

Book Review

Chasing Shadows: Desert Sand Dunes

by Leo Touchet (Breaux Bridge, Louisiana)

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by John Zheng

Chasing Shadows: Desert Sand Dunes is a collection of black and white photographs taken by Leo Touchet in seven sand dunes: The Dunes of Coro in Venezuela's Médanos de Coro National Park, Mequite Flat Dunes, Eureka Valley Sand Dunes, and Ibex Sand Dunes in Death Valley National park in California, Tularosa Gypsum Dunes in White Sands National Monument in New Mexico, Monahans Sand Hills in Texas, and Big Dune in Nevada.

An American photojournalist from Louisiana who has traveled to over fifth countries to photograph for numerous publications and corporations, Touchet has published books of photography including *Rejoice When You Die: The New Orleans Jazz Funerals*, *Duet: Poet & Photographer*, *At the Races and People Among Us*. His photographs have been held in permanent collections by the Bibliotheque National (France), New Orleans Museum of Art, Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Everson Museum of Art, New York Schomburg Center, United States National Park Service, Chase Manhattan Collection, and Sir Elton John Photography Collection; published in numerous publications including *The Boston Globe*, *Der Stern (Germany)*, *Fortune*, *Life Magazine*, *National Geographic Books*, *Newsweek*, *Panorama (Italy)*, *Popular Photography*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Time magazine*, and exhibited in art museums and university galleries.

The photographs in *Chasing Shadows* present facets of the beauty of the dunes that are hard to resist when a keen-eyed photographer comes upon them. Touchet reminisces in the introduction, "I came upon the dunes, pulled over, grabbed my camera bag and headed into the dunes. The sun was about to set as I walked up into the dunes to a higher level. Suddenly, I found myself surrounded by sand and shadows which kept changing with every step. It then became a race with the setting sun to photograph as much as possible before the dunes and shadows became darkness. It felt like I was chasing shadows." In other words, the shadows Touchet was chasing are shapes of beauty that strikes the eye

The composition of these beautiful shapes depends on the time of day and effects of light and shadow, but to capture these beautiful moments depends on the photographer's aesthetic experience and skills. Enriched by the contrast of light and shadow, these stunning images show a tension of fluidity and stillness in the beautiful shapes of sand dunes, evocative of other forms of artistic expression. The one on page 18 looks like a cubic painting and the ones on pages 31 and 32, look like abstract paintings. In fact, quite a few of Touchet's photographic images in *Chasing Shadows* possess the quality; of correlativity. The image of Monahans Sand Hills on page 7 challenges a viewer to imagine an amalgamation of skeletons or skulls bound to connect with Georgia O'Keeffe's spooky paintings of skulls. This association is helpful to interpreting Touchet's photograph as a symbol of death or desolation that reaches far and wide ad infinitum.

Touchet has a natural knack for discovering abstract beauty in the shadowed shapes of sand dunes. His images sometimes are a combination of different shapes in a photograph that possess something complex and tasty. The composition of the photograph on page 21 contains the curved, round and slanting shapes that show his aesthetic taste in using the contrast of light and shadow to bring out the mystery and serenity of sand dunes and to highlight beauty for visual sensibility. On the other hand, images in the

photograph of Eureka Valley Sand Dunes on page 11 challenge the viewer to associate the background shadow with the lying mummy of an Egyptian pharaoh or a collapsed ancient totem and the foreground wavy shapes of sand look like an Egyptian labyrinth that seems to reappear on the far left of the composition.

Many of his photographs reveal his aesthetic vision in characterizing beauty. The most visible characteristic is the feminine beauty of the sand dunes he captures with his lenses. The images on pages 21,28,29,30, and 33 are not only charming and calming to the eyes; they also arouse imagination and convey additional meanings. For example, the one on page 28 shows that the high contrast of black and white produces a visual effect of nature's tranquility. The shadowed foreground and background function like protection of the middle whitish part, an oasis where low trees stand as persistence of life. A second look at the composition, however, may help associate the shapes to feminine beauty-the curved outlines of two reclining bodies.

However, the most stunning picture is the one taken at Mesquite Flat Dunes on page 30. The image evokes an instant association with Gustave Courbet's oil painting, *The Origin of the World*. While Courbet's image possesses an erotic and primitive quality through his realistic expression that characterizes physical beauty and the mysterious creation of life. Touchet's image presents aesthetic beauty focused on its surreal quality that aims to awaken a viewer's imagination and aesthetic appreciation through a process of seeing, associating, and gaining. As a consequence, the visual effect produced by this image is not erotic but aesthetic and not artificial but natural as well, showing the photographer's power of perception and expression of beauty.

Doubtless, *Chasing Shadows* has characterized the beauty of shadows for visual delight and aesthetic appreciation; each photograph reveals a binding, or an inseparable oneness, of nature and human nature. The moments in time become permanent as visual art, reflecting Touchet's aesthetic ideal that beauty discovered in nature is important to photography.