STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

Slate

SECOND SIGHT

By Ismail Muhammad

Teju Cole—novelist, essayist, photographer, and photography critic—has crafted a body of work marked by a stunning subterranean unity. Reading any one of his books is like stumbling upon the exposed tip of a massive underground landmass, one that he's spent the better part of a decade mapping but the entirety of which he has yet to image. In part, this is because he's indeed spent the better part of a decade circling two related questions: What can we know about the world, and how can we know it?

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That unity also arises from the fact that Cole has spent seven years crafting a style with which to pursue those questions, one that subtly reiterates its motifs and concerns until their accumulated charge overwhelms his readers with the power of revelation. His latest book, the hybrid lyric/photo essay Blind Spot, is possibly the most stunning instance of Cole's recursive tendencies. It's a synthesis of image and language that conveys knowledge via studied repetition, a gentle accumulation of motifs. This book eschews argument in favor of a tender enfolding. In this sense, it's a culmination of a style and a set of ideas he's been honing since his novel Open City.

The "blind spot"—literally the lacuna in our visual field where the retina meets the optic nerve—is an idea the author has been probing at least since that early novel. Late in Open City, the protagonist, Julius, mourns this gap, opining, "What we knew was so much less than what remained in darkness." That line appeared once more in the final essay of Known and Strange Things—titled "Blind Spot"—wherein Cole detailed waking up one morning to find himself stricken by "big blind spot syndrome," a condition that damaged his retinal veins so that blood obscured his vision. Blind Spot's title speaks not only to a recursive logic, but also to the idea that the gaps in our knowledge emanate from a congenital wound—the blind spot from which we all suffer and which threatens to erode our perception. It asks us to imagine how we might uncover the knowledge hidden in that gap.

The book imagines photography as a prosthesis of sorts, a false eye that allows us to better navigate the world. Through photography, the world attains a poetic wholeness that takes on the quality of religious experience. Along with poetry, the image gestures toward a realm where all the world's pieces are intact and available for our perception.

"Every line in every poem is the orphaned caption of a lost photograph," Cole writes early in Blind Spot. "By a related logic, each photograph sits in the antechamber of speech." The book literalizes that logic, combining hundreds of Cole's own photographs from his travels around the world—from landscapes as familiar as New York and alien as Baalbek, Lebanon—with compressed meditations that resemble bits of a private conversation upon which we're eavesdropping. The photos range from the quotidian (a man sleeping on a table outside a church in Lagos in Nigeria) to the surreal (a young boy in Brazzaville in the Republic of Congo clutching a railing so that he looks like Christ carrying the cross). Sometimes, as when Cole ruminates over the self-referential nature of a sign on the side of a Brooklyn building declaring "Sign Here," these meditations directly address the photographs' subjects.

For the most part, however, the photographs are stages upon which Cole performs his erudite allusiveness. Hotel drapes in Nuremberg, Germany, occasion an investigation into the etymology of "fold," which itself precipitates rumination on the folded cloth Christ leaves behind upon his resurrection. A tear in a tarp in Wannsee, Germany, sparks a reflection on the resurrected Christ's wound in Caravaggio's The Incredulity of Saint Thomas. A scene from Treasure Beach, Jamaica, prompts a pronouncement on poetry's status as evidence of things not seen—namely, "higher realms" to which various forms of experience are inevitably connected. A parking garage in Chicago provides an example of style as "formalized obsession," a repetition that sutures the individual to the outside world.

Such associative moments elaborate upon Cole's thematic concerns in a way that compounds over the course of the book. The effect is like realizing that what you thought were stray notes cohere into song when you listen across a long enough interval. These repetitions teach us how to think along with Cole by calling our attention to details that might seem easy to ignore. The reappearance of certain images—various tarps, drapes, and sheets litter the photography, for example—and words comes to feel like the dawning of revelation without ever being coercive. Somehow these captions' brevity, combined with the variety of photographs, creates a sense of openness and guards against the heavy-handed didacticism that sometimes defines characters like Julius in Open City.

This process of reiteration leaves one feeling enfolded in the creases of Cole's mind. It's no wonder that imagery of drapes haunts the book. Enfolding becomes a metaphor: art as a shroud in which we're wrapped so that we might be resurrected and ushered into a new, divine sort of perception, one that is at once more intimate and more capacious. "A folded drapery is a cloth thinking about itself," Cole suggests, but like those billowing hotel drapes in Nuremberg whose folds become a topographical surface, that turn inward is also the inception of a relationship to the outside world: "A material, around the axis of itself, faces some part of itself, and confounds its inside and outside." The boundary between the two hardly seems to matter anymore: Part of yourself becomes alien, a new landscape to be traversed, while the outside world comes to seem like a part of your interior. That's the logic of the fold. It can press distant subjects across time and space into continuity, or give us a new understanding of what was once familiar.

In On Photography, Susan Sontag condemned photography as a practice of possession, a "way of imprisoning reality [and] making it stand still." Blind Spot pushes against that assertion. Cole's photographs don't seem like a way to possess the world so much as a way to move through it. The book owes more to Barthes, whose Camera Lucida theorized good photography as that which wounds. For Barthes, photographs had the potential to interrupt our subjectivity and

introduce us into another realm that would otherwise remain occluded. Cole furthers Barthes' work, fusing language and image in a way that demonstrates photography's ability to resonate with rather than dominate the viewer.

The effect is a delirious sense of second sight. Cole brings the unseen realm of poetry into vision, exposing a reality that's not beneath the surface so much as caught in its interstices. "From time to time, in certain heightened states in certain individuals, the boundary between the chimeras seen in dreams and the discrete forms of waking life begin to blur," Cole writes. "In these sudden rifts in the natural order of time, prodigies of vision in the guise of hybrid forms appear briefly." He might as well be talking about this book: a hybrid form that deposits its readers into a heightened state of perception, a composite way of seeing that overcomes our blind spot. In this heightened state, the boundaries between a church in Lagos and a convenience store in New York blur and what you're left with is the knowledge that they are inextricably linked, even if you don't know how.