

INTERDEPENDENT PARTS OF THE WHOLE:  
EDWARD WESTON'S STUDIO NUDES AND STILL LIFES,  
1925-1933

By  
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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Art History  
And the Honors College of the University of Oregon  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

May 2011

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## An Abstract of the Thesis of

Laura Christine Barton                      for the degree of                      Bachelor of Arts  
In the department of                      Art History                      May 17, 2011

Title: INTERDEPENDENT PARTS OF THE WHOLE: EDWARD WESTON'S  
STUDIO NUDES AND STILL LIFES, 1925-1933

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Kate Mondloch

Photographer Edward Weston has long been hailed as one of the heroes of modern photography and has been praised for his stunning approach to landscapes, nudes, and still-lives. This thesis examines his treatment of the nude female form and examines the relationship that the photographs establish between the human body and the natural world. Through a series of in-depth visual and formal analyses of his early nudes and still-lives, I show that Weston un-animated the human body, while animating the vegetables, shells, and landscapes that he photographed. Thus, he created not a vertical hierarchy where humans are placed above the natural world, but instead created a horizontal plane where all natural forms are equalized. This approach differs from most of the pre-existing scholarship on Weston, which has long interpreted his work using either the biographical method or feminist theory, both of which serve primarily to either maintain or reject Weston's heroic status; this paper attempts to instead explain how the photographs themselves serve to create meaning.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses sincere appreciation to Professors Kate Mondloch, Joseph Fracchia, and Dan Powell for their assistance with this thesis. In addition, I would like to thank Professors Lauren Kilroy, Kate Nicholson, and Helen Southworth for their help during the early stages of the project. Finally, I would like to thank Cara List and the very helpful staff at the Architecture & Allied Arts and Knight libraries for their assistance and for making these resources available to me.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary audiences have come to think of Edward Weston (March 24, 1886 – January 1, 1958) as the heroic founder of modern photography—the “photographer’s photographer.” His bold break with earlier artistic movements, his well-documented Bohemian lifestyle, his tumultuous relationships with women, and his extensive writings about his photographic theories have bred devoted fans and critics alike. Indeed, he lived a fascinating life. He wrote in his Daybooks of parties with artists of the Mexican Revolution, regular trips to the bull-fighting ring, and the complexities of his well-documented love life<sup>1</sup>. He also wrote about art and nature, and the intertwining of the two. These factors tend, however, to overshadow the photographs themselves. This is especially true for his photographs of nudes. Supporters and critics alike use his writings about his wives, mistresses, and lovers to inform the nudes—did he “behead” the nudes, or did his “plethora of love” for the women erase any erotic overtones? For this thesis, I will re-examine these writings, seeking to reconcile the many contradictions that they contain, centering this discussion around the nudes.

The straight, clean lines that characterize Weston’s photography evolved out of the Pictorialist movement of the early twentieth century, whose proponents imbued their photographs with allegorical themes and mystic moods. They believed that photographers should emulate the style of oil painters, and many went to great lengths to prove their artistic mastery. Edward Steichen, for example, did so by hand-applying gums to his negatives; others, such as Oscar Rejlander, intricately cut out and pasted

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Weston, *The Daybooks*, Ed. Nancy Newhall, Vol. II (New York: Aperture, 1973), 55.

together pieces of dozens of different negatives. This style is exemplified by Julia Margaret Cameron's 1872 photograph *Venus Chiding Cupid Depriving Him of His Wings*, which exhibits the use of props and highly-posed figures, as well as intentional blurriness and shallow depth of field [Figure 1].

Anne Brigman (1869-1950), a Pictorialist whose work can be thought of as a predecessor to Weston's work, used the style to explore the human relationship with the natural world. Her photographs are characteristically soft-focused, and she routinely used pencils, paint, and etching tools to alter her negatives and remove all that she deemed useless. Her nudes, therefore, are smooth and without distinct features, and are often posed dramatically in front of wild landscapes and wind-ravaged trees. *Invictus*, from 1925, for example, depicts a nude woman as ~~part~~ of nature, arm extended like the bare branches of the tree in which she is perched, her eyes closed, her head reaching upward toward the sky." [Figure 2]<sup>2</sup> The image is meant to illustrate the human body in harmony with nature—a theme that she connected to a passage by Edward Carpenter, which read: ~~the~~ human body bathed in the sheen and wet, steeped in sun and air, / Moving near and nude among the elements / Matches somehow and interprets the whole of nature. / How from shoulder to foot of mountain and man alike the lines of grace run on...."<sup>3</sup> The intertwining of humans and nature is a theme that Weston later explored in his work, though with a dramatically different style.

Pictorialism remained popular until about 1915, and Weston himself took part in this movement in much of his early work. *Violet Roemer*, from 1916, for example,

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Ehrens and Anne Brigman, *A poetic vision: the photographs of Anne Brigman* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1995), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Ehrens and Brigman. *Poetic Vision*. 25.

exhibits a romantic, saccharine quality that is similar to Cameron and Brigman's work [Figure 3]. The image shows a woman whose face is highlighted in an angelic glow, delicately bending down to pick a flower. The image is intentionally soft-focused, reminiscent of earlier Romantic and Impressionistic paintings.

Weston's style began to transition, however, between 1918 and 1922. He gradually began to use clearer focus and started experimenting both with close-up figure studies and with large spans of blank wall space in his photographs. His use of minimalist space can be seen in his 1922 attic series, and in *Tina in Studio* from 1922 [Figures 4, 5, 6]. Though he included figures in the attic series, the real subject is the "geometrical, receding, or advancing places of light and dark" created by the attic dormers.<sup>4</sup> As Weston continued the series, the compositions became even starker and his sitters' faces even more abstracted. *Tina* continued this use of stark space, but also shows an interest in questioning the studio space and the artistic process. He sat his model at the edge of the backdrop and included the room beyond and behind the traditional studio space within the frame. While he would later photograph nudes primarily within the studio space, this shows an early questioning of the relationship between the figure and the space it is within.

By the early 1920s, Weston had fully transitioned to a "straight" style of photography. As curator Theodore E. Stebbins Jr. notes, Weston said in June 1922 that he had "groped through all the stages of 'fuzziness' and intentional over-and-underexposure to get 'effects', until I awakened to a realization of what photography

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<sup>4</sup> Beth Gates Warren, *Margrethe Mather & Edward Weston: a passionate collaboration* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art in association with W.W. Norton, 2001), 25.

really means.”<sup>5</sup> He photographed the Armco steel company in 1922 and was moved by its stark, clean lines [Figure 7]. In 1923, he moved to Mexico with lover Tina Modotti, where he witnessed what he called “the spontaneity and genuity” of native work, and began photographing textures and clouds, rather than posed, allegorical scenes. These two events inspired Weston to develop the sharp, closely-cropped style that he is best known for. This style is perhaps best summarized by the manifesto of Group f/64, which Weston (along with photographers Willard Van Dyke and Ansel Adams) founded in the early 1930s. The manifesto describes what they call “pure photography,” which is “defined as possessing no qualities of technique, composition or idea, derivative of any other art form.” Members of the group believed that photography “must always remain independent of ideological conventions of art and aesthetics that are reminiscent of a period and culture antedating the growth of the medium itself.”<sup>6</sup> Weston believed that photographs should embrace the inherent strengths of the camera instead of attempting to imitate painterly qualities.

While his images had previously been intentionally blurry, Weston’s post-1922 photographs are characterized by their acutely sharp focus. This was made possible by his use of large-format view cameras, which produced negatives large enough (8 x 10 inch) that they required only minimal enlargement in the darkroom. Furthermore, he primarily used only the smallest aperture setting on the camera, f/64 (the origin of the group’s name), which gave his images maximum depth of field. This meant that his photographs were in sharp focus throughout the foreground and background. However,

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<sup>5</sup> Theodore E. Stebbins and Edward Weston, *Weston's Westons: portraits and nudes* (Boston, Mass.: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Therese Thau Heyman, Mary Street Alinder, and Naomi Rosenblum, *Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography* (Oakland, CA: Oakland Museum, 1992), 20-24.

using a small aperture meant that less light was let in to the camera, which photographers needed to make up for by either photographing brightly-lit scenes or by using long exposure times. The content of Weston's work, therefore, changed along with his style. Weston's belief in "straight" photography, combined with the limitations of his camera system, led to his interest in found quotidian objects, nudes, and landscapes. Each of these allowed him to use the long-exposure times needed for the sharply-focused images that he strived for.

In 1924-25, he photographed a series of closely cropped nudes, choosing to focus primarily on the flat planes of the torsos and backs of his female models and young son [Figures 20,32]. In 1926, after moving back to California from Mexico, Weston was first introduced to photographing shells by his friend Henrietta Shore. In the following years, this led to an interest in other natural objects—most notably, peppers, cabbage leaves, bananas, and radishes. During this time period, though, his nude photographs dwindled, as he felt that he had little to add to his previous work.

Weston continued to photograph nudes again in 1933 with another series of tightly-cropped nudes (though these depicted the women more frontally and less cropped than the earlier series) and again in the years after 1934, when he met his second wife, Charis Wilson. He began to include Wilson's entire body and more of her face in his late nudes. Weston had returned to California by this time and also began photographing the landscapes and beaches around his home in Carmel. He combined his interests in landscape and nude photography in his 1936 series *Nude on Beach, Oceano*, which showed full nudes reclining on the dunes at Oceano and included no cropping of the body at all [Figure 8]. In 1937, Weston won a Guggenheim fellowship,

which allowed him to travel throughout the Western United States for two years, taking hundreds of negatives of dunes, rocks, trees, and deserted towns. He continued to travel throughout the United States during the 1940s and his work expanded to include cityscapes and urban architecture. He also continued to photograph nudes, though they were often set into landscapes or spaces of every-day life, such as 1945's *Winter Idyll* of Charis Wilson [Figure 9]. Though Weston continued on to experiment with color photography, the nudes and landscapes of the 1940s are the last of his well-studied and artistically relevant works.

While living in Mexico, and in the years after, Weston wrote extensively in his daybooks and in letters to fellow photographers, including Ansel Adams and Alfred Stieglitz. These writings provide much insight into Weston's thought-processes, his lifestyle, his responses to critics, what he wished others to notice in his work, and his goals in his photographic process. For this reason, many critics have approached his work biographically, focusing on these writings as entry into understanding his work. This is problematic, however, as it has led to an over-emphasis on his lifestyle, and not enough analysis of the photographs themselves. Furthermore, he wrote in his daybooks on a day-to-day basis, and any one entry should not be understood as a manifesto for his entire oeuvre. He included impassioned rants directed at critics of his work and always noted compliments from his supporters. He wrote many entries on a whim, without fully developing his wording or thoughts. Moreover, the Daybooks are incomplete; Weston destroyed his journals before he left for Mexico from his time with Mather. The period between the two Mexico trips consists of only a series of letters to Modotti. He also seemed to write knowing that his words entries would be read. In 1927, he wrote

that he had been looking over his journal, ~~pre~~paring it for Cristal to type,” which shows that he did not mean for it to remain a private account. This makes it difficult to know to what extent his analysis of his own work reflects what he actually saw in his photographs, as opposed to what he hoped that others would see.

Furthermore, his writings are problematic because his goals for his artwork are written in broad terms that often contradict each other. The first of these goals is a focus on visual forms and lines, regardless of content or symbolism. When questioned about his shells in 1927, for example, he wrote—~~I~~worked with clearer vision of sheer aesthetic form.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, when asked about his photographs of his toilet, he said ~~Why~~, it was a direct response to form.”<sup>8</sup> In a passionate response to Stieglitz’s negative response to his prints, Weston exclaimed, ~~Does~~ it make any difference what *subject matter* is used to express a feeling toward life!”<sup>9</sup> And he was often surprised when others saw anything else but form in his photographs:

A rock made on the Mojave—often likened to a great penis...  
Nevertheless I can honestly state that when I focused my camera on it  
that broiling desert morning, all I felt was the great diagonal cutting the  
plate, its relation to other forms in the background, with tiny grasses  
giving scale at the base: someone  
likened this grass to pubic hair!<sup>10</sup>

This response to the formal qualities of the objects he photographed is a theme that runs throughout the Daybooks. The second goal that he stated was to capture what he called the *quintessence* of the object. In 1924, for example, he wrote that ~~the~~ camera should be used for a recording of *life*, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the

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<sup>7</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 225.

*thing itself*, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh.”<sup>11</sup> And in 1927: “to record the quintessence of the object before my lens, rather than an interpretation, a superficial phase, or passing mood—this is my way in photography.” And finally, he wished to show that all things had inner “rhythms” and that all of these forces were connected:

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.<sup>12</sup>

Is it possible to focus on line and form, but then also show the quintessence of a singular object, as well as its relationship to all other natural forms, without imbuing the image with expression of a personal philosophy? I will analyze whether or not these are contradictions, and which of his goals Weston achieved, in my concluding chapter.

One critic—Emilee Jussim takes issue with his writing in her article “Quintessences: Edward Weston’s Search for Meaning.”<sup>13</sup> She points out that his writings contain several contradictions and inconsistencies. She states:

As you begin to study Weston’s prolific writings and his numerous statements about his own work, you quickly encounter the word *quintessence*, which he used to describe his primary goal in photography—to reach with the aid of the piercing “honesty” of the camera, beyond superficialities to the quintessence of an object. A moment later, however, you read that he wants to make a rock *more* than a rock, a tree *more* than a tree... a pepper *more* than a pepper. Continuing on you will find that he vehemently opposes what he calls interpretation, but concedes that each person will have his or her own idiosyncratic reaction to both objects and photographs.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Weston, *The Daybooks*, Ed. Nancy Newhall, Vol. I (New York: Aperture, 1973), 55.

<sup>12</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 154.

<sup>13</sup> Estelle Jussim, “Quintessences: Edward Weston’s Search for Meaning,” in *EW 100: Centennial Essays in Honor of Edward Weston*, ed. Peter C. Bunnell and David Featherstone, (Carmel: The Friends of Photography, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Jussim. “Quintessences.” 51.



While Jussim's discussion raises important questions in problematizing Weston's often contradictory writing, she does not go far enough in her conclusion, where she states: "If we can accept the idea of ultimate mysteries, and recognize that these were the goal of Weston's imagery, then his passionately insistent but often confusing statements about 'quintessences' and other contradictions can be reconciled, or at least forgiven."<sup>15</sup> She calls out the contradictions, but does little ultimately to make sense of them, and ends up only adding to his heroic image by concluding that his work is full of unknowable mysteries. Furthermore, she focuses only on his vegetables and beachscapes, and disregards his vast collection of nudes, which bring with them their own complications. To show the interrelation between vegetables and landscapes is important, but to bring in nudes to this study—particularly predominantly female nudes—opens his work to several very different interpretations.

Understanding Weston's treatment of the body is central to understanding his work as a whole. Forms of the body appear not only in his vegetables, but his later landscapes as well, as Susan Danly points out, saying "In two tree studies [from 1937] with decidedly male and female torsos Weston demonstrates that the human form could appear in the most unexpected places."<sup>16</sup> Even as his other subjects evolved, nudes were an ongoing project throughout his career. Furthermore, as Gilles Mora notes, Weston's viewed the body as central to all aspects of life. While his personal experiences—particularly his sexual affairs and embracement of a vegetarian diet—will not be

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<sup>15</sup> Jussim. "Quintessences." 60.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Danly and Weston J. Naef, and Edward Weston. *Edward Weston in Los Angeles: a catalogue for exhibitions at the Huntington Library, November 25, 1986-March 29, 1987 and the J. Paul Getty Museum, November 25, 1986-February 1, 1987*, (San Marino, Calif: Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1987), 42.

emphasized in this thesis, his love of all things corporeal is worth mentioning in brief, as it does provide some background behind his use of the body as a motif throughout his career. As Gilles Mora writes,

From adolescence on, he regarded the human body as a functional imperative, a fact of life, and believed that its smooth running order conditions and determines everything we do. The body, he thought, is also the sound box of the senses. His Mexico journal is full of comments about smells and flavors, about the tensing and unwinding of a body continually susceptible to changes in the weather, in the throes of passion or revulsion, energized or subdued, actuated by the slightest stimulus. To say that Weston loved to dance would be an understatement. He positively revealed in it every chance he got...<sup>17</sup>

Mora goes on to add that —All newcomers to Weston’s work must bear in mind that the body was *the motive as well as the motif of his work*, its urgent rhythms and attendant transformations providing a springboard.”<sup>18</sup> If we understand his treatment of the human form, we can also understand why he chose to use it as a recurring motif throughout his career.

His work in the studio is further crucial to understanding his work as a whole. As earlier noted, it was in the studio that he was able to fully embrace his photographic style—the conditions were controlled enough to make closely framed images with clear focus and infinite depth of field. These are all conditions that he struggled to recreate when he moved to photographing outside. On a 1929 trip to Big Sur, he noted that he had trouble photographing the rocks in the area, because they were not approachable, and —one dealt with matter from hundreds of feet to many miles distant. ... Yet I did respond—it is rather that I must find the right spot to see clearly with my camera.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Edward Weston and Gilles Mora, *Edward Weston: forms of passion* (New York: H.N. Abrams. 1995), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Weston and Mora. *Forms of Passion*, 11. Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 110.

Later that month, he noted that when photographing cypress trees, he focused on “Details, fragments of the trunk, the roots...”, much as he had with his nudes, vegetables, and shells within the studio.<sup>20</sup>

My analysis of Weston’s contradictions in his writing centers on his studio nudes and still-lives between 1925 and 1933. To better understand his 1925 studio nudes, though, I will analyze the progression of his nudes in the years leading up to 1925—particularly the photographs of Tina Modotti in Mexico. The nudes during this time period (though, it should be noted, most were taken in 1925 only, as Weston photographed fewer nudes after 1926, as noted earlier) are characterized by their tight framing and the inclusion of only parts of the body within the frame. After 1933, his nude style evolved once again, especially as he began to experiment with photographing the body in whole after he met Charis Wilson in 1934. An analysis of his nudes, though, would not be complete without a simultaneous analysis of the studio shells and vegetables from the same time period, as these exhibit certain anthropomorphic qualities.

Nancy Newhall was the first critic to examine Weston’s nudes at length. She worked with Weston in 1951 to put together a book that would include fifty two of his nudes. She had curated a retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946 and the two developed a close personal and professional relationship in the years following. She wrote an article, “Edward Weston and the Nude,” for *Modern Photography* and proposed turning it into a book, even creating a dummy book to clarify her vision to publishers. Due to concerns of propriety, however, the book was never published. Kodak had recently threatened to cut advertising funding if the photo

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<sup>20</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 114.

magazines did not “clean up” their articles—meaning no more nude photography.<sup>21</sup> Newhall’s article was included in this controversy, which made publishers wary of publishing the book. In the end, she put together an essay for *Modern Photography* about the 1933-34 nudes of Charis, and relied heavily on quotations from his Daybooks to inform his work. A book that included Newhall’s selection of nudes was finally published in 1957, *Studies of the Human Form by Two Masters: John Rawlings and Edward Weston*.<sup>22</sup> It paired Weston’s work with fashion photographer John Rawlings, though two had little in common, and included only a paraphrased version of Newhall’s earlier article.

Janet Malcolm wrote “The Dark Life and Dazzling Art of Edward Weston” in 1975 as a review of the Museum of Modern Art retrospective of Weston’s work, and focused on his nudes. She explains that “The nudes are strikingly sexless and impersonal. They are bodies (usually faceless) or parts of bodies transmuted into forms that follow no mere human (or sexual) function: even those showing pubic hair show it with formal rather than erotic intent.” These are valid points that I will expand upon in what follows.<sup>23</sup> However, she uses her observations to conclude that the objects in his photographs have a “hushed deadliness.” The nudes are no longer parts of live bodies, but of static objects, she says. This “indrawn, remote, and sometimes even morbid character of the photographs” is at odds with the lively, virile man presented in the

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<sup>21</sup> Jessica Todd Smith. “Time of Exposure: Nancy Newhall’s Unpublished Book of Edward Weston’s Nudes” in *Edward Weston: A Legacy*, ed. Jennifer A. Watts, (London: Merrell, 2003). 97.

<sup>22</sup> *Studies of the Human Form by Two Masters: John Rawlings and Edward Weston*, New York, (Maco Magazine Corporation), 1957.

<sup>23</sup> Janet Malcolm, “The Dark Life and Dazzling Art of Edward Weston,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1975, 131.

Daybooks. She uses these apt observations about the nudes, therefore, not to inform his photographs, but Edward Weston's life instead.

Though the biographical approach is tempting to use when studying Weston, and has long been embraced by those who study Weston's work, it is problematic. It puts too much emphasis outside of the photographs themselves. For this reason, I have called Weston's writings into question, instead of simply celebrating his words. I have analyzed his nudes not through the relationship that he wrote about with the woman depicted, but instead by using close visual and formal analysis and by studying the evolution of his nude style. While conducting these formal analyses, I considered Weston's choices in focus, depth of field, framing, point of view, background, object arrangement, composition, symmetry, lighting, shadows, highlights, exposure, and texture in order to determine what is emphasized in the photographs, how these formal elements work to draw attention to certain elements of the photograph, and how the photographer works to create meaning of content through formal qualities. Because form was so important to Weston, it is key to understanding the relationship between his studio nudes and his photographs of vegetables and shells between 1925 and 1933.

## II. THE NUDES

Weston did achieve the first of the Daybook goals—showing the “sheer aesthetic form” of the nudes—in a way that his contemporaries did not. He did so by closely framing the 1925 studio nudes, which rendered their larger physicality ambiguous, so that attention would be drawn to the forms of the portions of the body, rather than the body-as-whole. Furthermore, his nudes do not function as nude-portraits; instead, he de-personalizes the body, so that viewers will notice the forms of the body, rather than how the body expresses the individual within it. He disassociates the forms of the body, therefore, from the way we usually see a body—as individual, as person with a narrative—but not so much that we do not know on some level that it is indeed a body. This—knowing that the abstracted form that we are looking at is a body—is important to understanding Weston’s work as a whole.

Weston’s early nudes exhibit his Pictorialist tendencies. Many, such as 1921’s *The Breast*, exhibit intentional blurring and are often photographed under intricate shadows or refracted sunlight [Figure 10]. Others, such as *Margrethe* (1923), he photographed under studio lighting, but had the women pose and partially cover themselves with flowers, fans, and drapery [Figure 11].<sup>24</sup> The open studio space and clearer focus of these photographs differentiate them from the photographs of Weston’s pictorialist counterparts. Weston’s photographs convey an openness about the photographic process, as he does not try to make them appear like paintings, and

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<sup>24</sup> Although this series, based on the date, could be included in his post-1922 work, I include it here because it still strongly exhibits characteristics of his early work (such as including the studio space, as he does in 1918’s *Nude*, and showing his model holding a fan, as he does in 1918’s *Epilogue*), but also shows the beginning of a transition away from photographs such as *The Breast*.

extends the frame to include pieces of the studio beyond the backdrop. Weston still, however, veiled the body in order to play at sexuality, and included props to metaphorically represent the femininity of his nudes.

A week before leaving for Mexico in 1923, Weston did a series of nudes at Redondo Beach with Margrethe Mather. Weston had met Mather in 1912, and in the years following, she served as his model, student, and studio assistant. Their relationship was important to Weston, both personally and professionally. He pursued her romantically for years, though she insisted on keeping the relationship platonic. She was also an accomplished photographer herself, and influenced Weston greatly between 1918 and 1922, as he transitioned to his modern style. She experimented with simple composition and shadows in *Portrait of Moon Kwan*, several years before Weston did the same in his 1922 attic series [Figure 12]. Eventually, she took over his Los Angeles studio when he left for Mexico in 1923. Although she appears in many of his early nude and figure studies (*Prologue to a Sad Spring*, 1919, and *Margrethe Mather on Horsehair Sofa*, 1920, for example) [Figure 13,14], their work together reached its peak in the Redondo Beach nudes.

These photographs show the evolution of his increasingly modern style, but other factors show that he had not strayed far from his Pictorialist nudes. In *Nude on a Dune*, for example, her hair covers her face, and the photograph as a whole is about the interplay between the nude form and the expressive shadow that it casts [Figure 15]. In *Nude*, Mather coyly hides her face under a parasol. Like with the pictorialist nudes, the introduction of an object makes the photograph about the woman's relationship with that object and the metaphorical connotations that the object entails [Figure 16].

Weston continued to develop his new style while living in Mexico, beginning in 1923. He lived there until 1926 (interrupted by an eight month return to his family in California in 1925) and during this time, photographed Mexican street scenes, still lifes of Mexican crafts, portraits, and nudes. One afternoon, while standing on his rooftop photographing cloud formations, he looked down and saw Tina (his mistress who had accompanied him to Mexico) sunbathing on the roof below. In series that followed, *Tina on the Azotea*, Weston continued the theme of the sunbathing nude from his earlier work, but began to include fewer contextual details. He included the texture of the roof below her, and in some, placed her upon a dark striped blanket. Although he includes this context, and does not try to hide what these textures belong to, they primarily serve to provide varying tones and textures to set off Modotti's form, and only secondarily place her within a context (sunbathing on a rooftop, as the title further suggests). This allowed him to draw more attention to the forms of her body.

Weston's early nudes of Tina sunbathing on their roof in Mexico are both about the forms of her nude body and about an individual woman sunbathing on a roof. *Tina on the Azotea*, [Figure 17], for example, is about the twist of her body, but also about a woman hiding her head from the bright sunlight. Modotti's body lies along the central axis that is created by the point of the blanket and the triangle of light coming from the top of the frame. This placement draws attention to Modotti's torso. Although Modotti's entire body is included within the frame, we cannot see all of it, as her head and left arm are tucked underneath her torso, and thus become invisible from the high point of view that Weston chose. Her shadowed right arm blends in to the side of her torso, which is the same dark tone. The harsh light shines from somewhere beyond the top edge of the



frame, highlighting the zig-zag-shaped line of her body, as it falls on her back, thigh, calf, and feet. These highlights (and the jagged line they create) are especially noticeable because they contrast with the dark shadows that her body casts on the blanket below her. It is important to note, though, that these dark shadows occur because she actually has her backside lifted off of the blanket, as this shows that the emphasis on this highlighted curving line along her body was very intentional. So, based on the parts of her body that Weston chooses to draw attention to, the photograph is about the twist of her entire body as it curves around the photograph's central vertical axis. However, Weston includes too many details of the blanket and roof for them to only function formally. They also provide context for the photograph, and the image is about a girl sunbathing on a blanket on a rough pavement-like surface, hiding her face from the bright sunlight. Weston gives even more detail in the title, telling viewers that this is an individual woman (Tina) sunbathing on a roof. Her twisted form comes with a narrative, which then takes focus away from the forms of her body. If viewers identify her primarily as a woman with a narrative (instead of a nude human form), their understanding of the human figure will not transcend these anthropocentric associations.

In 1924's *Tina on the Azotea*, Weston again photographs her posed body and provides contextual details [Figure 18]. At first, the image looks like a woman passively sunbathing in bright light on a textured concrete surface. He used a clear focus, which allows the viewer to see the texture of the rooftop below her in great detail. She lies diagonally across the middle horizontal band of the photo, and the edges of the frame cut off the top of her head and her legs below the knee. Weston chose a point of view

that allows us to see the front and one side of her torso and legs. He placed the camera closer to her shoulders, so that the top half of her body (her ribs and above) looks disproportionately larger than her bottom half. This is emphasized by the fact that she has inhaled and tucked in her abdominal muscles, so that her lower torso looks thin and her ribcage is lifted upward. The placement of her hand under her arched back, and a light highlight along her ribcage, further draw attention to this contortion of her torso. He shows through his framing and camera placement that he is interested in exploring slight twists or distortions of the form of the body. However, because the photograph includes Modotti's face and a narrative (the sunbathing woman), this feature of the photograph is lost.

In 1925, Weston returned to photographing nudes in the studio, and began including only parts of the body within the photographs. This allowed him to isolate the body, so that his photographs turned into studies of form, instead of combined studies of the human body and the human individual. His reasons for doing so can be connected to his thoughts on photographing landscapes. In 1922, Weston wrote in a series of notes that "landscapes did not lend themselves to the medium of photography precisely because unadulterated natural elements were, from the standpoint of form, uncontrollable — unless they be mere fragments." "Photography," he concluded, "is much better suited to subjects amenable to arrangement or subjects already co-ordinated by man."<sup>25</sup> This would imply that all mediums must make sense of their depicted subjects somehow. Landscapes could be painted because the transposition of the scene through the eye and then hand of the painter allowed the artist to arrange the components of a

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<sup>25</sup> Edward Weston and Gilles Mora, *Edward Weston: forms of passion*, (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1995), 69.

vast landscape and make sense of them on the canvas. This statement speaks to his thought that the photographer needed to play a role in arranging the physical objects-to-be-photographed, since he could not play a part in arranging those objects within the representation (since the camera records directly). The photographic process for him became a matter of controlling or arranging the subjects in order to make sense of the scene as a whole, and then photographing them. Although he spoke here about landscapes only, his process did indeed entail a certain amount of control over all objects that he photographed, which shows why he chose to photograph his nudes primarily in the studio.

A description of his process of photographing his 1925 *Excusado* reveals this control and is indicative of his approach to many of his subjects [Figure 19]. It is important to note that, in this case, I am using the daybooks not to find a description of Weston's own stated objectives about his work as a whole, but for factual information about how he went about photographing this object, how long he studied it, and what changes he was willing and not willing to make to the object itself. Seven entries ranging from 21 October 1925 to 4 November 1925 show how particular he was in his process. On 21 October, he exclaimed his excitement for this new subject matter, saying “I was thrilled!—here was every sensuous curve of the human form divine!’ but minus imperfections!”<sup>26</sup> On 23 October, he said that the photograph turned out well “but for a piece of carelessness on my part: during exposure I shoved a sheet of cardboard within range of the lens. So today I am working again with new enthusiasm. It’s not an easy thing to do, requiring exquisite care in focusing...”<sup>27</sup> The next day, he decided that “the

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<sup>26</sup> Weston, *The Daybooks vol. I*, 132.

<sup>27</sup> Weston, *The Daybooks vol. I*, 133-32.

tile floor does not distract” but works well as a base.<sup>28</sup> Four days later, he dealt with how much space to include around the form of the toilet itself: ~~My~~ original conception on the ground glass allowed more space on the left side, hardly a quarter inch more, but enough to now distress me in the lack of it. ... I finally trimmed the right side to balance and though I admit a satisfying compromise, yet I am unhappy, for what I saw on the ground glass, I have not—the bowl had more space around it.”<sup>29</sup> On 1 November, he found that ~~by~~ placing my camera on the floor without tripod I found exactly what I wanted.”<sup>30</sup> Then, on 4 November 1925, he noticed that he could have taken the lid of the toilet off so that the photograph would only include the smooth, sculptural base. But he ultimately decided that ~~to~~ take off the toilet’s cover, either by unscrewing or retouching, would make it less a toilet, and I should want it more a toilet rather than less. Photography is realism!—why make excuses.”<sup>31</sup> This process shows that he was extremely attentive to his subjects and used experimentation to strive towards a better visual rendering of them.

While some of his painstaking efforts were made simply to correct his own failures (removing the cardboard from the frame, for example), he also put in great efforts to find the very best angle, point of view, and lighting with which to photograph his subjects. It seems as though he must have put his camera in every space available in that bathroom (including on the floor), viewing the toilet from every possible angle until he made his decision. This process shows that while he was willing to change his relation to the object, he was not willing to change the object itself. Even though he was

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<sup>28</sup> Weston, *The Daybooks vol. I*, 132.

<sup>29</sup> Weston, *The Daybooks vol. I*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Weston, *The Daybooks vol. I*, 134.

<sup>31</sup> Weston, *The Daybooks vol. I*, 135.

first attracted to the forms of the toilet because he saw ~~every~~ sensuous curve of the human form divine!” he ultimately concluded that he could not take off the lid in order to express this, because doing so would make it less of a toilet.

This process took on a similar form in his work with the nudes. Weston once said that ~~without~~ any instructions to the models (I never use professionals, just my friends) as to what they should do. I would say, Move around all you wish to, the more the better. ‘ Then when something happened, I would say Hold it. ‘ And things did happen all the time.”<sup>32</sup> While this would imply a complete freedom on his models’ part, Charis Wilson’s recollection of the process was quite different.<sup>33</sup> When Sonya (Weston’s partner at the time) suggested that Wilson pose for Weston, Sonya noted that ~~you~~ simply moved around freely, and when Edward saw something that suited him, he’d tell you to hold it. It would last only for a minute or two and then you could go on moving.”<sup>34</sup> Wilson said, however, that those comments ~~proved~~ misleading, since any slight adjustment in my position produced another request to Hold it. ‘ I found it took a great deal of control to stop exactly on command. ...I told Edward that this was the kind of moving around freely ‘ you might do if you were trying to slip out of your bed without disturbing a sleeping rattlesnake.”<sup>35</sup> Wilson’s comment shows that Weston was not as casual about the process as his earlier comment might have suggested. While it

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Weston, Beaumont Newhall, and Amy Conger, *Edward Weston omnibus: a critical anthology* (Salt Lake City: G.M. Smith, 1984), 102.

<sup>33</sup> Using Wilson’s experience is somewhat problematic, as he did not meet her until 1934—almost a decade after the 1925 fragment series—and his process could have changed in that time. Her quote is useful, though, because it shows that his recollection of photographing the nudes is not entirely correct. Furthermore, the account of photographing the toilet shows that he was indeed very particular about everything he photographed, and it is very likely that he was just as particular about his 1925 nudes as he was with Charis.

<sup>34</sup> Charis Wilson and Wendy Madar, *Through another lens: my years with Edward Weston* (New York: North Point Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 7.

<sup>35</sup> Wilson and Madar, *Through Another Lens*, 10.

would have been impossible for him to have spent weeks on the nudes, as he did with the toilet, he did pay great attention to capturing the body in very precise positions, with precise lighting conditions. While he asked the model to move around freely, so that he could observe the process in order to find new combinations of forms and lines, the compositions that ensued were extremely precise and thought-out. Furthermore, it does show that there was one crucial difference between his experience photographing the toilet and nudes. While he chose not to take the lid off the toilet because this would have made it “less” of a toilet, he did not have the same interest in preserving some essential quality of the women he photographed. While they could move about freely, it was Weston himself who decided the final composition. This shows that his interests lay in photographing the forms of the body, rather than the individual characteristics of his models (a point which I will return to later in this chapter).

If we look at his 1925 studio nudes, particularly those of Margrethe Mather and Anita Brenner (because these most distinctly show the evolution from the nudes of Modotti) we see that he seems to think of nudes in the same way that he looks at landscapes, choosing not to represent them as whole, but to approach only part of the body. In doing so, he effectively reduced the corporeality of the body as a whole so that the nude only functions partially as a body, and partially as organic abstraction. The fact that they are not one of these, but both, is crucial to understanding Weston’s studio project at this time. Furthermore, Weston complicates the matter, as not all of the nudes fall into the same place along the spectrum between functioning as corporeal-whole-

body and pure organic abstraction. To illustrate this, I will give four examples of nudes from 1925 that function increasingly (in the order given) as organic form.<sup>36</sup>

In the first 1925 *Nude*, Weston placed the camera close to his model's body and included in the frame only his model's buttocks and twisted torso [Figure 20]. By placing her in the studio and not including her face and most of her body, he removes the context and narrative that is present in the photograph of Tina sunbathing on the rooftop. However, the nude still functions as a human form, even though only part of it is included in the frame. The clear focus allows us to see the goose-bumps on her buttocks, and the lines of her buttocks are in especially clear focus. The shoulder and breast are slightly blurrier. He aims the light from an angle low enough it highlights the tops of both buttock cheeks and the muscles of her back. It is also high enough that it emphasizes the roundness of her buttocks and creates four dark shadows along her back and shoulder as they twist. This set of conditions serves to flatten three planes of her body— her breast, shoulder, and back—into one plane, disrupting the way we would normally see this portion of the body. However, we see her buttocks straight on and in great detail. Its most defining quality—its roundness—is emphasized, rather than minimized or disrupted. Because of this, though part of the nude is abstracted, as photographed, it still functions as a human form. Furthermore, especially because it is the buttocks that are rendered so clearly, it still functions (though less than *Tina on the Azotea*) as a naked female form.

In the second 1925 *Nude*, the body is contorted so as to disrupt the recognition of body parts, rather than to emphasize them [Figure 21]. In this photograph, he again

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<sup>36</sup> Though I present them in this order and show that each one gradually moves away from what he accomplished in *Tina on the Azotea*, I do not mean to assert that this is the chronological order that Weston took the images. Unfortunately, it is not possible to know this, as they are all only dated as 1925.

put the camera on the floor, and includes two planes of the model's body: her side and just a hint of her torso. She has just inhaled a breath of air, creating a constriction at her waist and a thin, elongated torso. Weston included a highlight on the front plane of her stomach and a hint of light that escapes from beneath her back so as to make this constriction appear even smaller. The bottom of her ribcage juts out and creates a flat line where we would normally see breasts. The front plane of her body is lit, creating contrast between it and the medium gray of the background and the medium gray of the side of her torso, drawing attention to the highlight that runs along the whole front plane of her body. While still recognizable as a body, Weston lights and arranges the body so that the lines of the body are emphasized, rather than any body part itself. Furthermore, the elongated, drawn-out torso and absence of breasts where we would normally expect to see them serves to make this photograph more about the visual forms and organic lines than about a figure that is immediately recognizable as a nude body. As stated earlier, however, it does still function somewhere between nude and organic abstraction; though the visual forms are emphasized the most, it is still recognizable as a body, though without the context or narrative of the *Tina on the Azotea* nudes [Figures 17, 18].

In the third 1925 *Nude*, Weston's model lies on her front and reaches forward so that we only see a smooth form in the place where we would normally see an arm or shoulder [Figure 22]. He lit her form from a higher angle than the previous examples, throwing the part of her body that is closest to the floor into a deep shadow and making it blend into the floor below her. He highlights her back, which creates contrast between her form and the dark background, and draws attention to the gently sloping line of her



buttocks as it curves into her back and into her shoulders. While this line is still identifiable as the curve of a woman's backside, it is more because it merely resembles that line, rather than because there are other visual clues that tell us explicitly that this is a woman's form. Indeed, this is the only visual clue that tells us that this form belongs to a human form at all. Her skin is smooth and devoid of dimples or goosebumps, and the lack of arm where we would expect to see one reduces the figure's corporeality.

In the final 1925 *Nude*, Weston's choice of lighting and camera placement render the human form almost completely as abstract organic form [Figure 23]. In this photograph, his model bends completely forward, and we can see only her buttocks and back. Weston used a clear enough focus, so that the outline of her form is clear, but we cannot see the dimples or texture of her skin. Thus, her skin functions as a flat white space, rather than the flesh of a body. Weston also used a low camera angle, so that her buttocks appear to be rounder than they presumably were in actuality, and so the top of her back is tucked out of view and her upper body appears to be foreshortened. He used even lighting, however, and there are no shadows that fall along the bottom side of her buttocks. Thus, he exaggerates her two-dimensional roundness but minimizes her three-dimensional sphericity. By tucking her limbs and head in front of her, he no longer calls attention to them by implying that they continue outside the frame of the photograph. The body no longer functions as a larger physical body. Furthermore, by foreshortening her torso, smoothing her skin into a wide, flat, white space (instead of flesh that wraps around a three-dimensional body), the part of the body that he *does* include no longer functions strictly as a human torso either. It *almost* becomes something other—pure organic form, a piece of fruit—it is up to the individual viewer

to decide what he or she sees. However, we must not ignore that, on some level, it is still recognizable as a body. In case there is any doubt, Weston tells us in the title that it is indeed a nude. As I will explain in the concluding chapter, this is crucial to understanding Weston's work during this time period.

Weston further disassociates the nudes from the way that we usually see the body by depersonalizing the human figure in his photographs—ensuring that the photographs do not function as nude portraits, and are not about *someone*, but solely about the forms of the body. Taking his nudes out of a context was an essential step in ensuring that viewers saw the body as part form, or organic abstraction, rather than purely as human being. This allowed him to establish a relationship between humans and the natural world in his photographs. Although Weston allowed his models to move around freely and essentially pose themselves for the camera, the way that he generally chose to frame the photograph effectively limited the model's ability to pose or self-express in the actual photograph. As a result, the bodies become more universalized and less about the individual bodies in the photograph. For the most part, he tended to focus on his models' torsos, midsections, and lower bodies when photographing nudes in the studio between 1925 and 1933. As we have seen, the transition between the photographs of Tina sunbathing on the rooftop to the 1925 studio nudes resulted in “zooming in” on these body parts, and leaving out the rest of the body.

The effect of this choice in framing can be illustrated by comparing Alfred Stieglitz's (January 1, 1864-July 13, 1946) photograph of Georgia O'Keeffe, from 1920, and Weston's 1925 series of Miriam Lerner. [Figure 24, 20, 21, 22, 23] Stieglitz focuses on O'Keeffe's face, shoulder, arms, and artfully splayed hands and fingers.

Though her face remains passive, her fingers are expressive. Indeed, Stieglitz's nudes of O'Keeffe always functioned primarily as portraits, even if they just depicted parts of her body. As Doris Bry explains in her 1965 biography of Stieglitz, his larger project was to create a complete portrait of O'Keeffe—one that included images of all parts of her body throughout all stages of her life: "To show the many facets of a person, the true portrait had to be many prints which, seen together, would convey more than the same photographs seen one at a time. Hands, feet, torsos, tones and lines, molded by every possible experience, mood, and emotion—taken over the years—all belonged."<sup>37</sup> A portrait, of course, is particular to that individual person, and is meant to express some aspect of his or her inner being—who that person is and what he or she does. In order to express her individuality through her body, Stieglitz often included O'Keeffe's hands or face within the photographs. Indeed, these are body parts most expressive of a person's individuality. If we know someone, we are familiar with his or her mannerisms, body language, and facial expressions. Hands are shaped and trained by the activities that the person does. To include hands in a photograph (especially in this expressive manner) often means to draw attention to the person's individuality and his or her narrative. Stieglitz's photographs, therefore, function as nude portraits and are about O'Keeffe as understood through her body, rather than simply about a generic body, or the forms of her body.

Weston, however, made every effort not to include face, hands, and arms, and his photographs are instead about a generic, de-personalized body. On the rare occasion that he did include hands, such as in the 1925 Nudes, the hands are placed naturally, as

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<sup>37</sup> Doris Bry, *Alfred Stieglitz: photographer* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1965), 18.

if in the middle of an activity that required little awareness of the self. They are not tensed or splayed expressively like O'Keeffe's hands. The vast majority of his nudes between 1925 and 1933, however, include only torsos, backs, or legs. These are body parts that the model would have been less aware of as she was moving around on the floor, and focusing on them would have two results: firstly, by focusing on the parts of the body that she herself would not have been actively posing, the end result looks more natural and less posed. Secondly, it allows the photograph to be about a nude body—any body—rather than a nude portrait of *somebody*. This is important an important step if Weston was trying to draw attention to the visual forms of the body, rather than the individuality of his model. As Amy Conger notes,

I do not believe that he cut off their heads because he was not interested in their intellects, but only in their bodies. Consider that, in their advertisements, jewelers often prefer to show the jewellery they are trying to sell being worn by a model and leave out the face to avoid distracting from the subject. . . . It seems that a face contains great detail and distracts from the form itself. A face shows personality, a body usually doesn't.<sup>38</sup>

Weston further creates a de-personalized, generic nude by not focusing on individual capabilities and characteristics of the bodies he photographed. This allowed him to draw further attention to the forms of the body, rather than its anthropocentric qualities. The effect of this can be illustrated by comparing his nudes to Imogen Cunningham's (April 12, 1883-June 14, 1976) nudes of the same time period. Her close up body photographs show an interest in individual body characteristics and nuances. Indeed, this was common among their contemporaries. *Vanity Fair* published articles on the subject, such as 1931's "Hands that Rule the World of Art," and 1932's

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<sup>38</sup> Amy Conger. *Edward Weston: The Form of the Nude* (London ; New York, N.Y. : Phaidon Press, 2005), 12.

–Anatomy Pays.” The latter article included photographs of –Greta Garbo’s mysterious eyes, ‘ Adolphe Menjou’s worldly moustache, ‘ Marlene Dietrich’s voluptuous legs, Maurice Chevalier’s provocative underlip, ‘ and Jim Londos’s Grecian shoulders.<sup>39</sup> Cunningham showed a similar interest in photographing individual difference, making ~~hundreds~~ of photographs of hands from the 1920s until the end of her career.<sup>40</sup> For example, she photographed cellist Gerald Warburg’s hands in 1929, focusing on ~~the~~ extension of his fingers over the strings of his cello,<sup>41</sup> [Figure 25] pianist Henry Cowell in 1926 [Figure 26], and artist Robert Howard ~~ear~~ carving an elaborate hair pattern on a wooden portrait bust.<sup>42</sup> Her series of repeated subjects acts as a catalogue of sorts, bringing out both the commonalities between all hands, but also the characteristics that make each set of hands she photographed unique. It shows an interest in the possibilities of hands—how a specific set of hands appears when trained and molded to do a certain specialized activity. Just as Greta Garbo’s ~~mysterious eyes~~” are unique only to her, Gerald Warburg’s hands are unique to a cellist with his years of training. The images, when seen alone, act as portraits, of sorts, of the individual subjects. There is no attempt to generalize the body parts—they are of a certain person, doing a specific activity.

Cunningham’s 1931 series of dancer Martha Graham continue this interest in the individual expression of her subject, though it does not focus on fragmented body parts [Figure 27, 28]. This series shows Graham ~~emoting~~ and gesturing with dynamic expression,” capturing her ~~individual~~ rhythms, facial grimaces, and nuances of hand

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<sup>39</sup> Imogen Cunningham and Richard Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham: on the body* (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1998), 27.

<sup>40</sup> Cunningham and Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Cunningham and Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Cunningham and Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham*, 27.

and foot.”<sup>43</sup> Again, Cunningham chose a model that had had extensive training in her creative field, making the images about Graham’s performance, and about the way her body had been trained to move. These models differed greatly from Weston’s use of his friends as models. Cunningham’s dancers and musicians moved their bodies in a more expressive and dramatic manner than Weston’s non-professional models. Even when he photographed dancer Bertha Wardell in 1927, he made no attempt to emphasize her individual characteristics, or even to show that this was a dancer’s body [Figure 29]. While her crouched, muscular legs might imply strength or potential motion, they could belong to any female who had done manual labor and thus had a muscular physique. If Weston’s models did pose in the expressive manner that Cunningham’s models did, he did not photograph them in these positions. Indeed, he chose models with remarkably similar body types and the series within this time period are often distinguishable only because of Weston’s different uses of lighting and background, rather than due to noticeable differences in the models or poses themselves. Again, he drew attention to the forms of the body rather than the individuality of the model herself.

It is important to note that Weston drew attention to the visual forms of the body itself, rather than to distort the forms of the body in order to draw attention to a pattern of shadow upon it. A comparison to Imogen Cunningham’s 1928 *Jackie 2* illustrates this point [Figure 30]. *Jackie 2* shows the torso of a woman as she lies diagonally across the frame—her neck and breasts bathed in deep triangular shadows. Cunningham used a slightly soft focus, which smoothes out the woman’s skin and draws more attention to the general features of her body, rather than the particular details of her body.

Cunningham had the woman pose so that her arms are folded beneath her, creating the

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<sup>43</sup> Cunningham and Lorenz, *Imogen Cunningham*, 28.

triangular shadows at her neck, and positioned her to lie diagonally across the frame, creating a large triangle of dark gray in the upper left corner of the photograph. She chose a low angle of light, which creates harsh shadows under her breasts and across her shoulders; these mimic the triangle of her pubic hair and the triangle of the blanket at the corner of the image. The harsh shadows are so strong that they distort her breasts, splitting them into dark and light halves, rather than making them appear round. While *Jackie 2* focuses on the visual forms of the nude, it is about the interplay between the body and the design of shadows that can be created upon it, rather than the actual forms of the nude body itself.

Finally, Weston drew attention to the forms of the body by rendering the gender of the body ambiguous, and therefore disrupting the viewer's relationship with the body as sexed. At the time, it was common to portray the body within traditional male and female categories. This was likely due to still-present Victorian ideals, which placed each gender under distinct societal roles. In *At the Folies-Bergere*, for example, James Edouard Abbe Sr. uses bright light and low depth of field to give his two models flawless, gleaming skin [Figure 31]. One woman gently touches her own breast, as if a sign of modesty, though her other breast is in full view. The other turns coyly away from the camera, but looks out with a slight smirk on her face. Their pubic areas are covered with garlands of flowers, which symbolize their fertility. All of Abbe's choices, therefore, serve to emphasize traditional feminine characteristics and anatomy.

Weston, however, does not emphasize the bodies' genders, and often made the gender almost ambiguous. In *Nude* from 1925, for example, he used a direct, singular light that flattens the figure renders its back broad and masculine-looking; he also

emphasizes its round buttocks, however [Figure 23]. The additional narrowing along the waistline informs the viewer that this is a female, but this conclusion is not immediately obvious. *Neil* (1925) exhibits a similar technique [Figure 32]. The figure stands with a feminine sway, putting emphasis on the waist and hips, which are traditional points of focus for female figures. The back and shoulders seem slightly too broad, though, to belong to a female. Even when Weston includes sexual anatomy, the figure maintains his androgyny [Figure 33]. Weston poses his son in an exaggerated contrapposto position. His hip dramatically extends out from his body, giving the sense of a female-like narrow waist and wide hips, which seems to confuse his obvious maleness.

By not emphasizing the gender of the bodies he photographed, Weston disrupts the viewer's interaction with the photograph. This interaction with figures in artwork is usually defined by the gender of the body depicted. The relationship between a male viewer and a nude female subject, for example, is defined by the male gaze. According to Laura Mulvey, females ~~are~~ being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men.<sup>44</sup> The male viewer sees the woman as a sexual object and any focus on line or form is instantly minimized. If gender is emphasized, we will react to it as a body, whether we see it as an object of sexual desire or if we identify with it in terms of our own bodies. Indeed, it would be unusual to view the women in *At the Folies-Bergere* as anything except nude women. If a body has an ambiguous gender, however, our reaction to it can extend beyond the purely sexual. When viewing Weston's studio project as a whole, this disruption of the subject-viewer relationship is important, as we will see when discussing the studio still lifes of 1925-1933.

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<sup>44</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2009) 13.



### III. THE SHELLS AND VEGETABLES

While Weston de-personalized his nudes so that they became bodies without context or narratives, he increasingly emphasized the individuality and sensuality of the objects in his still-lives in the years following 1926. He did this by lighting, framing, and composing the photographs so as to call attention to the forms and textures of the vegetables, shells, and other natural objects that he photographed.

Weston's interest in photographing singular objects within the studio began while living in Mexico. He collected dozens of Mexican peasant crafts and photographed them, isolated and in high focus, as can be seen in 1924's *Two Swan Gourds* [Figure 34]. Weston began photographing shells in 1926, and made fourteen negatives of shells the following year—nine of which he showed at the Los Angeles Museum in an exhibition of his work. This soon led to an interest in similar natural objects, though primarily vegetables—eggplant, swiss chard, cantaloupe, peppers, squash, gourds, cabbage, bananas, and leek. He bought each of the vegetables at the local markets and relished in eating them when the photography sessions were over. These sessions were often interrupted by his hungry sons (who, on several occasions, ate the vegetables without realizing that Weston was photographing them) and by lack of light; each exposure took several hours, so Weston often wrote of needing to leave his camera pointed at the object overnight to wait for enough morning light to shine in his studio.

As with the nudes, the Weston's process for photographing the objects is important. Most notable about the process is the extreme care that he took in choosing

angles and backgrounds; this meant that he photographed each object, or similar objects, many times over the course of many weeks. His Daybooks show that he began photographing shells on March 25, 1926, noting that ~~a~~ new field has been presented.”<sup>45</sup> He continued writing about them on April 28, searching for a way to arrange and balance the shell so that he could include ~~that~~ important end” of the shell without cutting it out of the frame of the image.<sup>46</sup> He found that he could solve this problem by ~~using~~ another shell for the chalice, but I had the Devil’s own time trying to balance those two shells together.”<sup>47</sup> On May 9, he said that he ~~worked~~ all Sunday with the shells,—literally all day. ...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!”<sup>48</sup> Later that week, he wrote that he had photographed them again, gaining strength from ~~a~~ slight turn of one shell” and a lighter background.<sup>49</sup> He continued writing about photographing the shells, with such precise movements and changes, through July of that year, and continued photographing shells for years to come.

This shows that the final appearance of the prints was extremely precise, and that the choices made for each photograph (including those that I will explain in the following formal analyses) was very intentional. It is important to note that this process differs somewhat from how he photographed his nudes. Bodies, of course, cannot be photographed by making slight adjustments to their positions over a period of several months. His ultimate interest, however, was similar. This precision was in order for the

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<sup>45</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II.* 12.

<sup>46</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II.* 18-19.

<sup>47</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II.* 19.

<sup>48</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II.* 21.

<sup>49</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II.* 21.

object or body's natural forms to translate to the print in the best way possible, but not to preserve some essential quality of the individual or vegetable. Weston found arranging and even combining the shells and vegetables to be acceptable—but only so much that they did not appear to be posed. When photographing a group of eggplants on August 20, 1926, for example, he noted that it was ~~p~~erhaps too obviously arranged. The result is that not only do many of his vegetables and shells, indeed, not look arranged, but many that he combined (especially the shells) also appear to be one object. This shows that, again, he was not interested in any essential qualities of the shells (as he arranged them to create them anew), but primarily in formal qualities.

Since his still lifes are so extensive and varied, it would be remiss to generalize them too much, or to say that they only one purpose. For this reason, I will give several examples that show the complexities of the works, showing that nearly all serve to emphasize the visual forms of the object and destabilize the viewer's interaction with the object by removing it from its context and de-emphasizing its anthropocentric utility. Others serve to additionally associate the object with the human body or create a narrative or individualize the object—the opposite of what he did with the nudes.<sup>50</sup>

Among the first photographs of shells was *Shell* from 1927 [Figure 35]. The photograph depicts a halved nautilus shell from its side against a dark background, and serves to emphasize its spiraling shape. He chose a clear focus, which both emphasizes its outline as it spirals into the center of the shell, and emphasizes the spiral of the chambers as they curve inwards as well. The shell is surrounded by large amounts of black space, which contrasts with (and brings out) the light highlights and the thin white

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<sup>50</sup> As with the nudes, I do not mean to assert that this progression took place chronologically, merely that there is a spectrum between the two categories.

outline along the right side of the shell. He chose a point of view where the circles of the spiral are most perfect—had he stepped to the right or left, the shell would have made more oblong ovals. He lit the shell so that the outer flare at its entrance is a gleaming pearly, which provides contrast against the darker tones of the center of the spiral, and thus draws attention to this space. It also shows an interest in the glossy texture of the shells—something that he would go on to explore in more detail, as we will see. Overall, though, this photograph serves to draw attention to the most characteristic visual quality of the shell—its spiral, as all of the choices that Weston made serve to emphasize this.

As Weston continued, he kept emphasizing characteristic visual qualities of the objects he photographed. Weston's 1931 photograph, *Sperm Whale's Teeth*, is an image of two whale teeth [Figure 36]. His choices in lighting, background, focus, and arrangement draw attention to the curving forms of the teeth, as defined by the shadows and highlights that fall upon them. He placed the larger tooth behind the smaller one and both lean slightly to the left. They are placed in front of a light background that blends with the tone of the light sides of the teeth, so that the curving dark shadows on their right sides and on the ground beside them are emphasized. Weston chose a clear focus, which allows us to see clearly the outlines of the teeth. This, combined with his choice in lighting and background, serves again to emphasize the curving line of the dark shadows against the background. Furthermore, Weston chose a point of view and arranged the teeth together so as to emphasize these curving shapes. Had he photographed them from another angle, they would have curved towards or away from the camera and would have looked much flatter. He placed the teeth so that their left

sides curve together in two near-parallel lines. It is important to note that these parallel must have been intentional, as the smaller tooth is lit on its right side from a source other than the main light source (which is most likely a large window on the left side of the frame, judging from the reflections visible on the left sides of the teeth). Without this extra light source, the shadows on the two shells would have blended together. As it is, the two lines together draw more attention to this curving motion than just one line would have. It is also important to note that he chose objects with smooth textures and cylindrical shapes, which allow for a smooth gradation from highlight to shadow. These choices in lighting, background, and arrangement of the two teeth make this photograph about the curves of their forms.

*Cabbage Leaf*, from 1931, shows a partially wilted cabbage leaf with extremely prominent veins and folds, which Weston emphasized [Figure 37]. He chose a clear focus, which makes the veins, as they flow with the form of the wilted cabbage, more visible. The edges of the leaf are cut off by the edge of the frame, which serves to detract attention from the curly edges of its outline; if he had not done this, the contrast between the light form of the leaf and the background would have drawn attention. Instead, the contrast in the center of the leaf—again its veins and folds—is emphasized. He chose a point of view where the curve of the central stalk of the leaf can be seen curving up from the base (which we cannot see) and over to run parallel to the other folds in the leaf. Finally, most notably, the lighting serves to create dark shadows and highlights on each fold of the leaf, again emphasizing its lines. It is important to note, though, that Weston is applying light that is harsher (and thus creates harsher shadows and highlights) than he had with the earlier examples and with most of the nudes.

Even though Weston tells viewers what these objects are in the titles, he has little to say about the teeth or cabbage themselves. Rather, the photographs are about their visual forms—the curving lines of the teeth and the flowing lines of the cabbage—as every choice Weston made enhances these. Furthermore, by placing the objects in a bare studio space, he takes the objects out of any context in which they would normally be seen or used. With the teeth, for example, he makes no reference to their size, the whale that they originally belonged to, or their use to humans, showing that the intended message of the photograph is not about their utility in any way. With the cabbage leaf, he makes no reference to its anthropocentric use as food. He does this both by removing it from any place where we might normally see it—in a market, on a plate, on a cutting board, or attached to the rest of the cabbage, and by photographing it at a time when it is wilted—when it is least edible, but when it is easy to drape (creating soft flowing lines, instead of retaining the stiff shape of a fresh leaf). On the other hand, though, he does not attempt to abstract the objects so that they intentionally resemble other objects. In keeping with his straight tendencies, he uses simple lighting and shadows, which might enhance the object's form but do not create it anew, as well as a realistic point of view; he does not use extreme angles or zoom in so closely that we no longer know what the object is. While the photographs, through enhancing (not merely emphasizing) the formal qualities of the objects, serve to destabilize the objects depicted by disrupting the way they are normally viewed, it is important to note that the title always tells us what the object is (re-stabilizing it in our minds), just as he did with the nudes. Viewers know what the object is, but are not drawn to contemplate its utility.

As he continued photographing seashells, Weston began to experiment with their pearly textures and curving forms. Like with the teeth, there was only minimal anthropocentric utility for him to disrupt, though he did take the shells out of their usual contexts—not referring to the creatures that once lived in them or the beach that they were probably found upon. Instead of photographing the nautilus shells from the sides in order to emphasize their perfectly spiraling forms (arguably their most characteristic visual forms), he began arranging them together and photographing them from unexpected angles; it was through these methods that he began to find bodily forms within the shells. *Shells*, from 1927, is composed of two shells placed together: the spiraling shell from *Shell* [Figure 35], which is placed inside another shell [Figure 38]. Except for the title (which is plural), he does not make it obvious to the viewer that this is two shells arranged together—they fit seamlessly together to make a new shape. The way they are arranged, it appears that the opening of the shell on the bottom curls up and around (this is where it ~~turns~~ “turns into” the top shell) and then inward on itself. The ~~new~~ “new” shell that is created has two spiraling ends and one hole in the middle of those where it bends. Furthermore, Weston has enhanced the curling-inward of the top piece of the top shell—lighting it so that it has a bright highlight and a dark shadow on the bottom, making it appear even rounder than it is. By combining the shells together to make something new out of them, he removes it even further from the way that we usually see shells. Though we might be able to tell from its texture, its general forms and, importantly, the title, that it is a shell, it is certainly not like a shell that we are familiar with. This opens the shells to new readings—they can be seen as a bird, for example, with a long, round neck that curls in upon itself—sleeping, or cleaning its

feathers. Whatever the viewer sees is up to his or her imagination; Weston has created a new object by combining objects and enhancing (instead of merely calling attention to) its visual forms. Because he has found bodily forms in an object, he has opened it up to having a narrative that it never would have otherwise had—quite the opposite of what he did with the nudes.

Weston also found bodily forms in the shells by photographing them from unfamiliar angles and, again, enhancing their formal qualities. This is especially true in *Chambered Nautilus*, from 1927 [Figure 39]. While a shell like this might usually be characterized by its spiraling form, Weston turned the shell so that the camera was aimed at its opening. The part of the shell that curves into the opening appears to be quite close to us at the bottom of the frame and then it curves back into the composition as it enters the shell. The wall of the opening flares up in a large ovular shape, which is flattened by Weston's use of lighting. This flattened space contrasts with the the curve and roundness of the front part of the shell, which is emphasized by Weston's choice in lighting, focus, and point of view. The focus clearly shows the horizontal striping across this part of the shell. These lines are far apart at the front of the shell and taper together near the back, emphasizing the shell's curve away from us. There are strong highlights and shadows which further serve to emphasize this form. By disrupting the way that we usually see the object and by enhancing its form, Weston allowed the shell to appear to be something other, though the connection is not as obvious as it was in the previous example [Figure 38]. Its curving form resembles the curve of a spine (like the back in *Nude* [Figure 23]), or possibly a phallus. While the figure in *Nude*'s curving back is flattened, and her three-dimensionality is minimized so as to reduce her body-as-whole



corporeality, here, he emphasizes the very same form in order to create a body in material objects which do not normally resemble bodies at all.

Finally, while Weston minimized the individuality of the 1925 nudes, he chose extremely individual peppers. By enhancing these peppers' visual forms, he simultaneously made them look like bodies, or interacting bodily forms. In *Pepper*, from 1929, for example, he lit the pepper with a strong, uni-directional light and set it against a medium-gray background. This served to give it harsh, bright white highlights and dark black shadows which both stand out against the background. This would be similar to all of Weston's photographs, but here, he chose a pepper that resembles two figures, crouched and clutching at each other's necks as they bend their heads together. His formal choices make this comparison unmistakable. In *Peppers*, from 1929, he placed two peppers together, their dark forms against a light white background, which serves to emphasize their outlines, instead of the individual bulbous sections of each pepper. He also chose a point of view that emphasized the interplay between the peppers. Viewers then might notice that the peppers curve, like hunched-over forms: one stands over the other as it lies on the ground. The explanation for the interaction will be different for each viewer, but the fact that there are two figures that are clearly positioned together allows room for narrative. Again, this is quite different than what Weston did with the nudes, where he not only showed the bodies in isolation, but isolated body *parts* as well, minimizing the figures' ability to self-express. Again, this opposite approach establishes a relationship between the peppers and the bodies. By focusing on form instead of utility or individuality, the subjects are rendered so that

viewers notice primarily what the subjects look like. All content is placed on the same plane and all things become part object and part being.

*Pepper no. 30*, from 1930 depicts a single pepper in isolation, but its positioning and lighting makes it look unmistakably like a muscled, twisting torso. Weston set the pepper into a medium-toned funnel, which allowed this positioning of the pepper, pushing its back side up and forward. The pepper would have sat unevenly without this. Most importantly, though, is Weston's choice in lighting: this gives the pepper strong highlights and dark shadows that cut into its form and help to make parts of it blend against the background. There is a deep shadow that cuts into its right side, for example, as well as one that cuts into its base, creating the form of buttocks. Finally, there are deep shadows that cut into the "arm" pieces that reach up and over the top of the pepper. As with previously discussed pieces, he took what already existed of the pepper's form and enhanced it—making it appear even more bulbous and sculptural, as its sculptural qualities stand out and recede into the image more than they would have if the lighting were more even. Thus, the comparison to a body is unmistakable. Weston continued this trend as he continued photographing vegetables in the following years, especially as he photographed white radishes in 1933, as we can see in *Radish* [Figure 43]. Whereas with *Pepper no. 30* he took the liberty to shape the pepper with shadow in order to make its forms stand out (and thus make it look like a body), here, he framed the image so that it does not include the pointy, stringy ends of the radish. The focus, then, is the long, cylindrical shapes of its form. Because he did not include what is one of a radish's most defining qualities, he opened the radish to new interpretations—in this case, welcoming comparisons to fingers or legs. It is important to note that in both of

these images, he explains to viewers what they are looking at by including the name of the physical object in the title. He destabilizes our interaction with the object, however, with his choices in framing and lighting, encouraging comparisons to bodies. Thus, he continued the pattern that I have illustrated with the cabbage leaf and sperm whale teeth examples of decontextualizing the object and drawing attention to its form rather than function. In these photographs, however, that focus on form turned into an increased focus on the individuality of the pepper and the radish, and their similarities to the human form.

## IV: READINGS OF WESTON'S WORK

### THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

As I have shown, the first of Weston's stated goals—to draw attention to the formal qualities of the subjects that he photographed—he achieved. In his nude studies, he drew attention away from the individuality or narrative of the model depicted by placing her in the studio (and therefore out of a context where we would normally see a nude body), aiming his camera at her torso (which minimized her expressive abilities), and de-emphasizing the bodiness of her form (by making her skin look like white space instead of flesh, and by choosing points of view that rendered the rest of her body ambiguous). With his vegetables and shells, he took more liberties in enhancing their formal qualities—using the shells' pearly textures to make their forms look even more round and lighting the peppers so as to exaggerate the forms of their bulbous sections. The question then arises—do the photographs function solely as figural studies of form, or does he have something further to say about the objects and bodies themselves?

This question has been debated in recent years by feminist theorists—primarily Laura Mulvey and Roberta McGrath. Both authors originally published their writings on Weston in the 1980s, and thus, Weston would not have been aware of the ideas that they put forth. They bring in several ideas, though, that concern the relationship between the viewer and the nude woman as subject. Laura Mulvey, for example, notes that while Weston claimed that there were no erotic overtones of his work, and that his work functioned only as a study in form, in fact, he sets up a voyeuristic relationship between the model, and him, the camera, and the viewer. She includes his reaction to

others' claims that his work had erotic overtones: "Others must get from them what they bring to them: evidently they do!" noting that this implies that Weston thought himself free of this "sexual suppression."<sup>51</sup> She concludes by saying that "The fact remains, however, that his nude photographs of Tina Modotti are often taken from above, looking down on her as she lies passively, sunbathing or asleep, on the ground, in a conventional pose."<sup>52</sup>

Roberta McGrath furthers this discussion in more detail in her article "Re-reading Edward Weston: Feminism, Photography, and Psychoanalysis."<sup>53</sup> She maintains that the relationship between model and viewer that Weston sets up is a voyeuristic interaction. "Enjoyment of the nudes," she writes, "is ensured through the erasure of the threatening gaze of the woman, either through a literal beheading, aversion or covering of the eyes, as if she did not know that she was the object of your gaze. She does not look, pretends she is not being looked at, and at the same moment we know very well that she knows. She is the one to be looked *at* without looking herself."<sup>54</sup> And indeed, in his photographs of Tina Modotti sunbathing on the rooftop, and in his later nudes of Charis Wilson, the women often turn their heads away, passively. In *Tina on the Azotea* [Figure 18], Tina closes her eyes, seemingly unaware of the camera, though we know she is, as we can see from her taught, pulled-in stomach. McGrath goes on to say that the distance that the photograph implies is crucial to the pleasure gained from the photograph. "To move too close, to touch would put an end to scopic mastery and lead to the exercise of the other drives, the senses of touch and hence to orgasm. Thus, the

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<sup>51</sup> Laura Mulvey. *Visual and other pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1989), 109

<sup>52</sup> Mulvey. *Visual and other pleasures*, 109.

<sup>53</sup> Roberta McGrath, "Re-reading Edward Weston: Feminism, Photography, and Psychoanalysis," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. by Liz Wells, (New York, London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>54</sup> McGrath, "Re-reading Edward Weston," 335.

photograph acts not so much like a window on the world as a one-way mirror where the tantalizing object of desire remains just out of reach so close, and yet....”<sup>55</sup> This voyeuristic distance between model and photographer (or viewer) must be maintained for the pleasure to be maintained. The extreme focus on formal qualities that Weston establishes, in fact, only increases this relationship. There is a “heightening of visual qualities which excite and invoke,” but which do not allow touch. That retention, she notes, is a crucial part of the maintenance of the pleasure gained from viewing the images. McGrath’s argument is important, as it establishes that the viewer’s interaction with a photograph is complicated and that it extends far beyond a reaction to the body parts depicted.

McGrath’s analysis is problematic, however, because she tends to generalize Weston’s nudes, instead of acknowledging that his approach to nudes evolved greatly over the course of his career. While he certainly sets a voyeuristic relationship between viewer and Tina in *Tina on the Azotea*, is this relationship maintained in the 1925-1933 nudes? The voyeuristic relationship, as she and Mulvey speak of it, does not. Not only do these figures no longer have faces to turn away from us, but, as explained in Chapter Two, the forms of their bodies function, in part, organic abstraction, rather than whole bodies. When we look at Weston’s work as a whole, therefore, we can see that this voyeuristic relationship was minimized as he removed his models from a context, which gave them a narrative—even one as simple as “nude woman to be looked at”—and into the studio, where their figures function more as form rather than body at all.

It could be argued that this extreme attention to the details of the form increases the sensuality, or the tactility, of the object depicted. To reduce the object to its most

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<sup>55</sup> McGrath, “Re-reading Edward Weston,” 330.

sensuous features (emphasizing the texture of the peppers and shells, for example), is to enhance one sense at the exclusion of the others—the equivalent (though opposite) of closing your eyes while eating or listening to music. However, if we look at Weston’s work as a whole, we can see that he actually minimized the sensuality of the nudes (though it does indeed still exist) while maximizing the sensuality of the peppers and shells. The tactility of the body is almost nonexistent, for example, in *Nude* [Figure 23], as the model’s skin becomes a flattened white space instead of flesh at all. In *Pepper no. 30* [Figure 42], however, the tactility of the pepper is not only drawn attention to, but exploited. Instead of becoming flat, the forms of the pepper are so emphasized that they seem to extend out into the viewer’s space from the dark backgrounds behind them. Thus, he disrupts our usual sexual reaction to the nude body. If there is such a reaction to his work, it is less in reference to the nude female body and more to peppers and shells. This again disrupts viewers’ usual interactions with the objects. Whereas the gender (and therefore the sexualized relationship) of the nudes is disrupted and minimized, a sensual (and therefore nearly sexual) relationship is established with the peppers. Again, this evidence shows that Weston gave both bodies and peppers opposite treatment, but with the final effect of equalizing the two subjects.

Other scholars have debated whether the images are sexual or not, though in different terms. As Mulvey noted, Weston himself believed that the shells especially were not erotic and when he heard that Tina and her circle of artist friends in Mexico did think they were erotic, he asked, “Why were all these persons so profoundly affected on the physical side? For I can say with absolute honesty that not once while working with the shells did I have any physical reaction to them: nor did I try to record

erotic symbolism.”<sup>56</sup> Amy Conger notes in “Edward Weston: The Form of the Nude” that according to the Federal Anti-Obsecenity Act of 1873, which was still somewhat enforced at this time, Weston’s nudes would have been considered indecent. She notes, though, that “Weston’s nudes do not arouse an erotic feeling for me...I am, however, stunned by the beauty in his use of light, tone, texture, and composition.”<sup>57</sup> Others, such as Ben Maddow suggest otherwise—that Weston’s sexual relationship with these women is obvious in the photographs, and that “no one can look at his photographs of nudes without some sensual vibrations.”<sup>58</sup> The reactions to the question of whether or not Weston’s nudes are sexualized are wide and varied.

Embedded in this debate is the question—is a nude body inherently sexually charged? As Mario Perniola suggests, not necessarily so. “In the figurative arts,” he writes, “eroticism appears as a relationship between clothing and nudity. Therefore, it is conditional on the possibility of movement—transit—from one state to the other. If either of these poles takes on a primary or essential significance to the exclusion of the other, then the possibility for this transit is sacrificed, and with it the conditions for eroticism.”<sup>59</sup> Eroticisim, therefore, depends not on whether or not there is a nude body present, but upon whether or not that body is in transition between being covered and being exposed. I would add to this that this transition does not necessarily need to be between nudity and *clothing*, but between nudity and coverage of any kind. To be covered, part of the body can be hidden behind shadow or mist, the model can be

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<sup>56</sup> Edward Weston, *Daybooks vol. II*, 31.

<sup>57</sup> Conger, *Edward Weston: The Form of the Nude*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Conger, *Edward Weston: The Form of the Nude*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Mario Perniola, “Between Clothing and Nudity,” in *Fragments for a history of the human body*, ed. Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi (New York, N.Y.:Zone, 1989), 237.



covering part of her body herself, or the photographer can hide part of her body outside the edges of the frame. The most crucial aspect is that the artist alludes to there being more to see. Indeed, the women in *At the Folies-Bergere* are fully unclothed, but the image is highly sexual; the women's bodies are hidden by garlands and their own hands [Figure 31]. Eroticism comes not from what we can see, but from the promise that there is *more* to see. The context and the narrative established in the photograph work in a similar way. For an image to be eroticized, there needs to be enough of a narrative that a relationship between viewer and subject is established—the voyeuristic relationship that is established in *Tina on the Azotea*, for example (in this case, the viewer is allowed to “watch” Tina sunbathing). However, this narrative needs to be ambiguous enough that the viewer's imagination can fill in the rest of the story. We need to be able to see something, but we must also be promised that there is more to see.

If we examine some of Weston's other, less widely-published work, we can see that this aspect of eroticism was something that he had considered. *Nude*, from 1925, for example, is much more sexual than his studio nudes of the same year [Figure 44]. Unlike the studio nudes, this nude figure lies draped across a couch, with a blanket spilled across the floor, which gives her context. She provocatively covers part of her pubic area with one thigh, and one breast is hidden by the edge of the frame, while the other is in plain view. Her pose reveals some of her sexual anatomy, but alludes to viewers that there is *more* to see. Though she is not in transition between clothing and nudity, she does not show her entire body outright. In *Tina*, from 1924, Weston partially covers Tina's body with a cloth, so that we can see her breast, torso, and hip, and can almost see her other breast and pubic area. He highlights the one breast by

photographing her in strong sunlight, so that there is a deep shadow under it, calling attention to it. Because he alludes to the fact that there is more of her body (her sexual anatomy, specifically) to see, but does not quite show it to viewers, this photograph is more sexualized than the 1925 studio nudes. Though he hides the body from view in that series, he does not reference that there is more of her body to see. The forms only partially function as nude bodies, which again reduces their sexuality. As I will discuss shortly, this is important in considering whether or not Weston achieved the goals set forth in the Daybooks.

#### FORM, QUINTESSENCE, OR INTERDEPENDENT PARTS OF THE WHOLE?

As I have shown, Weston's nudes and studio still lifes did indeed meet his goal of illustrating "sheer aesthetic form." So, did he succeed in showing the "quintessence of the thing itself?" In answering this question, it is valuable to know the meaning of the word itself. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the quintessence is :

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  - a. The most essential part or feature *of* some non-material thing; the purest or most perfect form or manifestation *of* some quality, idea, etc.
  - b. The most typical example of a category or class; the most perfect embodiment of a certain type of person or thing.<sup>60</sup>

Because the things he photographed were material objects, the first definition does not apply, as they were not qualities or ideas. The second definition also shows that Weston might have misused or misunderstood the word. If a quintessence is the most perfect embodiment of the a class or category of things, it is not actually possible to show the quintessence of *one* thing. It must be compared to other things. The phrase ~~the~~

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<sup>60</sup> J.A. Simpson., and E. S. C. Weiner. 1989 (*The Oxford English dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press).

quintessence of the thing itself” *only* makes sense in relation to Weston’s work if the category or class means all possible depictions of the thing being photographed, which, even then is stretching the use of the word. As we have seen, Weston’s studio photographs (the vegetables especially) were often meant to bring out just one visual characteristic of the object. *Pepper no. 30* is about the bulbous forms, the original spiral shell is about the lines of its spiral, *Sperm Whale Teeth* is about the curving forms of the teeth, and *Cabbage Leaf* is about the lines of the cabbage’s folds. While these photographs and even the objects he used certainly are not the “most typical example” of these objects, it could be said that he did indeed find the most perfect way to make these characteristic visual forms stand out—that he did find the image (out of all possible images that could have been taken of the objects) that brought out the single object’s most characteristic quality. It should be noted (as it often is not) in Weston scholarship that this is what he did, and that he did not capture the “quintessence of the thing itself.”

Another possibility is that Weston simply misunderstood the word “quintessence,” and took it to mean the “absolute essence.” This interpretation would make sense with his phrasing—the camera should be used for a recording of *life*, for rendering the very substance and [essence] of the *thing itself*, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh.”<sup>61</sup> If this is the case, does any of the 1925 *Nudes* depict the essence of a torso? Is the essence of a cabbage leaf its flowing lines and veins? Is the essence of a pepper its bulbous sections? Again, this term only applies if consider that he focused on visual forms and characteristics of the objects he photographed, and specifically did not capture the anthropocentric essences of the objects. To humans, the

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<sup>61</sup> Edward Weston, *The Daybooks*, Ed. Nancy Newhall, Vol. I (New York: Aperture, 1973), 55.

essence of a vegetable has nothing to do with its visual forms, but with its utility as food. The essence of a shell might be its spiraling form, and might even be its texture and tactility, but has nothing to do with its connections to the body. The essence of a torso might be its ability to breathe, or something to do with the individuality of the person it belongs to, but in the 1925 nudes, Weston has specifically abstracted the figures' forms so that the images are no longer about the corporeality of the body. So, even if we take into account Weston's possible misunderstanding of the word "quintessence," we find that he still did not achieve this goal.

The third of his stated contradictory themes was to show "clouds, torsos, shells, peppers...[as] interdependent, interrelated parts of a whole, which is Life."<sup>62</sup> If we examine his studio work as a whole, and take into account the themes that I have outlined here, we find that he did indeed come close to doing this. The 1925 *Nude* series functioned by first minimizing the individuality of the model depicted, by minimizing her expressive qualities. He focused on his models' torsos, so that the photograph was no longer a nude-portrait, and no longer about the individual body language or profession of the person depicted. He removed the bodies from any context, which removed any narrative overtones from the photographs. The photographs could then become about the forms of bodies, rather than about people. He also tended to focus not on his models' sexual anatomy, or defining anatomical features of sex, but made the gender of his figures somewhat ambiguous. This, along with the removal of the narrative, served to disrupt any sexed relationship that the viewer would have otherwise had with the figure. This was an important step in seeing the figure not as a body, but as pure form. He then zoomed in close to the bodies he photographed in order to

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<sup>62</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 154.

(partially) abstract them into organic form, rather than maintaining the corporeality of the body as a whole.

He treated his vegetables and shells quite differently. With these, he again minimized their anthropocentric utility. Much as the nudes are no longer about people, the still lifes are no longer about the objects' utility for people. Furthermore, he photographed the objects so as to disrupt the way that we are familiar with viewing them. If we are to focus on form, and forget that we are looking at a cabbage leaf, we must not associate with it the way that we normally associate with cabbage leaves. Many of his still lifes from this time period go even further. Whereas he had minimized the individuality of the nudes, he photographed the peppers in a way that emphasized their individual qualities and even gave them narratives. The nudes he turned into abstracted form, but then he lit, framed, and arranged the shells so that their visual forms begin to look like bodies.

It is important to note, though, that although he made the bodies, vegetables, and shells look like something *else* (whether abstracted form or human body), he always made it clear to his viewers what they were looking at. The nudes, as discussed in chapter II, remain somewhere between corporeal-whole-body and organic abstraction. Even though the nude in Figure 23 is abstracted and made to appear as wide, flat space, Weston chose to include in the composition the indent of her buttocks and the narrowing of her waist, and he tells us that it is a body with the title, *Nude*. Even though it is abstract, we still know that it is a body. The shells, though they resemble bodily forms, are still somewhat identifiable as shells because of their pearly textures. The peppers—though they are unique, individualized peppers, and even though Weston's

photographic choices were made in order to emphasize these visual forms—are still identifiable as peppers. If there is any doubt, the title tells this is true. If Weston's goal was for viewers to realize that all forms are connected, interrelated, interdependent parts of the whole, though, he needed this label in order to ensure that viewers knew what they were looking at. If we are to see that the natural forces that created a human body are the same forces responsible for the twisting forms of a pepper, we must first realize that we are looking at bodies and peppers.

By giving opposite treatment to nudes and natural objects, Weston disrupted the way that viewers usually identify with these subjects. If we look at his work as a whole, we see that while he abstracted his bodies into organic forms, he simultaneously gave corporeal qualities to the peppers, cabbage leaves, and shells that he photographed. Though the nudes are no longer emphasized as whole bodies of individuals, his peppers begin to resemble active bodies, though they are still recognizable as peppers. By focusing primarily on the form of the objects he photographed, rather than content, everything that he turned his camera upon becomes some combination of body and object. Humans, therefore, are not placed in a vertical hierarchy above all other living things, but in a horizontal plane equalizing all natural forms. Thus, we can return to his wish to show that all natural forms—bodies included—are interdependent parts of the whole, and conclude that this objective, at least, he achieved.

## IV. EPILOGUE

This exploration of Weston's writings is important not only in order to understand Weston's works in more detail, but in order to confront and analyze one of the central themes of Modernism itself. Weston was not alone in his tendencies to embrace formalism—to focus on his “vision of sheer aesthetic form.”<sup>63</sup> The idea of formalism can perhaps best be defined by English art critic (and member of the Bloomsbury group of London) Clive Bell in his 1914 *Art*<sup>64</sup>. This text shows that Weston's ideas of form in his own photography grew out of a greater context of artists who strived towards creating meaning out of only form. Bell's writings provide a more thoughtfully-worded version of what Weston mentioned often in passing. Bell wrote that great art (i.e.: formalist art) is defined not by its subject matter, or the content that it represents, but by its treatment of form—by the artist's use of line, color, and three-dimensional space. Great art requires the viewer to know nothing about its content, which makes it more applicable to a universal audience, regardless of time or place. “The representative element in a work of art,” he writes, “may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions.”<sup>65</sup> Content does not matter at all. As we can see, Weston's exclamations that “Does it make any difference what *subject matter* is used to express a feeling toward life,”<sup>66</sup> was an echo of Bell's earlier statements.

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<sup>63</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 31.

<sup>64</sup> Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958).

<sup>65</sup> Clive Bell. *Art*. 27.

<sup>66</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II*. 24.

As I have illustrated in this thesis, however, this very Modern approach to art comes with it an inherent set of contradictions—one that was present in Weston’s writings, but that extends to Modern theory as well. As we have seen, it is not possible to ignore content—especially when the photograph is not devoid of content in the first place. Artists always make some sort of commentary *about* what the image depicts *through* the formal qualities. It is possible, though, to transcend the object’s typical anthropocentric associations—indeed, Weston said little about cabbages or peppers as food and little about the body as nude woman. He thought he could ignore these aspects of content by focusing intently on the forms of the object—doing everything he could as a photographer to draw attention to the flowing lines of the cabbage, or the muscled, robust forms of the pepper. However, because we still know what the objects are, we are still inclined to connect this new way of seeing the objects to our old familiarity with them. It is here that we see that Weston’s contradictions are a natural result of the Modernist formalist perspective. Focusing so intently on form allowed Weston to transcend content, but he could not destroy it altogether. By taking the peppers out of context, giving them added narratives, choosing peppers that don’t really look like peppers, and choosing peppers that are beginning to rot, Weston no longer identified the peppers as food. Furthermore, he used the capabilities of the camera to “see the pepper anew”—the camera could see more details of its form than the human eye. But, in the end, the image is still recognizable as a pepper, and therefore, any message that we gain from this new perspective will relate to peppers. As I have shown, for example, Weston’s focus on the *form* of all natural objects ultimately ends in a conclusion that



We arrive, therefore, at the very post-Modern perspective that it is not the artist, but each individual viewer that determines the meaning of the artwork. We see that this strict attention to the details of form did not destroy content, but instead created the content anew (and it is important to note that Weston, as I have shown, always maintained a connection to the object's original state, and therefore maintained ties to its original interpretation). By creating it anew, he opened the objects to new and varied readings. This frustrated him greatly—he maintained the Modern idea that the artist was the one to create meaning of the work. When Modotti, Diego Rivera, and their group of Mexican artist friends wrote to Weston after viewing his shells for the first time, they noted their physical reactions to the photographs: ~~they~~ stirred up all my innermost feelings so that I felt a physical pain.<sup>67</sup> Rivera commented: ~~These~~ photographs are biological, beside the aesthetic emotion they disturb me physically,—see, my forehead is swelling.<sup>68</sup> And Weston responded (in his Daybooks) with shock: ~~Why~~ are these persons so profoundly affected on the physical side?...No! I had no physical thoughts, never have. I worked with clearer vision of sheer aesthetic form. I knew that I was recording from within, my feeling for life as I never had before.<sup>69</sup> How can we reconcile this contradiction in Weston's approach to his work—the bodily connections in the shells seemed clear to his viewers; no doubt the bodily forms in the peppers seemed even clearer. But Weston responded with shock whenever these connections were specifically called out. If he himself responded simply to *form*, why was it that everyone else saw so much more?

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<sup>67</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II.* 24.

<sup>68</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II.* 150.

<sup>69</sup> Weston. *Daybooks vol. II.* 150.

In fact, as I have shown, it was exactly this extreme attention to form that led his subjects to be re-made and re-invented in the imaginations of his viewers. Although some of Weston's interpretations of his work do indeed reflect the meaning of his work as a whole, his photographs' real draw to viewers comes from the fact that the attention to form allows (and even encourages) viewers to read their own interpretations into the works. His attention to form allows viewers to see the objects in such detail that they become strange and foreign. Is the nude a body or a landscape?—is the pepper a vegetable or a body?—is the cabbage leaf a piece of cloth or flowing water? So, in the end, we can see that Weston's writings do provide some insight into his work—but perhaps the real power of his work is that he allowed the viewer to decide the meaning of the content, and in fact, disengaged his own power as maker of meaning.

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