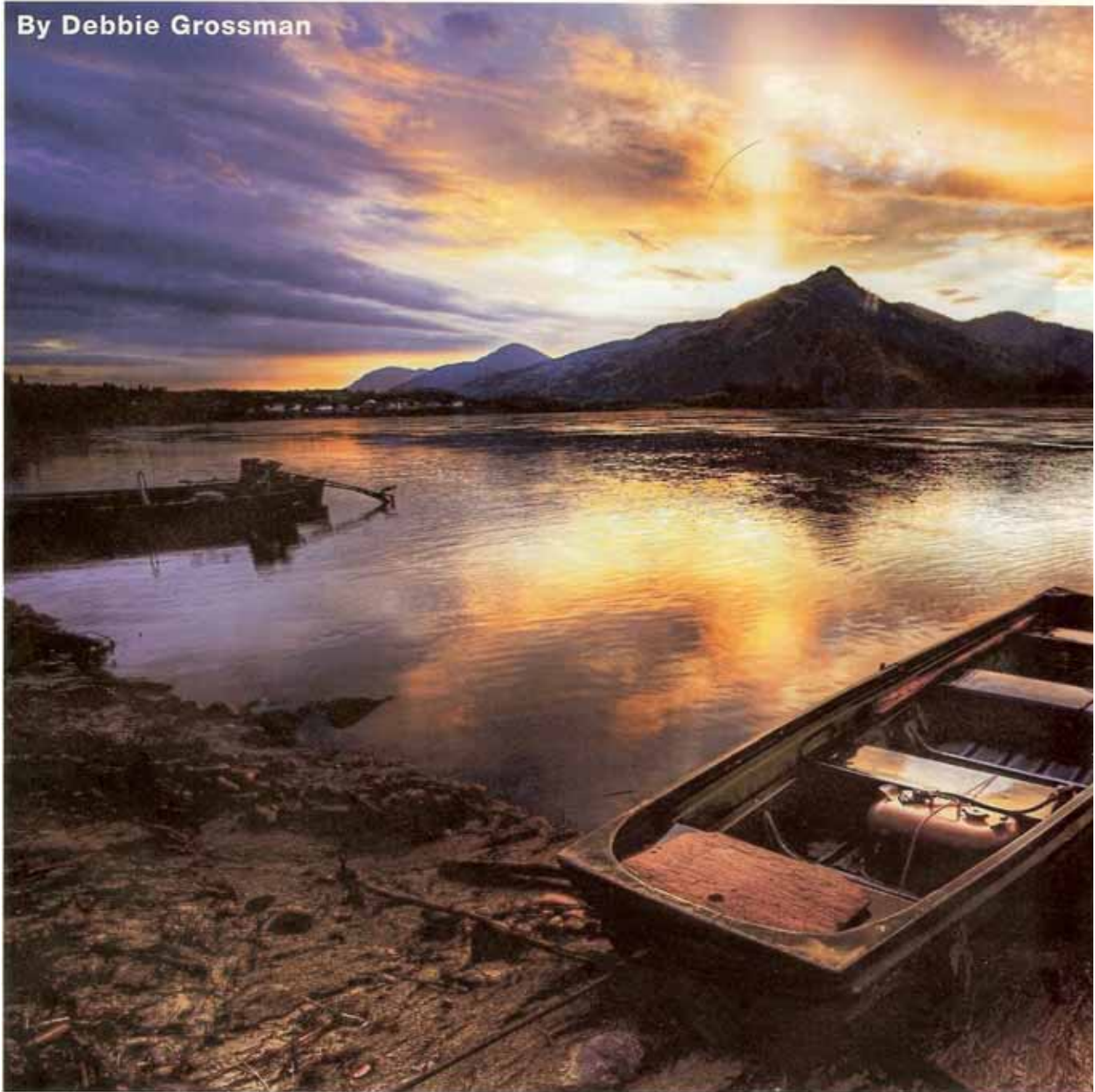


Popular Photography

August 2007

By Debbie Grossman

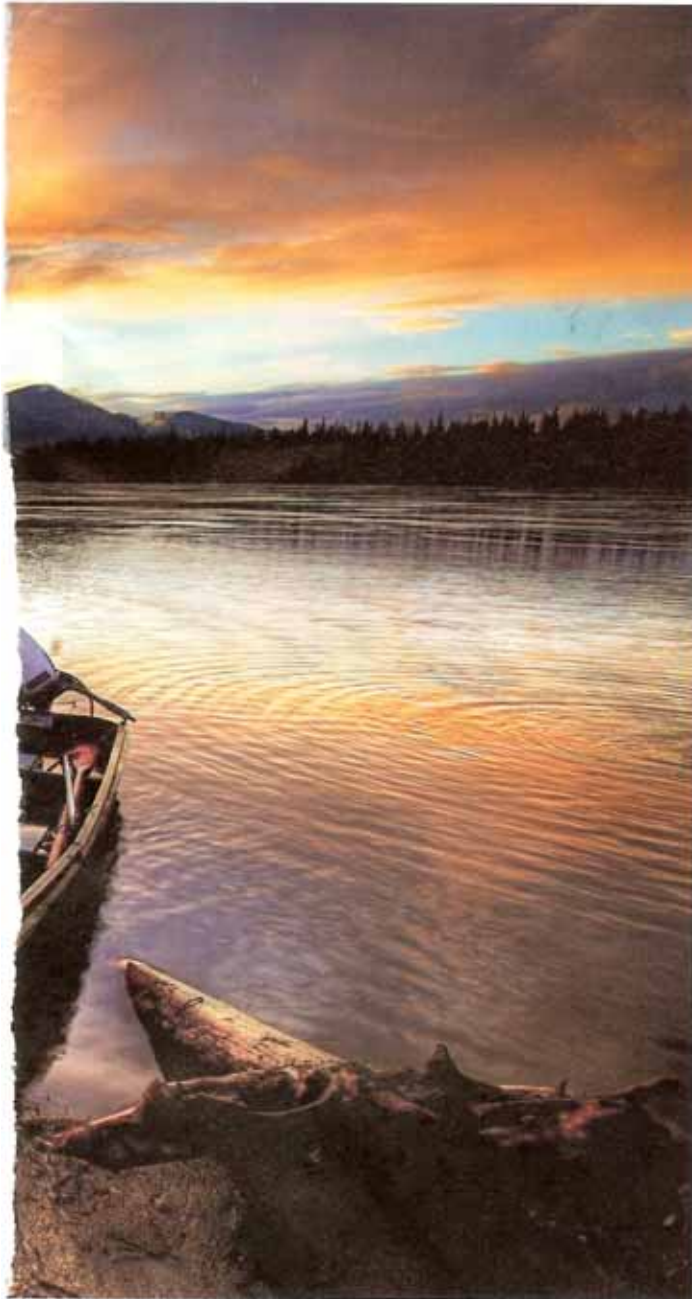


OUR PANEL OF EXPERTS

1) Steven Pinker is a professor of psychology at Harvard University, specializing in visual cognition and the psychology of language.

2) Debbie Mandel is a motivational

lecturer and the author of *Turn On Your Inner Light*. **3)** Jessica May is assistant curator of photographs at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, TX, and has a background in the history of photography and American art. **4)** Leon Hoffman is a practicing psychoanalyst and director of the Pacella Parent Child Center of the New York Psychoanalytic Society & Institute.



WHY WE LOVE SUNSETS... AND OTHER CLICHÉS

There's a lot more to a photograph than meets the eye

"As products of evolution, we are bound to have brains that find certain subjects eternally fascinating," says Harvard University psychology professor Steven Pinker.

Photographers will know what he means: Sift through your photos, and chances are you'll find a lot of sunsets, flowers, and babies. Our world, like the inbox for POP PHOTO's Your Best Shot contest, is filled with them. Sure, they're pretty. But, we wondered, what is it about these subjects that draws us to photograph them over and over? And what can this tell us about who we are?

If anyone could give us some answers, we knew it would be the kinds of thinkers who spend their careers figuring out what makes us tick. So we asked an evolutionary psychologist, an art historian, a self-help guru, and a psychoanalyst to give us their opinions on these three exemplary pictures.

Despite their disparate areas of expertise, all four pointed out, albeit in the language of their respective disciplines, that such photos reflect our essential human obsessions: sex, birth, and death. Who knew that, in our fumbling to set the right f-stop and attach a graduated neutral-density filter, our favorite pastime would boil down to those three things? Then again, what doesn't...

THE SUNSET

The setting sun is perhaps the subject that has most awed—and flummoxed—photographers since the invention of color film. Throw in a body of water, and you have a formula for a potentially gorgeous, if hugely clichéd, photograph. When you're shooting, success or failure to get that shot can seem like life or

death. But did you realize that angst was existential?

DEBBIE MANDEL: The boat is pointed toward a peak at sunset. Traditionally in literature, a sunset, or the west, symbolizes the journey towards death. The boat is empty, and life according to all major religions is a casting off. This is our spiritual interpretation of the end.

LEON HOFFMAN: Sunset precedes the night (death), and we anticipate its rebirth in the morning.

STEVEN PINKER: The demands of survival in a world in which you can't just go to a 7-11 when you're hungry explains our visual fascination with bodies of water. In the world in which we evolved, you couldn't just turn on a faucet

Paul J. Parent

WHY WE LOVE CLICHÉS



whenever you got thirsty. You had to know where the sources of water were and find them attractive enough not to want to stray too far from them. Locating bodies of water is a major challenge for all organisms. It's not surprising that members of *Homo sapiens* like to look at pictures of lakes and rivers—and pay more for waterfront real estate.

JESSICA MAY: Of course, we are not meant to imagine that the boat itself is admiring the sunset, really. But in a curious way the boat simultaneously offers a theoretical place for us to enter the picture and make ourselves comfortable to admire the spectacle of nature, and acts as a proxy for ourselves: We're just admiring the boat admiring the spectacle of nature.

THE FLOWER

No one who's spent any time looking at the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe will have much trouble predicting what these intellectuals had to say about people's penchant for head-on views of pink and blossoming flora.

STEVEN PINKER: Why should flowers be so fascinating? It's not as if we eat them. But flowers are informative for two reasons. One is that they are excellent clues to a plant's species—the leaves of many plants blur into a monotonous sea of green, but their gaudy flowers are giveaways as to which species they belong to. (Even professional biologists often use the flowers of plants to distinguish similar-looking species.) The other is that they are

forerunners of fruit. Ecosystems with lots of flowers are likely to be

rich and productive. If you prefer to live in places with flowers, you are more likely to find yourself in a place with lots of food sources. And more to the point, if you pay attention to where the flowers are now, you can predict where the fruit will be several months from now. So a brain that takes pleasure in looking at flowers is a brain that is going to soak up ecologically useful information, and have a survival advantage over brains that just like to look at rocks or dirt or sand or sky. Photography is a way of pressing that pleasure button.

JESSICA MAY: An orthographic projection. For some reason, when it comes to taking pictures of flowers, we are all architects. This

CHARLES HANCOCK

picture is nearly a "plan view" or view from above, which is used by architects when they are drafting to describe the floor plan of a building, but is also typically used by photographers to make pictures of flowers or food. Using the plan view implies a desire to describe something in its totality, and by describing it to somehow possess it.

DEBBIE MANDEL: Red is the color of passion, and the flower invites bees for pollination. The flower as symbol of a blossoming woman is archetypal in literature. This is an image that fulfills our romantic hunger.

LEON HOFFMAN: Flowers in that position are clear representations of the female genitalia—not just representing sexual interaction but also a representation of the opening of the birth canal.

THE BABY

Those cheeks! Those eyes! That helplessness! What is it about the presence of little children, even those who don't carry our precious genetic material, that makes even the most terrible pictures vaguely appealing?

DEBBIE MANDEL: The funny face of a baby makes us smile at potential and fresh life that is uninhibited. Everyone has an inner child that he wishes to release to express himself naturally.

JESSICA MAY: We photograph babies like crazy basically from the instant that they are born, but something interesting happens when the little ones figure out that they are supposed to look back at the camera. People then bring their cameras much closer to their baby's face.

LEON HOFFMAN: If you walk down the street and watch people look at children with their mothers, you'll see why photographers love to take photos of children—there is a combination of an innate connection between children and



adults, as well as a connection as a result of our own memories of us and our caretakers when we were young. From the perspective of attachment theory, the innate, smiling response of a baby ensures the attachment of an adult to take care of him or her. Similarly, it elicits a smile from adults.

STEVEN PINKER: We evolved to rely on visual signals that, on average, correlated with gene propagation in the lifestyle in which we evolved. In other words, our brains have circuits that encourage us to seek out fertile bodies as sex partners, and circuits that encourage us to protect and care

for babies (particularly happy, healthy babies that are looking right at us). If we indulge those desires, then in the world in which we evolved (a world without contraception or adoption), our genes would have propagated themselves automatically. As products of that evolutionary process, we take pleasure in looking at babies, and we take pleasure in looking at that other great category of photography—nudes, and more generally, pornography. You may not print a lot of those pictures in POP PHOTO, but I think you'd agree that they make up a large percentage of photographs people take all over the world! ☉