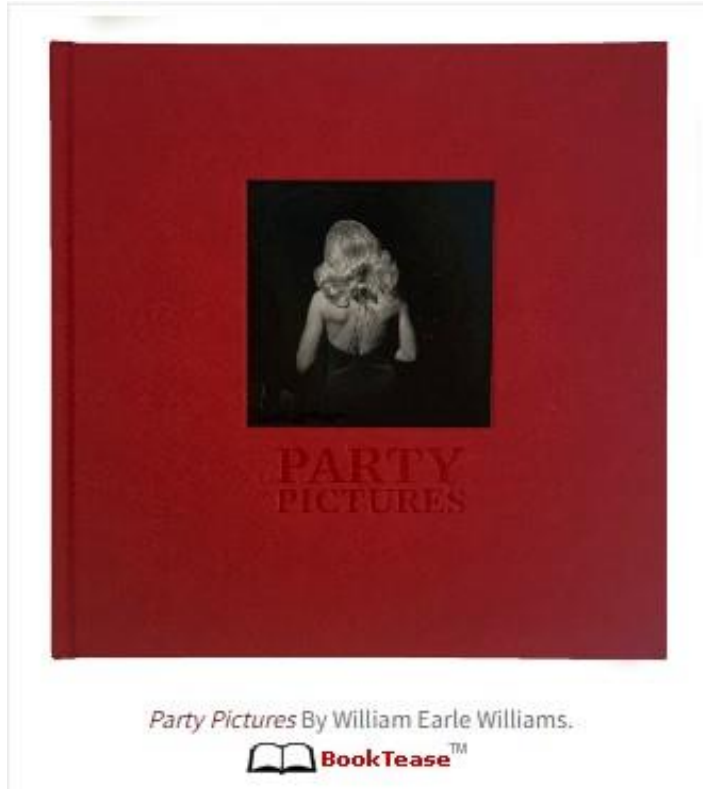


Monday, December 5, 2022

Book of the Week: Selected by Blake Andrews



Party Pictures

Photographs by William Earle Williams

The Print Center, Philadelphia, PA, USA, 2021. 92 pp., 44 black-and-white tritone plates and 29 illustrations, 8½x8½".

Photographer William Earle Williams is based in Philadelphia, where he's taught at Haverford since earning his Yale MFA in 1978. Over the last four decades, he's tackled numerous photo projects centered on African-American history and the inanimate artifacts of racial reckoning. He's photographed the former locations of slave trading and the battle relics of Gettysburg, explored the Underground Railroad, and paid homage to under-recognized African-American Civil War soldiers. For an oeuvre focused on humanity and the impact of history, it's worth noting that none of Williams'

photos depict living people. Instead they document historical artifacts.

In the context of past projects, his book *Party Pictures* comes across as an outlier. Not only does *Party Pictures* show people, it does so with relish. This book is a gush of humanity. Social clusters pile tightly into each frame, captured by Williams with close-range flash. One might be tempted to read into them an unconscious compensation, as if Williams was making up for decades of inanimate imagery in one fell swoop. But these pictures are not a reaction. In fact, just the opposite. They predate all of his other projects. He began the series back in 1979, just after settling roots in Philly. His shoots extended into the late 90s, although the book does not go past 1988.



An early spread of news clippings in the book sets the tone for what's to come. Torn from old gossip sections, they recount an ever revolving calendar of balls, parties, celebrations and occasions. Williams used such blurbs initially to scout potential photo ops. He eventually gained official permission and regular access. Philadelphia's social scene at the time was (and to some extent still is) predicated on a network of private clubs, a powerful and secretive underworld of movers and shakers which Williams was determined to penetrate. "The Philadelphia parties were supposed to be the best," he tells Edith Newhall in the book's interview. "You know, the best people, the best behavior, the best food, the best, best, best, best, best." Seeking the best best best he arrived at parties with his camera, dressed for the occasion in a tuxedo. He shot freely from the hip in dimly lit spaces. In some ways he blended right in, at least as well as a Black man could amid the stodgy white glad handlers. If his resulting photos are any evidence, it seems that most subjects paid him little attention. Their minds and eyes are generally engaged off-camera, perhaps cutting mental deals or scanning the room for A-listers.

Philadelphia certainly knew how to throw a party. A mood of late-night excitement carries throughout the book. Revelers are dressed to the nines in a variety of black tie suits, costumes, boas, sequined gowns and veiled hats. Framed against darkened backdrops — Williams shot intuitively, often without clear vision of his exposures — and cropped abruptly onto medium format monochrome, they cast a spell of mystery and elegance. Andy Warhol makes an appearance in the book, as does Frank Sinatra and Walter Annenberg. Philly locals will probably recognize others who escape me. These old social clubs attracted the creme-de-la-creme, "puritanical doyennes in starched lace and society upstarts dripping with jewels alongside blue-collar waitstaff," as described by Elizabeth Spungen. Williams captured all with deliberate impartiality. If he was star-stuck, it doesn't show in the photos. "It turns out that even with the best, best, best, best, best you still run into the human condition," he tells Newhall. Then the clincher: "People are lonely."



Shot in Philadelphia by an adopted local, this is a Philly project through and through, vertically integrated with local ties. The series was initially shown at the Print Center, an exhibition space in the city with its own ties to the old social circuit (it was initially called The Print Club). Naturally, the deal to turn the exhibition into a book occurred in Philadelphia, at the Oyster House, with the assistance and encouragement of John Caperton and Edith Newhall. Finally, a chance to share Philly's homegrown gem with the outer world. Or so the thinking went. That was in 2011. But, well, you know how photobooks go sometimes. This one would take another 9 years to reach fruition. Bad timing as it turned out, because the original publication date was meant to be March 12, 2020. One could not have scheduled less fortunate release date.

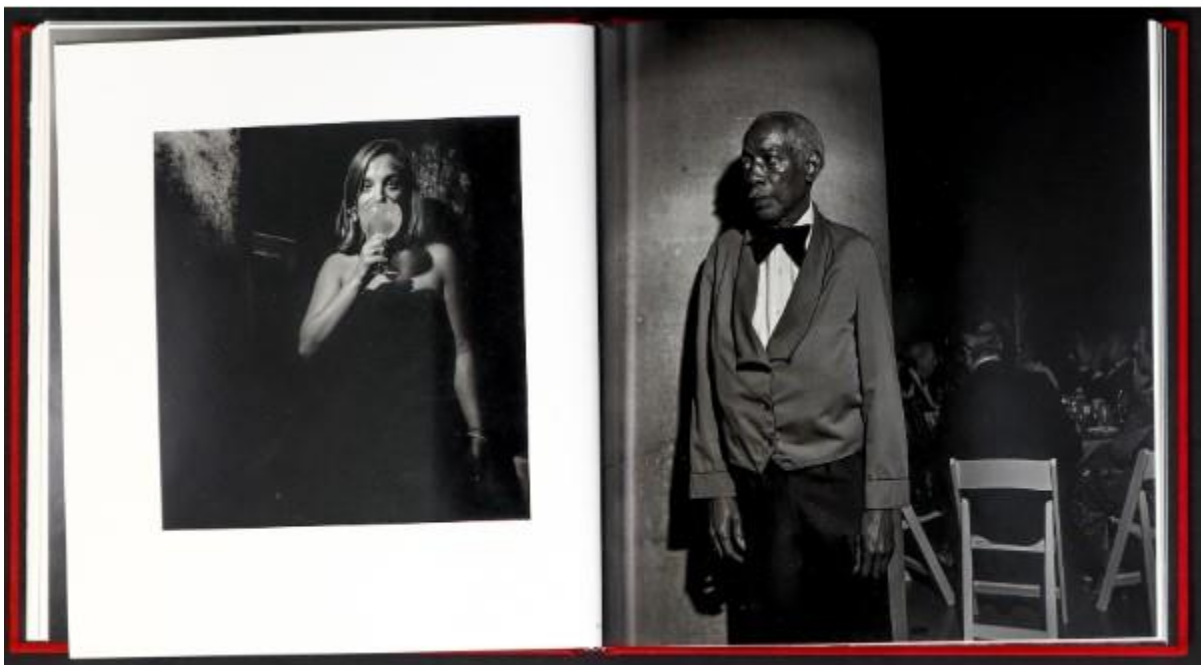
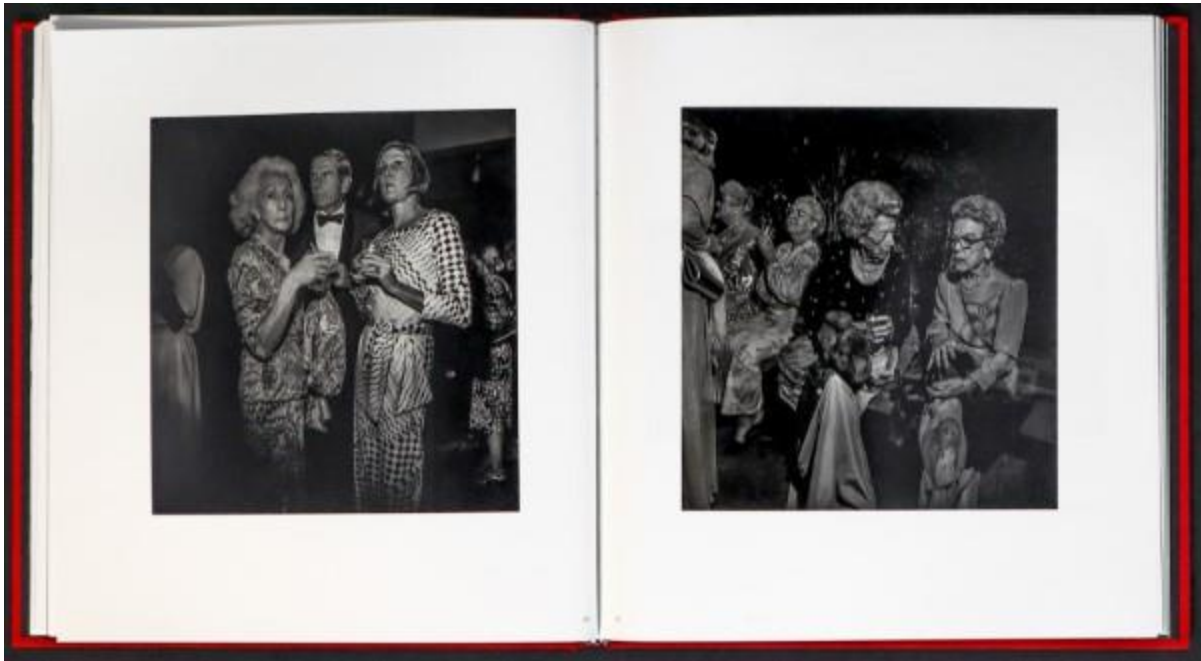


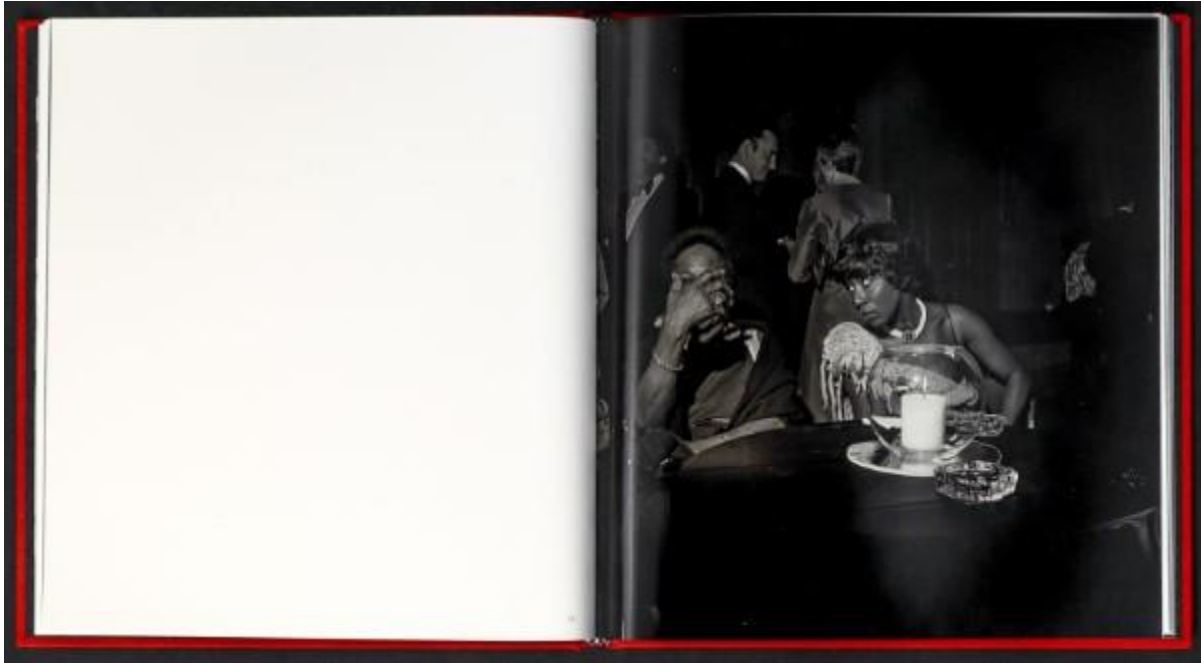
The world soon went into shutdown and the punch bowl was pulled from Party Pictures before it could really get going. But the book never went anywhere. It was published and ready, for anyone who cared to look. Browsing it now in 2022, this is an unsung gem. If it took 9 years of preparation, the work shows. It may be a smallish book with smallish photos, but the attention to minor details is comprehensive and unusual. This starts with the faux-leatherette cover, perhaps designed to glow like a satin dress. Party Pictures contains two great essays (by Elizabeth Spungen and John Caperton), a lengthy interview transcript between Williams and Newhall, plus an informative bio and captioned index. The supporting material is great, but it's upstaged by the photographs, as it should be. The images are reproduced as tritone plates with high fidelity and lush tonality, and a sheen befitting a gala event. Party Pictures may have arrived well after most guests have left, but that's no

reason to sleep on it. This is one party worth staying up for.

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