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A. Aubrey Bodine (1906-1970)

A while back, Stan Collyer invited me to dine with him at Attman's Deli in Potomac, MD (Full disclosure: I have no financial interest in Attman's Deli). His purpose, aside from food and friendship, was to introduce me to the photographs of A. Aubrey Bodine, which lined the walls of this authentic Jewish Deli/Restaurant from one end to the other. Bodine was a photojournalist for the Baltimore Sun for 50 years, and it was quite an experience to see so many fine images of a local and famous photographer in one place. I highly recommend you take a meal there and enjoy the dozens of Bodine prints on the walls. It is a rare chance to see a permanent collection of great photographs so close to home.

You can read Bodine's story on Wikipedia here, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._Aubrey_Bodine, and visit his official website here, https://aaubreybodine.com/. The website is managed by Bodine's daughter, Jennifer Bodine, and her husband, Richard Orban. The website is replete with a huge number of Bodine's images, and I am sure you will enjoy browsing through them as much as you might enjoy a lunch and viewing at Attman's Deli.

Bodine concentrated on celebrating Maryland and the nearby mid-Atlantic region. He published a number of books of regional photographs. Much of his work was in black and white, and you will see endless numbers of such fine images on the website. I have chosen some images that interested me because, although they are not all spectacular shots, they represent problems that we all have to solve, and I think Bodine's images are instructive.

Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. Library, shot 1/5/1958.
Image ID 47-732 •Photo by A. Aubrey Bodine • © Jennifer B. Bodine • Courtesy of www.aaubreybodine.com

Bodine website commentary: The library at Wye Plantation is paneled in walnut, and is both air conditioned and fireproofed. The portrait above the fireplace is one of Samuel Johnson, by Opie.

First off, this is just a room, obviously shot with a good camera, possibly a large format, very probably on a tripod. The detail and illumination make every detail completely clear. The shot is dead level and the verticals are perfect. The camera was either shooting straight ahead or the lens could be shifted. So again, this is obviously a professional shot.

Now let's consider the framing, which is what really interests me. Every single side—left, right, top, and bottom—is cut off. The side wall views are abruptly cut off; the chandelier is not entirely in view, and the chairs are radically truncated. What is the purpose of this? I think Bodine is addressing the problem of putting the viewer *in* the room, not just look at the room. After all, if you can't see the legs of the chairs or the top of the chandelier, or all the shelves with their books in real life, what would you do? You would walk around the room to get a better view. That is what I think this image invites us to do—at least it invites us to *want* to do—to look deeper into the room and walk around in it.

Baltimore Harbor, Night, shot 1949.
Image ID 31-042 •Photo by A. Aubrey Bodine • © Jennifer B. Bodine • Courtesy of
www.aaubreybodine.com

Bodine website commentary: Bodine's salon records list at least 96 exhibitions across America and around the world where this photograph won countless medals and other awards between 1949 and 1965. This image appears in the book A. Aubrey Bodine, Baltimore Pictorialist, by Kathleen Ewing, published by Johns Hopkins Press.

What is striking here is the combination of soft and hard elements. The background is differentiated from the foreground by distance, density of tone, softness of focus (from the fog, not the lens), and linear vs. curved elements. The tonal range is from pure white to pure black. The background elements are in full view, but the foreground elements are only slightly viewed, but it is clear what they are. If you were there trying to get a shot of the ship in the distance, would you have understood the value of including the foreground material? Probably so, for many of you are very well trained in composition. How about this? Would you have framed the background left and right, or taken Bodine's final step to crisscross the frame with those cables?

Zebra, shot c. 1960.
Image ID 32-050 •Photo by A. Aubrey Bodine • © Jennifer B. Bodine • Courtesy of
www.aaubreybodine.com

Bodine website commentary: In his close-up of the zebra, Bodine made a recognizable object appear abstract. The line and form become more important than the object itself.

Although few of Bodine's images explore this sort of near-abstraction, he is clearly a master of it when he chooses to enter this genre of photography. Compare Bodine's high-contrast abstract

images with the highly abstracted work of Paul Strand, which I wrote about in *Cameraderie* April 2014. Bodine pursued such high-contrast abstract image later in his life—according to his daughter, Jennifer Bodine, with whom I talked for this article.

In my conversation with Jennifer Bodine, she also quoted her father as saying "The Photographer's job is to find the picture and the best spot from which to shoot it." In that respect, she went on to say, her father often placed himself in outrightly dangerous locations from which to shoot, seemingly unaware of his danger.