

**Robert Weingarten** was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1941, into a garment worker family who had limited financial resources but great respect for the power of knowledge. Educated in the New York public school system, where he excelled in history, science, and mathematics, Weingarten diligently pursued from an early age two extracurricular interests: music and photography, both of which carried over into his adult life. Another powerful early influence was the forces of nature to which he was exposed during childhood summers spent with his family in Far Rockaway, Queens. To the west lay the tranquility of Jamaica Bay with its profusion of wildlife, and to the east the ever-changing Atlantic. Weingarten was from the beginning a perfectionist, inspired by nature and driven by the quest for harmony and meaning.

Weingarten's education and quick mind enabled him to achieve higher academic degrees, while strategic thinking and good timing propelled him to the top of the business world. Financial success enabled him to acquire the very best precision cameras manufactured in Sweden, Germany, and Japan, but for twenty years they were little more than ornaments on a shelf. Money bought mobility and in 1983 after a lifetime of city living, he relocated with his wife and family from New York to Southern California, where his closer proximity to nature ignited an ambition to pursue photography in a more deliberate way than before.

The turning point for this ambition was the surprise fiftieth birthday gift in 1991 from his wife, Palomba, of a fully equipped dark room for his Los Angeles home. Five years later, in 1996, he cut back on his business interests and set himself the goal of becoming an exhibiting and published photographer. He sought out the best working photographers, and one by one cajoled them into becoming his tutors. In addition, between 1996 and 2002 Weingarten traveled widely in America and Europe in search of edenic pastoral landscape motifs, which he usually photographed in color, waiting sometimes hours for the perfect light.

In late 2002 he heard of Alfred Stieglitz's famous dictum that no photographer should travel anywhere to photograph, and took note of Stieglitz's recommendation to focus on subjects close to home. At the end of 2002 Weingarten began to plan a new project fraught with uncertainty; he decided it would involve the sea, near which he had lived since childhood, but which he had stopped photographing at the age of eighteen.

After making test pictures from various points around his ocean view home in Malibu, he decided to turn his normal working procedure upside down and inside out by creating a set of strict rules of engagement with the motif. The subject would be sky, sea, and city observed over the course of one year, beginning on January 1 and ending on December 31, 2003, and would be advanced every day he was at home. A number of key artistic decisions governed the outcome of the project. Weingarten established a single viewpoint, looking southeast over Santa Monica Bay, from which every photograph in the series would be made with the camera in exactly the same position. He selected a camera that would make an image two-and-one-quarter inches square, a three-hundred-and-fifty millimeter lens, and slow-speed, fine-resolution, color-saturated transparency film. All the required film would be procured at one time from the same production batch, and be stored at the same temperature and humidity for the duration of the project.

Each exposure would be made at precisely the same time of day – 6:30 am – measured by one quartz clock. All exposures would be made with the lens focused on infinity and at the same aperture of f/22. Just two variables were allowed into this disciplined scheme: the shutter speed of the lens, which would be adjusted faster or slower depending on the quantity and quality of light available at 6:30 a.m. each day; and, the most variable element of all, changes in the scene that were introduced by the forces of nature.

Shutter speed was established at the beginning of each session, based on the desire to achieve the same

relative density in all the finished transparencies. The fastest shutter speed was one sixtieth of a second, rapid enough to stop the motion of clouds and water, while the longest exposure was eight seconds, 480 times slower, which introduced a secondary time-element and a softening of the edges and blurring of any motion. The apparent softening was exclusively the result of nature withholding light and thus making necessary a longer exposure. Overcast spring days can be dark at 6:30 am, while very clear winter days can be bright. To insure that softening was not the result of other factors, the camera mirror was locked up and the enormous lens (larger than the camera body) was mounted directly onto the tripod to eliminate the possibility of softness resulting from minute movement of camera or lens during the exposure. Nature was the exclusive driver of the softening effect by supplying more or less light depending on the weather and season. Each day he was at home Weingarten made three exposures – no more and no less – in order to achieve at least one transparency that was completely faithful to the light.

The result of this disciplined process was that camera, lens, and film were able to record chromatic effects that elude human perception. The eye records what it sees as a series of snapshots created as the eyelids involuntarily close and open during the blinking process. Camera, lens, and film, on the other hand, accumulate light over the duration of the variable exposure, and the film records both what the eye consciously sees and what it cannot see. This accumulative process, combined with the spatial compression introduced by the telephoto lens, results in a very wide range of chromatic effects, most of which elude the unaided eye. When looking at Weingarten's prints, made on fine cotton paper from digital files created directly from the transparencies, one reaction is, "Can it be true?" We want to believe that the vast range of color is a result of digital manipulation, or of color filters put on the lens. However, we forget that vision is sight processed by memory. The mind develops

stereotypes of the colors of common sights like sky and water. One such chromatic adaptation is to see sky and water in the mind's eye as blue, when in actuality they are a range of different hues.

Given the number of rigidly fixed elements in this project, it is fair to ask how the diverse results were achieved. The engine for the dynamic element was the fixed aperture set at an opening that would admit just a small amount of light, enabling the maximum depth of field and achieving great clarity in the space that was compressed by the long focal-length lens. The small aperture also necessitated slow shutter speeds in low light, with a resulting accumulation of light and movement that gives impressionistic effects. The variable light and atmosphere produced colors that range from the vivid orange of number 77, to the pastel blue of number 3, to the bright crimson of number 120, to the rose of number 33.

Weingarten is a man obsessed with beauty, both in nature at large and in his own nearby environment. Desiring his photographs to be compared with painting and drawing, he shares a goal of some important Old Masters of Pictorialist photography like Heinrich Kuehn, Robert Demachy, Eduard Steichen, and Baron de Meyer. One key difference is that Weingarten's pictorial effects are not the result of manipulation in the scanning or printing, but rather represent the faithful translation onto paper of what has been recorded on film. He skillfully deploys the materials of photography and the principals of physics to harness time, color, and space for the sake of their expressive potential.

Weston Naef  
Curator of Photographs  
The J. Paul Getty Museum

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