

Photographs as Drawings

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

W7KM
PHOTOGRAPHY was a hit from the moment it appeared in its first practicable form. This was the daguerreotype, which, unveiled in 1839, was all over the globe by 1846. Daguerreotype portraits, silvered copper plates reflecting the faces — perhaps the very souls — of those who had looked into them, astounded society with their truth to nature. The work of Paul Delaroche and other French portraitists had anticipated the trend to hyperrealism a decade or more before, but photography was a mechanical process open to all and as such it helped fan euphoria about scientific progress.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning found daguerreotypes superior to paintings; Emerson said they represented "the true republican style of painting" in that "the artist stands aside and lets you paint yourself." But while some related photography to painting, others, including its co-inventor, William Henry Fox Talbot, saw the medium as a form of drawing.

In fact, Talbot's contribution, the negative-positive process, was born of his own inability to make a successful drawing even with the help of a camera lucida, and he titled his book, the first to be illustrated with photographs, "The Pencil of Nature."

Whether the difference of opinion matters to the world at large and despite the impossibility of defining drawing (the object or the act), the photography show at the Lehman College Art Gallery here comes down on the side of that medium. Titled "The Encompassing Eye: Photography as Drawing," the exhibition originated last year at the University of Akron in Ohio, where it was organized by Charles Hagen, an editor at Artforum and the first editor of Afterimage who also writes on photography for The New York Times. Coinciding with the premiere was the 1991 fall issue of Aperture, with essays by Mr. Hagen and other authorities, including Weston Naef, curator of photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, Calif., and Michael Gray, curator of the Fox Talbot Museum in England.

It is not hard to see an analogy to drawing in Aaron Siskind's "Homages to Franz Kline" — studies of dark graffiti on light walls and in the blown-up fragments of handwriting by Nancy Hellebrand. And, although they have the presence of sculptures,



John Coplans's larger-than-life images of himself nude rate as life studies, together with a frontal view of his torso that suggests a Dubuffet-ish caricature of a face.

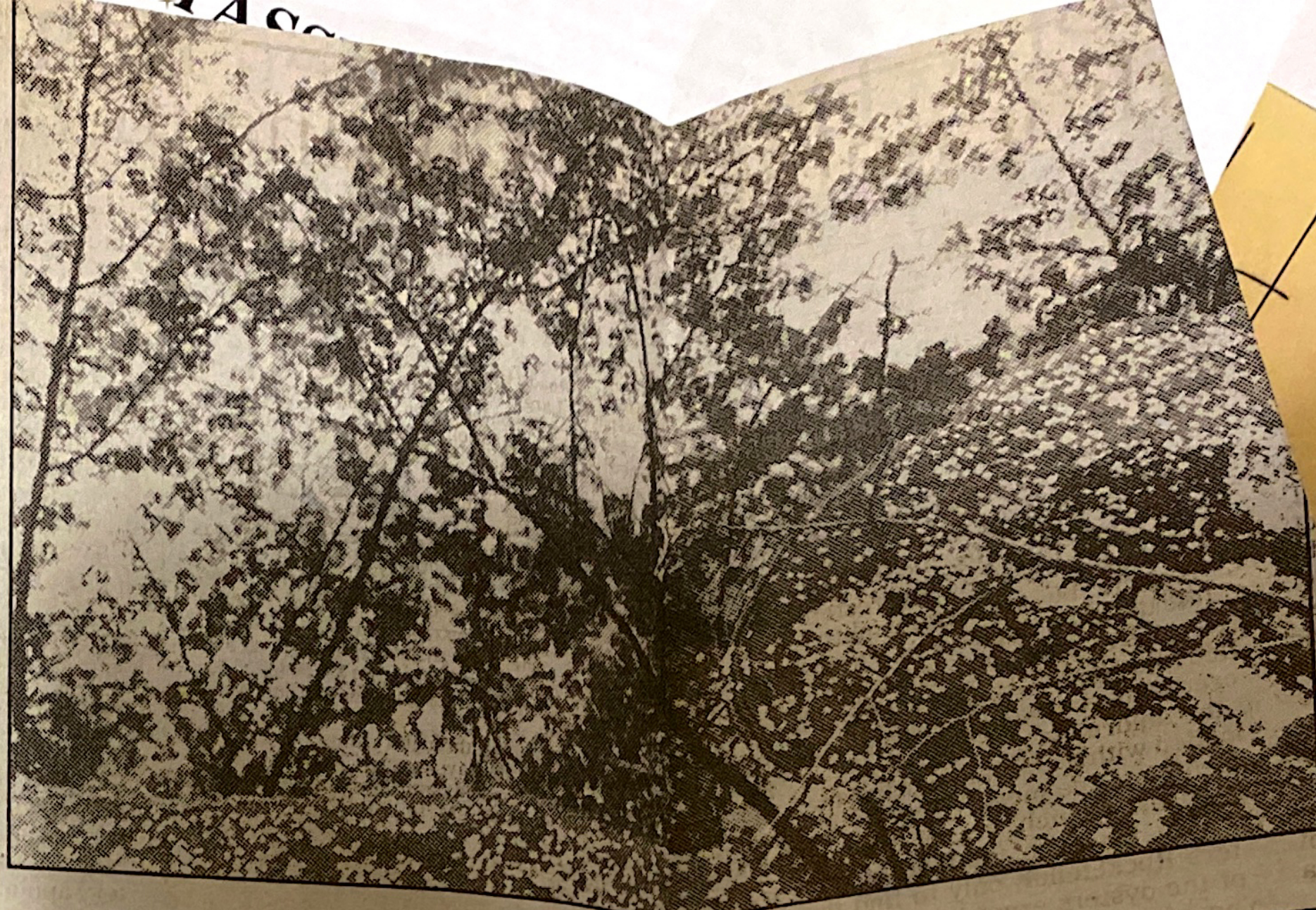
But in the prints of Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Rauschenberg, drawing yields to painting. Mr. Kelly's pictures are all of light and shadow, and one in particular, "Door, St. Barthélemy," could be the preliminary to a painting. Yet in a brief Aperture interview, the artist states that he "never develops paintings from photographs directly," adding that he tried it once only to discover that "the magic was in the photograph and it stayed there." As for Mr. Rauschen-

berg's pictures, one is a gravure of dozing alligators patterned by the shadows of palm fronds, the other a study of a pet store window that harks back to the good old days of Pop.

Having quoted Rosalind Krauss saying that "What is it?" is central to many people's understanding of photographs, Mr. Hagen contends that "we need to ask the additional question, 'How is it made?'" But surely that depends on the degree to which the image charms, mystifies or astounds its beholder. In the case of Harry Callahan's "Georgia Mountains," I would settle for knowing what exactly is the vegetation on

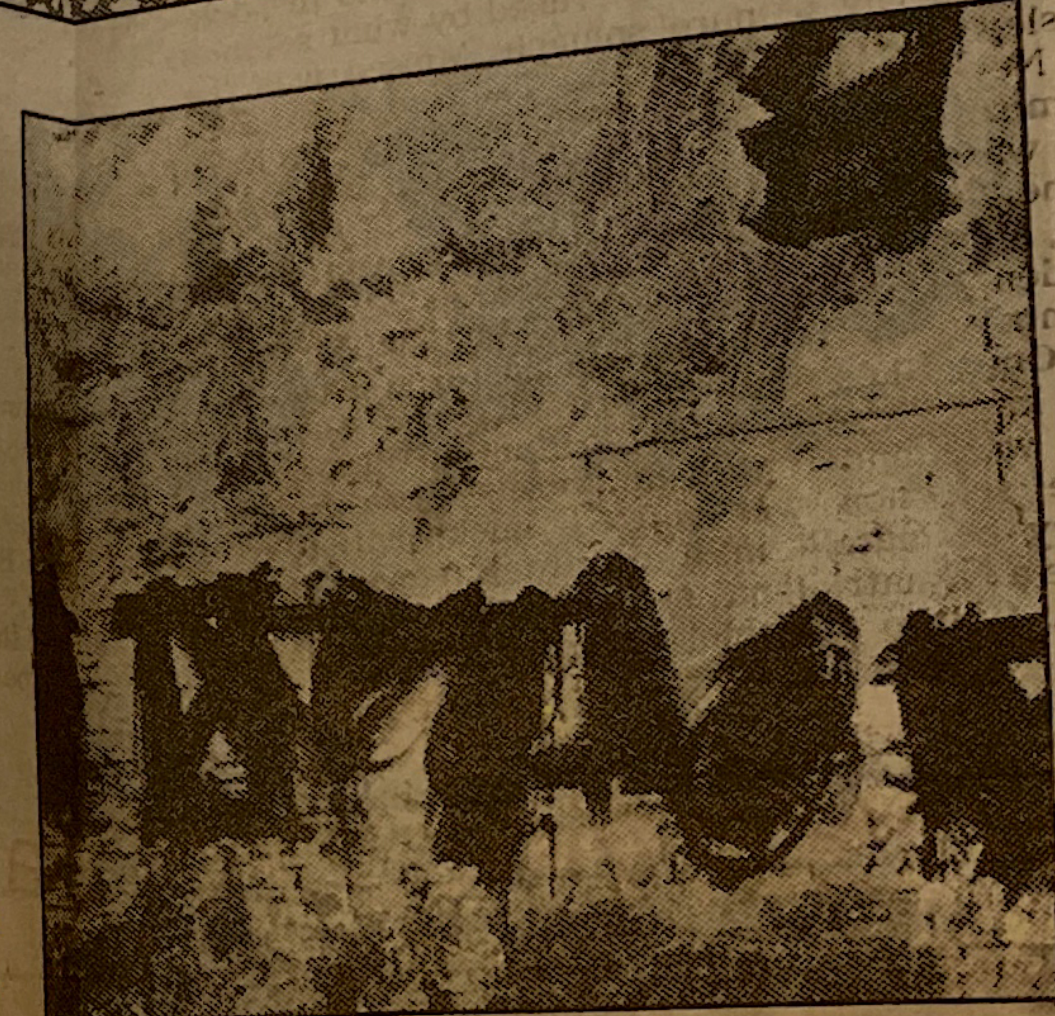
these mountains that looks so much like human hair. Then again, the image is so beautiful I could probably live without the information.

It is the same with James Casebere's specially constructed sets, which are neither exactly still lifes nor interiors but seldom fail to make arresting images. With Vik Muniz's "Memory Renderings" of famous news photos, like that of the Vietnamese officer executing a soldier, the question is more likely to be "Why?" Still, to ponder these mysteries and those by Michael Spano, Peter Campus, Zeke Berman, Jan Groover and others is to risk losing one's grip on the show's thesis.



ABOVE "Tokyo" by Lee Friedlander.

LEFT "Construction No. 41" by Michael Spano.



RIGHT "Jalapa 43 (Homage to Franz Kline)" by Aaron Siskind.

In the Lehman's second gallery are several Talbots, notably a study of lace printed from a calotype negative and a photogenic drawing of a leaf that looks like a fossil. A photogenic drawing is defined as the positive of a photogram which, in turn, is achieved by placing the object on sensitized paper and exposing it to light. Other remarkable works in this section are the shots of trees by Lee Friedlander and Ray Metzker — dainty all-over images hinting at Abstract Expressionism — together with the more or less abstract photograms by the sculptor Theodore Roszak.

For some reason, the show includes a woodcut by Chuck Close — a map-

portrait of Alex Katz in blue, black and tan. This one touch of color serves to point up the fact that everything else is black and white or sepia. Mr. Hagen concludes his essay by observing that, in the end, "human intention" is the "ultimate yardstick of meaning and purpose," and nobody is likely to gainsay him.

All the same, his handsome choices make it perfectly clear that in photography as in drawing, painting and sculpture, some intentions are more stimulating than others and that technology has little to do with it.

The show is on view through Oct. 30. The number to call for more information is 960-8732.