite photo, Hallinan replies, "From an economic standpoint, it's the Statue of Liberty."

Recently, Hallinan has turned his attention to shooting views of the New York skyline and photos for industrial uses. FPG, says Hallinan, wanted him to do shots of computers. "I didn't have one so I got a beat-up old Apple from a school. I shot a picture of it and it sold."

FPG suggested he get a better-looking computer to use as a model, so he bought a new one and gradually became interested in using it. Now, Hallinan has discovered computer graphics, and he's incorporating them through double-exposures into his human-interest shots, making pictures that are as typical of this era as his 1950s pictures were of that era.

AS MUCH AS their look changes from decade to decade, stock photos are always the same. The smiling bathing beauty with the immense beach ball has been replaced by a smiling woman with a smaller beach ball. The swimsuit competition shot has been replaced by an aerobics class shot. The couple in a potato sack race have been replaced by a couple (seemingly nude) arm wrestling. For every dated photo, there is a contemporary equivalent.

Today's stock houses offer some idealizations that wouldn't have existed years ago—women in business suits, happy black families, computer-generated still lifes—but our ideals haven't changed that much. Given a decade or two, the assumptions behind these archetypal images will be thrown into relief. Just you wait.



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