THE ONLINE PHOTOGRAPHER
EDITED BY MIKE JOHNSTON

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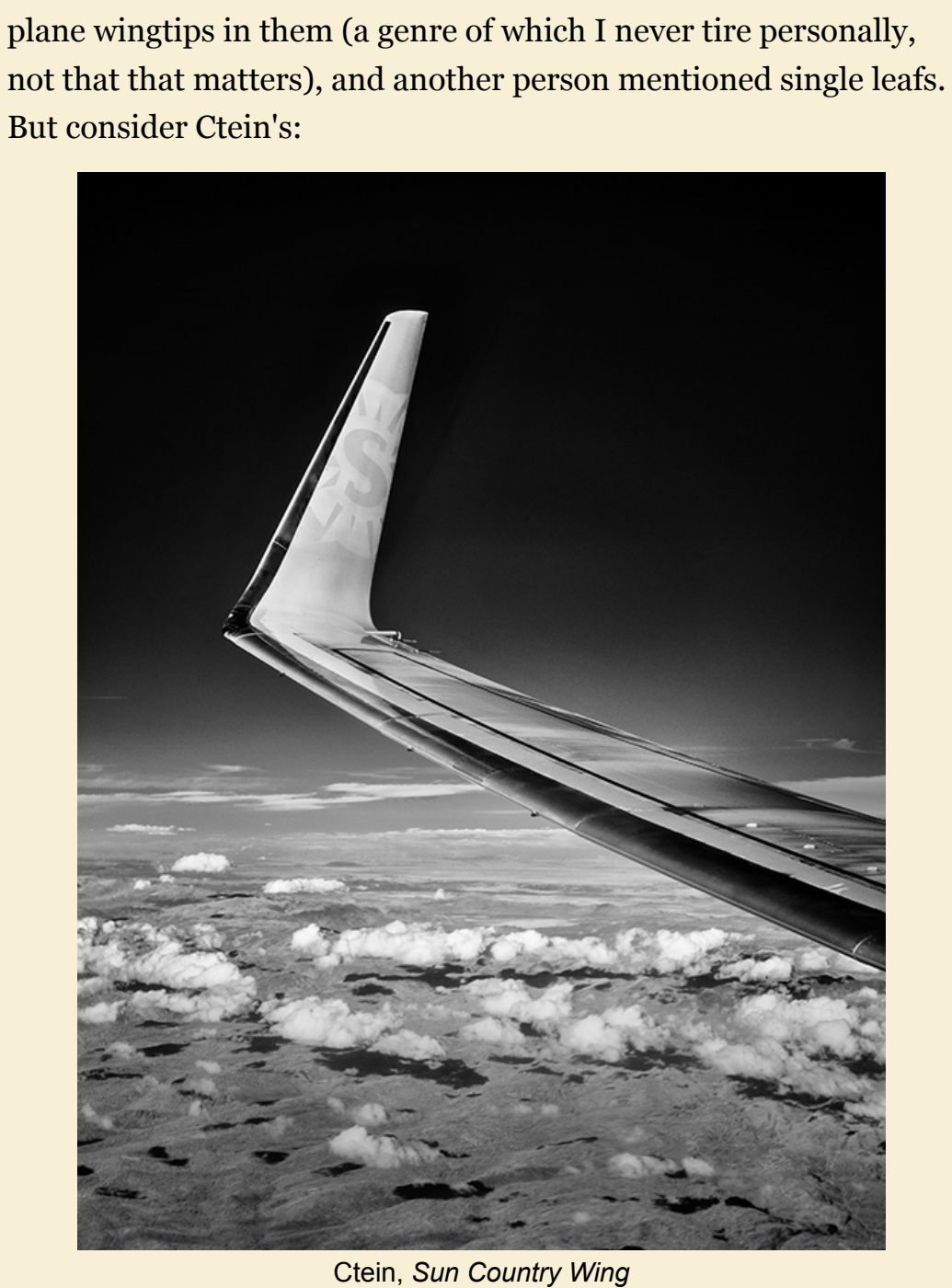
Sunday, 14 June 2015

Ctein and Clichés (Visit to Ctein Part II)

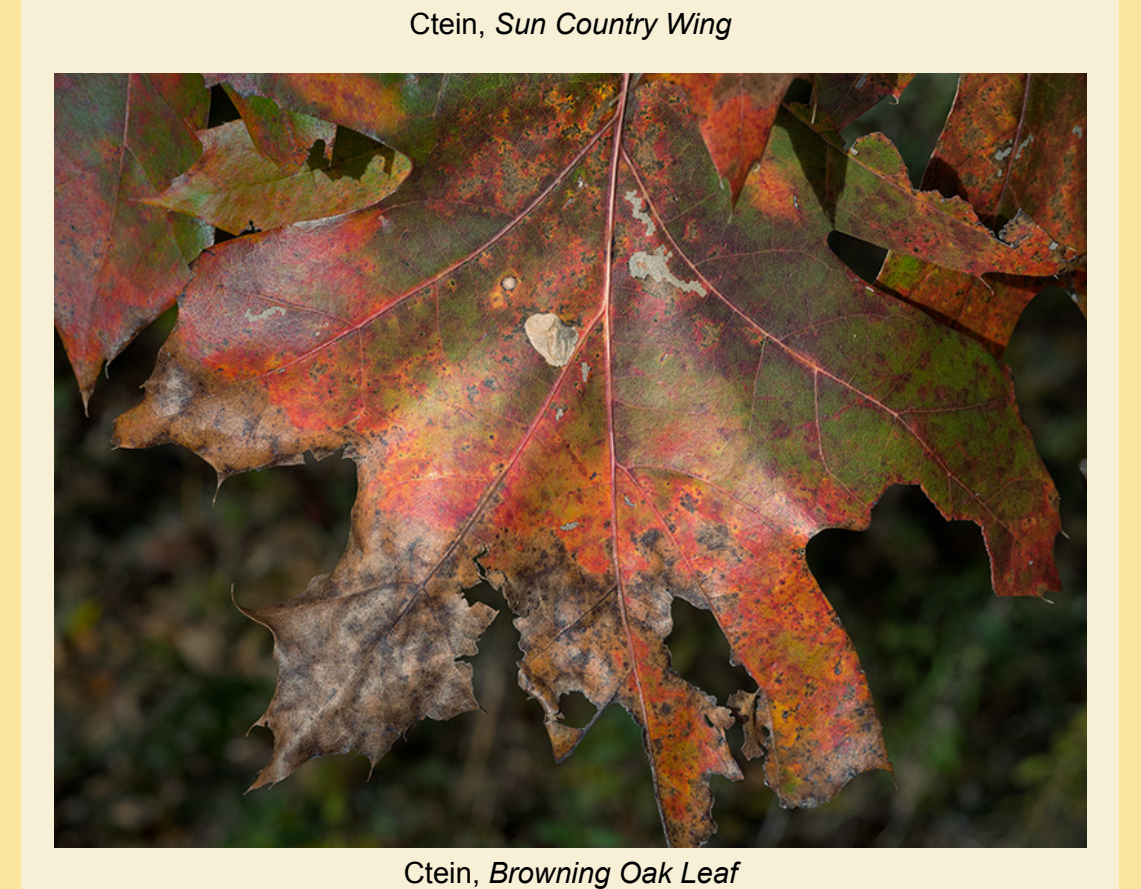
So I promised you a picture of Elmo the African Gray. Here he is with his [choose one: a.) pet human; b.) "friendbeast," in the words of The Oatmeal; c.) doting owner]. Who knew that a parrot would kiss on request? But only if he feels like it.

As I mentioned at the end of the last post, we looked at many pictures. In a hurry, because I was trying to miss rush hour. (Or rush fivehours, which is what they have in San Francisco—two rush fivehours with a small window in between of traffic that's merely heavy.)

Something that struck me as I was looking at Ctein's prints is that two of them—which he's looking at in the photo above—are forthrightly of subjects that were on our list of The Worst Clichés the other day. I'm sure somebody mentioned sky pictures with plane wingtips in them (a genre of which I never tire personally, not that that matters), and another person mentioned single leafs. But consider Ctein's:



Ctein, *Sun Country Wing*



Ctein, *Browning Oak Leaf*

Don't you love that spectral "S" on the winglet? And the colors in the leaf are very rich and variegated in the print. Both pictures have greater presence in the prints. Both are very Ctein-like treatments.

These are perfect examples of "the cliché exercise" I suggested days ago, of making a list of clichés and then working away at it until you're able to make pictures of each subject that are truly "yours." So, see, this is exactly what I was talking about. You make from clichés the opposite of clichés.

This brings to mind a great quote from Elliott Erwitt another reader supplied, but I can't find it. I'll insert it when I manage to find it again. [**UPDATE**: *It was Dave Jenkins who sent the quote, which I posted here. Erwitt said photography "has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them.*"]

The way back

Ctein, Paula and I had a nice lunch in Pacifica, I got a nice tour of the splendiferous new lower level of No. 42, and he and I talked TOP business for a while. I hadn't been at his house since either '94 or '96 (quoth Ctein, "I could figure it out if it was interesting enough, but it isn't"). Then I got back in the rental Jetta and headed innocently home.

I say innocently, because I was unconscious of my coming fate. But then, I was much younger then.

O mortal Wisconsinite, O piteous Cheesehead; abandon hope all ye who enter the wait for the Bay Bridge. As I approached the Bridge, first traffic began to slow, then Time began to slow. At first I was content to measure my progress in whole blocks—then car lengths—then feet—and finally in mere thoughts of movement, for those had become rare. The Universe poised still and in perfect equilibrium as I attempted to get through simulacra of traffic lights: unmoving traffic filled the far side of each intersection until the light turned red, at which point the traffic on the far side would move slowly forward creating room for a few more cars, then traffic from the side streets would fill in all the available space and the light would turn green. The intersection transmogrified into a perfect Kafkaesque stymie of neverending green-yellow-red, green-yellow-red, green-yellow-red until I began to forget my credit card number, my phone number, and eventually my name and age and all the things I once hoped to achieve.

Siri kept flashing never-before-seen things like "Road on route has now closed; tap to dismiss," and "You should have kept going straight at the last intersection, it's now four hours faster than turning right; but too late." Later she began reflecting on her good fortune in neither being human, nor actual or real. I crept closer toward not caring whether I was.

The sky darkened. Night fell. I began to get disoriented from hunger and dehydration; at two in the morning, with Venus and Mars shining pitilessly from the bright black sky, Siri began listlessly quoting long sections of Kierkegaard. I passed car models long out of style with the bleached skeletons of San Francisco drivers festooned fantastically in grotesque positions on the rotting drivers' seats. My regrets in life began to flood my thoughts. And then we hit the bridge and traffic started to flow fine again and I got back to Berkeley.

At home, our host said, "Oh, you got caught in traffic? How long? Only thirty-six hours? That's nothing. That's *nothing*. Some people take that long to get home *every day*." With a dismissive wave of his hand.

It was *not* nothing. It was a stretch of my youth I have lost eternally.

So, Northern California, on the good side: delightful food; fantasyland landscapes; moderate temperatures; laid-back citizens; social consciousness; friends; lack of insects. On the bad side, a wee tad of traffic from time to time that can make watching plants grow seem helter-skelter by comparison.

Still, it was great to see Ctein in his native environs. I hope to stop back much sooner than another two decades. Next time I should consider returning to the landward side of the Bay via San Jose.

Mike

(*To see all the comments, click on the "Comments" link below.*)

Featured Comments from:

jsmidt: "Audio books were invented for Bay area traffic."

Bahi: "There's often a slightly otherworldly look to Ctein's work, I think, intended or otherwise. It's not *quite* Earth as we know it. Even though I'm not a fan of science fiction, I very often like his results. Both the leaf and the wing are good examples. For me, the latter is the view from a spacecraft assessing the surface of a potentially inhabitable planet that has clouds and potentially Earth-like terrain.

"In 2013, my car broke down in a car park next to a familiar-looking Scottish castle. It was only a few months later, safely back home, that I realised I own a fabulous Ctein print of that very same castle; Ctein's rendering appears, of course, as if from another green world, devoid of car parks and tourists and ignition wires that fuse together on a scorching summer's day.

"All of which to say that the mental state you experienced after visiting the great man, and which you describe so well, was entirely appropriate. I suggest taking exactly the same route next time."

Posted on Sunday, 14 June 2015 at 02:04 PM in Blog Notes, Ctein | Permalink

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Comments

Something very Neil Gaiman-esque about that Mike. Very enjoyable.

Posted by: Stuart | Sunday, 14 June 2015 at 02:56 PM

"Next time I should consider returning to the landward side of the Bay via San Jose."

Yup....or take BART.

Posted by: Jeff | Sunday, 14 June 2015 at 03:50 PM

Yes, SF traffic has hit the "I can't live here" stage. It went from slow to dead stop about 2 years ago.

Posted by: Will Lovitt | Sunday, 14 June 2015 at 03:59 PM

That's why I take BART when I visit the Bay Area.

Posted by: Chuck Albertson | Sunday, 14 June 2015 at 04:07 PM

"I passed car models long out of style with the bleached skeletons of San Francisco drivers festooned fantastically in grotesque positions on the rotting drivers' seats. "

Oakland isn't ready THAT bad, but you have got to admit that it's cool how old cars never die of rust in California.

Posted by: hugh crawford | Sunday, 14 June 2015 at 06:31 PM

I lived in the Bay Area in the early 1950s before the freeways thru SF were built and traffic was not so hectic. I often traveled by bicycle between SF and Berkeley via the SF/Oakland ferry.
I no longer have that bicycle, but I still have the Zeiss Super Ikonta B that I bought at Brooks Camera Shop.

Posted by: Herman | Sunday, 14 June 2015 at 06:42 PM

Oh wait, the jam was on the SF end of the bridge?
Yeah that's sort of a mess there with all the construction.
.

But in the afternoon, to go from daily city to Oakland I have three words "San Mateo Bridge", I mean really.

But really, Bay Area traffic is so bad that the traffic can back up to my moms farm near Tracy 80 miles to the east at 6:00 in the morning.

Posted by: hugh crawford | Sunday, 14 June 2015 at 06:46 PM

Your reminder on the Clichés exercise you had proposed made me look to see if I have examples of the worst Clichés. Here they are: http://photo.net/photodb/slideshow?folder_id=1081367

Posted by: Animesh Ray | Sunday, 14 June 2015 at 07:41 PM

It seems they'r working on a bicycle path along Bay Bridge. Maybe next time you can gently pedal to your friend Ctein, and wave at all the silly car-people.

Posted by: Nico | Monday, 15 June 2015 at 04:45 AM

In the Bay Area, you know that the traffic is *really* bad when the ordinarily remarkably patient Siri starts to ask plaintively whether we're there yet.

One way to pass time when stuck in traffic is to listen to e-books, staged e.g. in mythical lands east of California, featuring cars moving at wondrous velocities like 70mph on freeways — that is, essentially, escapist science fiction.

Rumor has it that the astute Elon Musk will start offering in California a "sunroof" option — a solar panel integrated in the car's roof — whose 150-watt output would be sufficient to provide the average kinetic energy of a 2.3-ton Tesla Model S in Bay Area traffic...

Posted by: Bruno Masset | Monday, 15 June 2015 at 05:22 AM

Entertaining to read your take on the traffic in SF, and the comments from others about it. My one trip to SF last summer and I found the driving to be a very enjoyable experience: well-behaved drivers, good signs, flowing highways. But then again, I spent 10 years living in the Netherlands, and the last 6 in Manila (where the traffic is slow, even when it's light & flowing).

Posted by: Martin Doonan | Monday, 15 June 2015 at 06:45 AM

Loved your observations on Bay Area traffic, especially the bit about Kierkegaard. I sit in that Bay Bridge mess once a week or more. Last year, to make my drive time more useful, I got a subscription to audible.com. The first book I listened to was "The Denial of Death" by Ernest Becker. It was stuffed full of Kierkegaard quotes. You'd think a book that summarizes existential philosophy concerning the inevitability of death would be the worst traffic jam listen, but it was oddly comforting.

Posted by: Dave | Monday, 15 June 2015 at 10:30 AM

Perhaps the traffic jam was due to the Attack of the Goats:

https://www.facebook.com/BerkeleyLab/videos/10153757410327
permPage=1

Posted by: Chuck Albertson | Monday, 15 June 2015 at 10:40 AM

I mentioned a few posts back that the traffic in the Bay Area was abominable. The two best solutions I've figured out for it, other than BART, are either splitting lanes on a motorcycle, or an ultralight.

Still, it was cool you were able to get out here.

Posted by: Stephen Scharf | Monday, 15 June 2015 at 01:36 PM

I saw a "plane tip" photograph recently that made me think of your cliché post. The difference with this particular photograph was that it showed the arc of the International Space Station as it travelled just above the horizon and "over" the wingtip. I wish that I could find the link now to illustrate it.

So, is that one or two clichés in the photograph? One for the wingtip, and another for a "star trail"?

Posted by: Craig A. Lee | Monday, 15 June 2015 at 01:59 PM

A funny read! Keep up the good work.

Posted by: Jeremy | Monday, 15 June 2015 at 06:25 PM

Dear Bahi,

Y'know, when John Camp proposed that little writing exercise of ours, I reminded him that I don't write fiction. Never even had an inclination to try. His response was "Ctein, you won't have to. Just write what you know." The results speak for themselves.

The preceding might be true. It might not. If I tell you that all fiction writers are liars, should you believe me?

The Castle photograph is interesting because when I made that photograph I had no idea that it was one of the most photographed castles in the world, that it's hugely famous. For me it was simply about the way the fog and the green landscape integrated it into its surroundings, something the original architect very clearly understood when he designed it. (That's something that impressed me about most of the Scottish castles I saw–– practical/military considerations aside (and of little interest to me), they were designed with a very good eye for how they would fit into the environment they were situated in.)

Later on when I started to look for photographs of that castle online, I hit nothing but overly dramatic renditions that made it look more like a Disneyland set than a part of the landscape that it was clearly meant to be connected to.

The preceding is true. No maybes about it.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
======================================
-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Tuesday, 16 June 2015 at 02:11 AM

I was in San Francisco in 1992 - or at least on a day trip up from San Jose where I was working at the time. It was cloudless and 95F in San Jose when I set off, in a tee shirt, and a foggy 60F in San Francisco. I had to find a place to buy a sweatshirt. I still have it somewhere.

Luckily the weather improved mid afternoon and I was treated to the sight of the Golden Gate poking out of the fog as it lifted. Quite an awe inspiring city.

I still managed to get stuck on the Bay Bridge, in my convertible (rental). I was inching along when another convertible pulled up alongside with a very cute blonde in it. We started chatting and ended up stopping for dinner in Berkeley and hanging out for the weekend.

Beats the hell out of Kierkegaard.

Posted by: Steve Jacob | Tuesday, 16 June 2015 at 09:20 AM

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