

Brett Abbott, Keough Family Curator of Photography and Head of Collections, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, interviewed by Barbara Griffin



Color Light Abstraction 1075, early 1960s, inkjet print, 14 x 21 in., High Museum of Art, Atlanta, promised gift of Barbara and Gene Bullock-Wilson. © Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved.

Intro: Barbara Griffin, previously Senior Vice President of Image Management at Turner Broadcasting System, Inc., currently serves as the Board President of Atlanta Celebrates Photography. While deciding on her next career move, Barbara kindly agreed to sit down with Brett Abbott, her peer and friend, for an interview about the current exhibition at the High Museum of Art, "Wynn Bullock: Revelations," plans for the museum in light of the generous gift they received this spring, and his new role as their Keough Family Curator of Photography. I want to thank them both for granting SXSE this opportunity. - Editor

Barbara Griffin: What made you fall in love with photography?

Brett Abbott: My father was an amateur photographer. He's a pediatrician, but he had a darkroom in the house when I was growing up. I still remember the darkroom; kind of a magical place. Unless I was with him, it was pretty much off limits. Now I understand why.

Chemicals?

Chemicals and nasty stuff (laughs). He's always loved photography and was kind of an amateur photo buff. He made pictures of our family. I just remember being a kid and living with photography that was made by the family, of the family, and they were very tender pictures. I still remember some, one that he made of my sister in particular on a hiking trip, and of my brother and me. We would go to the Sierra's every summer, the eastern side of the Sierra's; south of Mammoth there is an area called Rock Creek. It's a beautiful, gorgeous area of amazing natural wonder. We did lots of hiking and fishing. He would always have his camera, and he made some pictures that are still in my mind.

Do you have any of the images today?

Our house burned down in the Santa Barbara fires of 1990; we lost pretty much everything that we ever had....

....heartbreaking....

....from my childhood and my parents' childhood. They had videos and moving pictures of them as children, I think, without sound. I'm pretty sure all of that was lost. When we evacuated I was not there...I was at a friend's house that day. We spent the night at, I think, my grandparents' house because our house was gone. So I didn't get to choose anything to keep. But my mom did run in, she attempted to grab some pictures.

We used to have family pictures in big brown paper grocery store bags. They would never quite make it into albums but they were these treasured things, so the pictures would be in those little folded drugstore pamphlets, stacked. I remember you could just go and pick out one of these bags that we would re-purpose to hold the pictures. You could just pull them out of the closet and go through them, and get a family history. I think we probably have a couple of those pictures, somewhere. I can't think now exactly where, but my dad may have printed some that were given to my aunt in New Mexico where it was safe, or at my grandparents'. So we rescued a few.

That experience made you realize the importance of curating or preserving imagery?

Yeah, possibly. That idea of preserving, keeping....

....honoring, treasuring....

....honoring, treasuring. Definitely carries over to now.

Photographs are powerful containers for memory, triggers for memory, and they help us remember things that we would never remember necessarily on our own. Then, it's almost like a portal...it unlocks something in your brain that's been stored away for a long time and opens this pathway into other thoughts and memories. I did learn that from that experience.

Finding you had this interest, love, reverence, for photography, how did that evolve into your role today?

I went to school... let me back up a little bit. In high school, I took an art history class. It wasn't about photography; in fact, I don't even know if it touched on photography because, as you know, photography has often been somewhat outside the canon of art history. Photography is one of the most popular media at museums now, but it has not always been that way.

That art history class in high school left a big impression on me. Most public high schools do not have art history as part of their curriculum. It had been taught years before I was there, and then it was cut. When I was a junior it was started up again, the first year it had been offered in a decade. It was taught by this woman whose passion really was art. French was her other passion, so, French and art history. She was teaching all sorts of other things because, budgetary issues, they have to take on history, they have to take on Spanish, which was not really her language. She convinced them to start up art history again. It was an amazing experience and I learned a huge amount. You know people often think art history is fluffier. It was the hardest class I took in high school. Frankly, it was harder than many of the classes that I took in college. She got us thinking, and memorizing huge, vast amounts of information going all the way back from ancient art to almost the present. So I took that course, loved it. Never really thought I was going to major in art history or be in the arts. But I went to college and in my freshman year the R.A. on my hall, the older person who takes care of the new students, lived across from me. She was an art history major. When picking that first quarter at school, deciding what classes to take, I had space for an elective. She said: "Take an art history class, if you liked it in high school."

Even knowing how hard it was....did you think you had a little jump on it because you'd taken it before?

I didn't really know who I was yet. I thought I was going to be an International Relations major or something business-y. So I took this art history class. I loved it, of course. The

curriculum dwelled on ancient Greek, Roman and Etruscan Art. So before I knew it I was like, I'll take another....and I'll take another one. And after a while I realized....

....this is it....

You know, if this is what I'm most excited about of all my classes and this is what I really like, then I should major in it. I don't exactly know what that means in terms of what I'll be when I graduate, but I should follow my passion. I should follow what makes me happy, and just believe that life will work out.

I love that.

And that's the way you should live your life, following your passion, not by doing something you think you should be doing.

Never follow money.

Never follow money, that was the idea. I've had some second thoughts about that (laughs) from time to time. I don't know that I would encourage people to go after their passion blindly. It's important to follow your passion, but a healthy dose of pragmatism goes a long way with your passion. How you can make your passion into something that will sustain you. The reality is you can't discount that, that's an important part of life, unless you have a trust fund, you've got to make it work financially.

I keep forgetting to get a trust fund.

I know. Tell me when you get it.

Especially when you're on a liberal arts track and you think "what am I going to do when I get out of here?"

Right (laughing). That's the first thing they ask when you're majoring in something like art history. People make fun of it....

I did major. At a certain point I realized if I'm really going to major in this, then I'd better think about what to do with this degree. There's not a whole lot that you can do unless you get a graduate degree as well. So it was pretty clear I was going to graduate school right after college. So I applied to graduate school and went directly (no year off, just kept going). It was a masters program, not a Ph.D. I didn't know at that point what exactly I would want to focus on if I got a Ph.D. So I thought I want to be a generalist art historian, and I wanted to take more generalist classes.

Where did you go to school?

Stanford (Palo Alto, CA) and then Williams College (Williamstown, MA). So I arrived at Williams in the two-year masters program. Grueling. Definitely one of the hardest things I've done.

And *Engaged Observers* came out of that?

No, *Engaged Observers* came out of The Getty, having been at The Getty for a while.

What was your thesis?

I went to grad school thinking that I wanted to study Modern Art because I'd had a lot of ancient and renaissance in college. I'd studied in Florence and Spain. I felt like I wanted to round out more in Modern Art. So I went with that intention and I did take some photography as a part of that....the graduate school at Williams is actually housed at the Clark Art Institute, which is an important museum and research center, affiliated with the college. Curriculum is interwoven with museum objects; most of your classes take place

in the museum. It's a very museum-oriented graduate program. They had just started a collection of photography. Now, it's this big investment in photography - Jim Ganz was the curator of works on paper at the time, so he did prints, drawings and photographs. I took his course in photography and I took his course in prints and drawings. He's the first one that took our class to New York; we went to the gallery scene and Sotheby's....got a sense of what the art market is like. So I got exposure to the history of photography there. I think I developed some of my love for photography there. Actually the thesis topic for my graduate program was a renaissance topic....the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinita, in Florence, a fresco cycle painted by Ghirlandaio.

Kind of a gradual increase in responsibility?

Working in the photography department in a major museum was why I was hired by The Getty's photography department. So I moved back west. Early on, my intention was to go back to graduate school and get a Ph.D. What I realized was that I was getting the equivalent working at The Getty. The resources there, in terms of the collection is incredible....a hundred thousand objects or something. An element of connoisseurship concerns itself with what historical prints look like and feel like and ought to look like, in a way that I never would have gotten from more work at a school. This observer went from curatorial assistant to assistant curator to associate curator - over a period of about nine years. Nine years working in that collection, you become a specialist in the history of photography.

And then you did *Engaged Observers*?

Couple of things....probably the two biggest projects at The Getty were - one was a retrospective of Edward Weston's work, and the other was *Engaged Observers*. The latter was actually the bigger of the two. Those two poles, the art-for-art's-sake kind of Modernist pole on one side and the *Engaged Observers*, meaning a kind of socially-engaged, documentary journalistic approach on the other....I've volleyed between my whole career. And I like that. I like going back and forth between that kind of art-for-art's-sake photography versus a more journalistic approach. The two sides are almost like the Janus face of photography - two sides to the medium, but I don't think they are contradictory in any way.

When you came to The High....I'm skipping ahead....we'd just had the Civil Rights Exhibit. Did you feel that you would be able to bring both of those roles together in curating programs for The High?

Yes, actually that's part of why I was a good fit here. Most of my experience at The Getty was in, I would call it, American 20th Century Photography, Modernism and Journalism, or Modernism and Documentary. The terms really start to blend; it's hard to define them, really. The strength of The High's collection is a heavily American 20th Century collection, with great strength in Modernists like Harry Callahan or Wynn Bullock, Walker Evans and the documentary tradition. That amazing collection of Civil Rights documentary photographs. The collection here was a good match with what I was trained in and had an interest in.

Well, we love having you here. With that in mind, when you're approaching new programming at The High, walk me through your process.

Step back and look at where we are and where we want to be. The kinds of projects we work on at The High relate to that bigger picture. They are strategic in the sense that there are parts of a larger project to build something significant for this museum, for Atlanta, for our region. Projects come through that lens. That's what makes them feel

even more relevant. We are blessed with an abundance of opportunities.... how do you cut through that and choose "why this and not that?" So one needs a framework or an armature on which to put projects.

When I came here, one of the things, or maybe the most important thing that excited me about coming to the High is that I would have an opportunity here to do something really meaningful. It felt like there was a lot of enthusiasm for photography in Atlanta, yet it also felt like we had a lot of room for growth in terms of photography. That combination spoke to, "Ok, here's a community that's hungry and a museum that could do something special."

All the pieces of the puzzle were here, they just needed to be put together. You had this relatively new museum....the expansion took place in 2005, not that long ago. Beautiful galleries and spaces to show things. You had a nice start to a strong collection, with about 4,300 photographs in the collection. You had this community that seemed interested, supportive and enthusiastic about photography. There was no robust photography program out of a major museum in this region other than The High. There is nothing comparable in the Southeast, there is nothing comparable to what's going on in New York, or California, or Chicago, for that matter. I felt like there would be an opportunity to help the museum and the community jump up to that next level.

The Getty was the proximate heavyweight of the art world....hard to escape its gravity?

The idea that I could continue working at The Getty and be very well funded....it's a wealthy institution whence I could continue to do very interesting projects and be a project curator...where you go really in depth on a particular topic, and that's your whole life. Or....come to a place like The High, expand my horizons, be more of a generalist....almost be entrepreneurial in approach and, if successful, do something meaningful for the region. Create something that it didn't have.

For the region and for photography as a whole.

Make it really robust, one of the top photography programs in the country. Serve as a resource for our region, which is relatively under-served in that regard.

And now with the recent endowment, congratulations by the way, you are very well positioned to make that happen.

Thank you....the reason I've talked about endowments ever since I came here. There was really not a base of funding specifically for photography here.

Even though it's so popular at the museum?

It's a younger medium. It doesn't have the history of European paintings or historical American art, so it's a medium that's up and coming.... needing to achieve a level of sustainability in terms of funding; that's what we've done with the endowment. One of the things that we have to do, as a museum and to be an important photography program, is build a collection, build a resource for this community - not a resource of loans that come in and leave, but a resource of photographs that are part of The High Museum's collection, the city of Atlanta's collection, the region's collection. So that people can come here and always have access to them.

So building that resource for our region can then serve as the source for robust exhibition programming, loans to museums all around the region. We try to be very generous with loans. I really want the collection here to be used and seen. It's a resource for museums that don't have the resources to accumulate, or the expertise in

terms of curatorship. So I want to be this resource for the region. If building a collection is key to building a program then you have to think, "Ok, what kind of collection should we be building and how do you do that?" My philosophy has been to build on strength. It doesn't make sense to diversify ourselves so much that we have mediocre holdings in everything. I'd much rather be really, really good at certain things and not try to be the best at everything.

So, we already had this strength in 20th Century American photography and I'd identified certain pillars of strength in the collection. There is the documentary tradition, the modernist tradition, and contemporary photography that we've made some headway on in recent years. Then across those 3 pillars, the base of it all is Southern photography. Who are the best photographers to have emerged from the South that relate to those 3 pillars of strength? So that's really the matrix that I use when I'm thinking about building the collection. We're positioned to be, and it's very relevant for us to be, the collection that has the best holdings of Southern photography in the nation. We're poised to tell the world what the South has contributed to the history of photography better than anyone else...we should be poised to do that.

There's such a rich tradition of storytelling in general in the South and this photography is a huge piece of it. So that's perfect.

That's exactly right. I'm talking in big picture terms here but those are the tests when I'm thinking about what to do. Most of the projects that I work on are meant to be collection-building exercises and exhibitions. So the show that we're about to open is the Wynn Bullock show. He was a major mid-century modernist photographer. He was colleagues and friends with Harry Callahan, of whom we have a large collection of work. He also was friends with Clarence John Laughlin who we also have a large collection of, so there's, right there, relevance to the collection. Bullock is relevant to The High's existing strengths.

*Old Typewriter, 1951, gelatin silver print,
7 1/16x9 7/16 in., High Museum of Art,
Atlanta, Gift of Lucinda W. Bunnan
for the Bunnan Collection, 2012.594.
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Second thing, there was an incredible opportunity with Wynn Bullock to not only do something really important for his legacy, but to also do something important for The High's collection. In talking with Wynn Bullock's daughter and the estate, we realized that we could work together to achieve something really wonderful. One, they were willing to place a major collection through gift at The High Museum and transform the museum into one of the artist's most important repositories in the country. We were willing to make a commitment to do an exhibition, to preserve that work, to make it available for study and scholarship to do a book and to tour a show. So you bring those two things together, an artist who's relevant to us and there's an opportunity to receive this incredible gift and to do something really meaningful with it and share it with the

world and remind the world that there was this incredible photographer who has sort of been forgotten.

He has, and I was going to ask you about that because of who his contemporaries were. He was seemingly very prolific and an innovator as well. It's great to be bringing him back now, especially as he had a reverence for nature, something we're keenly aware of now.

That's exactly right.

Why do you think he....

Fell off the map? I think it's complicated. During his life he was considered important. He was very well respected. He was friends with Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. Very close with them. And he was a part of that West Coast f64 approach to photography. So he had great acclaim during his day. He lectured widely, a year after his death he had a retrospective that opened, I think, at The Met in New York. It traveled to Chicago and maybe London. It was a big deal, a really big deal. And then he sort of fell off the map and I think there are a number of reasons for that.

First off, he was never a good promoter of his own work. He was an artist, more interested in photography as a creative act, as a practice that could fulfill him and allow him to explore the world and the universe and the meaning of life. He was much more interested in his journey through art than he was in trying to monetize it or popularize it through sales. He didn't pursue it or market his work effectively, something that Ansel Adams was constantly saying to him. Ansel who was a great marketer...

....of himself

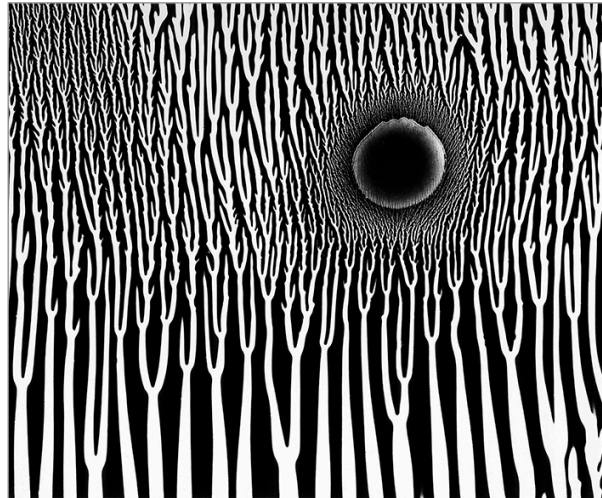
(laughs) He was constantly trying to push him to be better at that. I think that's one reason.

Another reason is that he died prematurely. He wasn't young (73), he passed due to cancer. So I think that a lot of artists spend their late years thinking about the sum of their life's work, organizing it, and that's the time that they really put thought into legacy. And he didn't have that time. So I think that's another reason.

Supposedly he did not have the best relationship with the Newhalls, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, who were very important critical, pivotal, curators and photo historians of the day who wrote, basically, the first history of photography, American photography. They were very close with Ansel and with Edward Weston. I don't think he necessarily had a contentious relationship with them but he felt like no one else understood his work as well as he did and he wasn't willing to release control of it. Nancy wanted to do a book on his work and he didn't allow her to. I think that there is a lesson in that. As an artist it is important to let other people work with your work and help you popularize it. That is the power of the curator, especially in those days when there weren't too many of us. I think that was an opportunity that was missed and didn't help in establishing legacy for his work.

And, I think, lastly... I said it's complicated (laughs)... there are lots of factors, it's not just one or the other. Photography was changing in the 60's and 70's and at the time that he passed people would have been starting to think about his place in the canon, interest in photography really shifted and became much more conceptual.

Photogram, 1970, gelatin silver print, 9 1/8 x 7 3/8 in., Collection of Barbara and Gene Bullock-Wilson. © Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved.



You had a lot more interest on the part of artists who wouldn't consider themselves photographers but artists working in photography, as opposed to classic photographers working in photography. That changed the dialogue and there was a shift towards a more conceptual language in photography that turned the focus away from what we consider classic modernist work.

He was more conceptual though, than Adams.

He absolutely was. That's what's so interesting about him. People lump him in with Weston and Adams and they don't realize that actually he was much more postmodern in his approach. He really was much more conceptual and he was more worldly than they were. He took up photography when he was living in Europe. He was not a strictly west coast photographer. He was a concert singer before he was a photographer. He was touring Europe as a singer, was exposed to works of art like impressionism in the Louvre, which he frequented. He was exposed to the work of László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, cutting edge experimental photography and was inspired by that and really brought those worldly European influences, along with an interest in science, Einstein, philosophy. Wild things like quantum physics, relativity, he was very well read. He brought that really interesting mix of interests to his photography and combined it with a kind of west coast modernist approach to the craft of photography.

He must have been fascinating to be around. Wow.

I'm sure he was. I think a lot of people had trouble keeping up with him. He just loved to talk about this stuff that was over most people's heads.

He wasn't interested in just simply documenting something, the way that Ansel Adams was....it was much more lyrical and more about perception and feeling.

Absolutely. If we're going to be reductive into what photographers are about, Edward Weston was really interested in geometric form. He was interested in how you weight a composition and how you create an interesting pattern within the photograph. Ansel was interested in drama.

....and perfection....

Bullock was interested in mystery. They're really very different. And when you start to look at pictures by the three of them....I could put a Weston, a Bullock and an Adams next to one another, all made in northern California of natural subjects....hills, let's say. You can see, if you do that comparison, they are after very different things.

That would be fascinating to do.

Yeah. Bullock was interested in mystery, the way the world works beyond our common frames of perception. He was very interested in the idea that there are all sorts of mysteries to the way that the universe functions. That we just don't think about on a daily

basis. We can't necessarily see them or perceive them but that doesn't make them not real.

And he was interested in using the camera as a tool for reminding us of these complex processes that take place all around us. When he's photographing a natural subject like a forest you'll notice that first of all there is always an interest in light in many of his photographs.



Let There Be Light, 1954, gelatin silver print, 7 3/8 x 9 7/16 in., Collection Center for Creative Photography. © Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved.

The light is so beautiful.

He thought light was the most profound force in the universe.

He had a reverence for it, the light you see repeatedly in his work. A lot of his photos are filled with fog; the fog provides a sense of mystery but it also provides a sense....that air is not nothingness. Air is something.

...tabula rasa...

....and even if you're in outer space where there's no atmosphere, you're actually surrounded....

...it's tangible....

...by electromagnetic forces surrounding you all the time. That things are passing through us right now (laughs)....little particles, rays and all sorts of things we don't perceive because the senses of our mind and the eyes, the tools that we have built-in, don't pick them up....but they're still there. And Bullock was fascinated by that concept that there is more to the world than appears to the eye....could you use the camera to remind people of that....to meditate on that topic, so that when there is a fog-filled landscape, he's reminding us that air is as much about fullness as it is about emptiness. When he is photographing light abstractions, he's



Erosion, 1959, gelatin silver print, 7 1/4 x 9 5/16 in., Collection Center for Creative Photography. © Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved.

reminding us that light is passing around us at all times. When he's photographing that hillside that's so different from a Weston or an Adams hillside – the one I have in mind – he's actually looking at an eroded hill, I don't know if you know it - it's an eroded embankment.

It's one of his really strong, iconic pictures; what he's looking at is like an embankment, where the skin of earth has been flayed. It's been taken off by erosion, by water passing over it. You get to see what the earth looks like underneath the surface of the earth, because you're almost looking at a cross section of land underneath the ground. You see the roots of the shrubs coming down and hanging. He's showing us in that picture a world that exists underneath the ground. It's a world we don't see, but it's no less real.

And that's what almost all of Bullock's pictures are about.



I'm flashing on the picture on the hill, where he shot into the sun, the name of it I can't remember... "Stark Tree"...just the idea of that – if Ansel Adams had the same choice he probably wouldn't have made that photograph. The idea that you would shoot into the sun and get that kind of drama, and it feels like a nighttime picture. It's very moody.

Moody and mysterious, almost a little bit frightening.

Stark Tree, 1956, gelatin silver print, 7 5/8 x 9 1/16 in., Collection Center for Creative Photography. © Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved

Yes! Which is why I love it.

Unsettling. There is something unsettling to his work. Even the famous work like "*Child in Forest, 1951*"....

I was going to ask you about that one.

It's un-settling and it was controversial in its day. You see this thing and it's beautiful but also disturbing. You think...

Child in Forest, 1951, gelatin silver print, 7 7/16 x 9 3/8 in., High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchase, 1978.62. © Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved

Why is that child there?

It's this gorgeous thing, exactly, but why is the child there....

It's nude.



Is it living, is it not? Is it by choice? And then you have the forest and the flesh. What he was interested in was that sensation of un-settling the viewer. Bullock was interested in

the idea that by putting a nude in context with an environment that you could bring out all of these ideas, these contrasts about the world. It would make you see and think deeper about the complexity of the universe. You see natural growth and decay at the same time; animate in the person and inanimate, and light and dark.

It's all of these contrasts, he's pulling out dualities. Why was he interested in dualities? Because a lot of the science of the day that he was reading about told us that the world was based on dualities.... light and dark....life and death....the idea that atoms could be in more than one place at the same time, that is a basic tenant of quantum physics he was interested in....

...just the duality of photography itself...

...negative/positive...

Bullock felt like photography, because it was an art based on the duality of negative and positive and based on the forces of time and light, was the perfect medium to explore these baffling scientific concepts of the day.

Rock, 1973, gelatin silver print, 8 5/8 x 6 3/4 in., Collection of Barbara and Gene Bullock-Wilson. © Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved.



Wow. I think with this retrospective (runs June 14, 2014 - January 15, 2015) people will have an all new look at Bullock, and see him in a way we never have before.

I remember studying him in college; "Child in Forest, 1951" being an image we looked at; I remember thinking it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Yeah, yeah.

So is that your hope?

It is. The title of the show is "*Wynn Bullock Revelations*", a play on words because his whole approach to photography was about the act of revelation, personal revelation about what the world is. The show also will be a revelation for all of us who thought we knew Wynn Bullock, and will come away, I hope, with a whole new understanding of what his work is about.

It's too easy to lump him in with the Weston, Ansel Adams oeuvre - to see him anew will be exciting.

There will be a book, which I'm excited about. My hope is it will become the standard reference for his work for decades.

<http://museumshop.high.org/collections/exhibition-catalogues/products/wynn-bullock-revelations>

<https://utpress.utexas.edu/index.php/books/higwyn>

There'll be a great book, the show will go to the Center for Creative Photography, who is our partner in it, in Tucson, AZ. I hope it will travel elsewhere. A major acquisition is being made, as I described, at the end of the show. We'll be a permanent repository for

his career. We're trying to arrange it so Bullock's daughter, Barbara, appears during *Atlanta Celebrates Photography* (October 2014)....to do a gallery talk or maybe a talk in an auditorium where she gives some of the back stories behind the pictures. She is the child in the forest by the way.

Really?!

Yes, she is the child.

When you were talking about that, I was thinking about Sally Mann's work, and what Bullock would think of her work in terms of the decomposition of corpses.

He probably would have liked her work.

It's amazing to think that, out of a school of photographers, I don't know if you'd describe them that way, such different work and personalities came out of it. It's very much the way things are today, too.

Distinct identities really. You can see it through their work if you take the time to look and let the pictures tell you something about the person behind them. You'll see that there are distinct personalities at play....

...photographers tend to have big and distinct personalities.

...(laughs)...

What does hosting a significant exhibit like this mean to The High?

Part of that larger program - building the collection and building a robust series of exhibitions and public programs related to photography for our community. Before I was here, Julian Cox did a good job of getting that kind of program up and running. What you're seeing now is that the engines are all firing and we're doing four major shows back-to-back in photography. It went from the Bunnell Collection, to Abelardo Morrell, to Wynn Bullock, and then Gordon Parks.

Those are all special exhibitions in big major spaces in the museum. I don't know that we've ever had a line-up of four shows, major shows, back-to-back....

I can't promise I'm going to be able to keep up back-to-back indefinitely....but the idea is that there is an appreciation for this kind of project here, that we have the opportunity to do great things in photography. We really can do them, we're running a program that is as good as any program in the nation right now.

Photography as a medium, just generally, not just in the South, but generally around the nation and around the world, is becoming popular. More people are recognizing the creative potential that's always been in it; museums are seeing it's an art that is accessible.

There's a level of engagement and accessibility associated with photography that you don't....not to say that there isn't something wonderful about other media, other art....but I think there is something about photography, in the sense that....I don't know if there is another medium of art where you can say that almost everyone who views it has done it. Photography is special in that way. We're all practitioners. Even if we don't call ourselves photographers, we've all made a picture; almost all of us now carry around a camera in our pockets, on our phones.

But you can appreciate photography even if you don't care about composition and you don't care about history; if you don't care about anything else that makes photography art, you can still appreciate photography for the subject that it shows you....

...and the moment...

....for the literal moment that it records.

I wanted to end on a fun question....this is a perfect place to ask you....curatorially, how do you think history is going to regard the Selfie? (laughs)

That's a good one. It's already being discussed curatorially. It's a phenomenon that will be associated with our time, just as tintype portraits were associated with the Civil War, and soldiers going off to battle, and their families wanting to have a way of remembering them. Or, the snapshot revolution that takes off with the development of small format cameras that allowed, for the first time, everyone, to make a picture. You could buy a Brownie and go out and make snapshots, right?

There's a whole revolution of small format pictures, family snapshots in the early 20th-Century, that emerges, that is particular to that time. The Selfie is particular to our time....to the digital age, to social media, the way photography intersects with social media. So I do think it's important, (laughs)....to take something that's humorous and spin it into something serious....will we actually collect them in some kind of serious way, and preserve them? I don't know....we'll have to wait maybe 30-40, 100 years and see how it goes.

Barbara, I do want to say before you go.... to finish the thought about why is photography big here? Yes, it's becoming more popular in museums around the world. And yes, it's an accessible medium. But it takes organization around photography to really get people excited about it at the level that you see in the Southeast and in Atlanta. And I think we have a lot of organizations to thank for that here. I think The High is one of them, but I think that Atlanta Celebrates Photography (ACP) has done amazing things in bringing the community together, and harnessing this enthusiasm, giving it some structure and encouraging it. Making sure that it happens every year, helping us bring solid, credible speakers from around the world to talk about photography. There are a whole lot of other photography groups in town that keep plugging away and encouraging the amateur, the hobbyist.

...and the pro...

And the pro. Atlanta Photography Group, ACP.... there's a lot. Once you fall in love with photography, it feels like there's nothing else. It just is.

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Brett Abbott

**The Donald and Marilyn Keough Family Curator
of Photography and Head of Collections,
High Museum of Art, Atlanta**

Brett Abbott joined the High Museum of Art as photography curator in 2011, after nine years in the department of photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, where he ended his tenure as Associate Curator of Photographs.

Since his arrival at the High Museum, Abbott has organized several significant national exhibitions, including the first retrospective in nearly 40 years for photographer Wynn Bullock, which will premiere at the High in June 2014. He has also continued the High's "Picturing the South" series, commissioning and exhibiting new works by Richard Misrach, Abelardo Morell, Martin Parr, Kael Alford and Shane Lavalette, many of which then entered the Museum's collection.

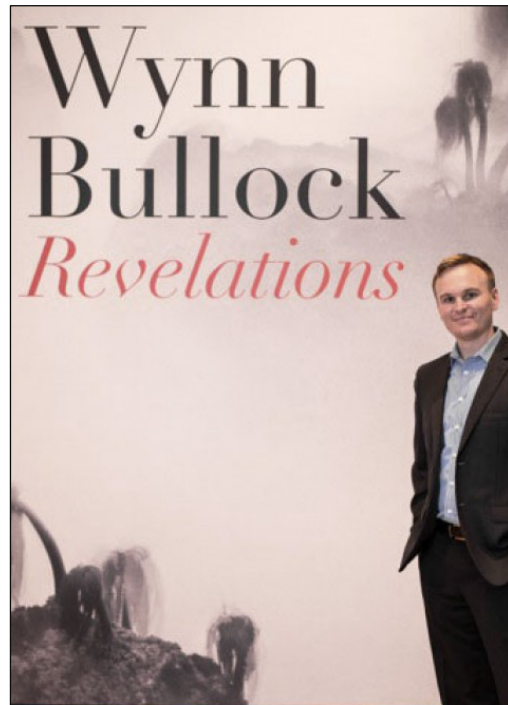


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Under Abbott's leadership the High has acquired more than 1,000 new photographic works. In total, Abbott has stewarded more than 10 major photography installations at the High, which have also included The Museum of Modern Art's *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century* and Richard Misrach's *Revisiting the South*.

His honors include the 2012 Ansel Adams Fellowship from the Center for Creative Photography for his research on Bullock, the 2010 Lucie Award for Curator of the Year for his organization of the landmark exhibition *Engaged Observers: Documentary Photography since the Sixties*, and the 2007 Lucie Award for Curator of the Year for the exhibition *Edward Weston: Enduring Vision*.

He has authored essays for more than 11 scholarly publications, including six for the High about such artists as Kael Alford, Wynn Bullock, Ralph Gibson and Abelardo Morell.

Abbott received his Master of Arts in art history from Williams College in 2002 and his Bachelor of Arts in the same field from Stanford University in 2000.

Prior to his current position and his nine years at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, Abbott served as a curatorial intern in the department of photographs at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2001) and also held roles at the Williams College Museum of Art (2000–2001) and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (1999).