

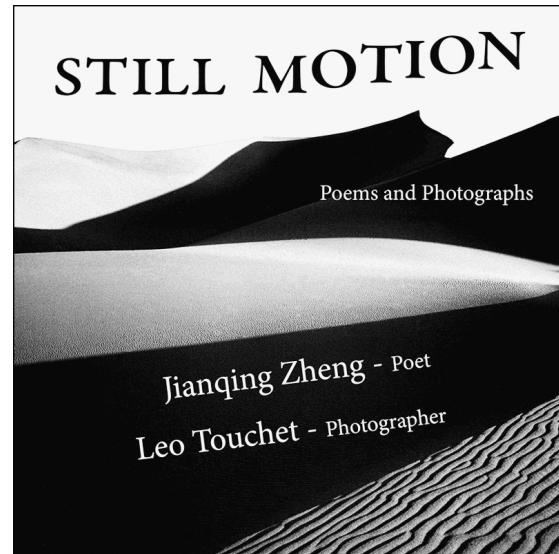
Reviews

Still Motion: Poems and Photographs. By Jianqing Zheng & Leo Touchet. (Photo Circle Press, 2025. Pp. 62, \$15, paperback)

John Berger opens *Ways of Seeing* by asserting that “Seeing comes before words.” Explaining his claim, he writes, “The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.” Continuing his influential collection of exploratory essays on sight, reception, and visual art, Berger identifies “another sense in which seeing comes before words,” stating that “it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”

Written with clarity, strength, and direction, throughout its fifty-plus years in print, *Ways of Seeing* has remained relevant for changing audiences, over time. For example, Berger cites René Magritte’s painting *The Key of Dreams* to illustrate what he describes as the “always-present gap between words and seeing.” To establish the foundations of his volume’s argument at the end of chapter one, he declares, “our vision is continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are” (www.ways-of-seeing.com/ch1).

In *Still Motion* Jianqing Zheng and Leo Touchet assemble ekphrastic poetry and photographic images that speak back to the dialogue that emerges from *Ways of Seeing*. With the interplay between Zheng’s poems and Touchet’s photographs bridging the “gap between words and



seeing,” this collaborative, interdisciplinary volume arrives as a contemporary conversational partner for Berger’s celebrated study, delivering a collection of stark images and stunning imagery.

At the outset of *Still Motion*, Zheng provides a description of the poetic project his contributions to the collection pursue by writing, “I was fascinated with Leo’s black-and-white dune photographs when I received *Duet*, a collection of photos and poems by Leo and his wife Liz.” Continuing, the poet praises Touchet’s work with sand dunes in *Chasing Shadows*. He explains that the images in this collection have not only shaped *Still Motion* but informed his own sense of how ekphrasis works. Zheng writes “ekphrastic writing is not a retelling of what we see in artwork,” before suggesting that, instead, “it concerns an interaction of the senses,” and arrives as “a creation from the original art.” Outlining these perspectives, Zheng explores the writing process he pursues in the twenty-five poems that he’s prepared for the volume.

Observing that the “beautiful shapes” in Touchet’s photographs are “made effective by light and shadow,” the poet states that they “inspire” his verse in the collection. Zheng explains that the connection between his “ekphrastic poetry” and Touchet’s images in the volume represent “experiments with imagination, language and synesthesia.” Touchet extends the scope of these claims in the introduction/project statement that he contributes to *Still Motion*. Aware of the appreciation that the poet has for his images, the photographer writes, “Jianqing was fascinated with my photos of sand dunes and later reviewed my book *Chasing Shadows*. He later traveled West to see the dunes himself.” Touchet recognizes that by going to the dunes, Zheng gained insight about their ceaseless reconfiguration and never-ending engagement with light and shadow. The photographer remarks that, in this way, the poet came to discover, just as he had, that “the only time that you can photograph the dunes is during the first and last half hours of the day when the sun is low and causing shadows.”

The sensibility arising from this dialogue informs the distinct interplay between the poetry and photographs in *Still Motion*. Connecting both artists’ work, sky and wind shape their words and images, as the volume delivers its address to light and land. Offering their observations of the delicate, incremental study in structure and process that are the dunes, Zheng and Touchet establish the terms of their conversation about space, time, and motion. With their work conveying this rarified, nearly precious quality, speaking to sand whispers and shadow silence, poet and photographer capture both emergence and closure, as the raw and the refined converge in sifting images. The poems and photographs in *Still Motion* turn and shift, undulate and interface, moving along and across the page, capturing possibilities for exchange be-

tween line and word, black and white, presence and absence.

In this way, *Still Motion* explores intersections where sight constructs meaning and appearance assembles perception in the two artists’ work. The titles of Zheng’s poems—“A Way of Seeing,” “Questions from Seeing,” “Juxtaposition,” “Seeing Shadows,” and “Sight to Sight,” among others—respond to Touchet’s images of the Mesquite Flats Sand Dunes and Eureka Valley Dunes of the Death Valley National Park in California as well as the Monahans Sand Hills State Park of Texas. For example, in “The Visual Chord,” Zheng bends line and sound into a multi-dimensional, ekphrastic reflection. Observing, collecting, and re-assembling elements of a Touchet Mesquite Flats Dunes photograph, the poem renders a complex, layered, mirror of the photographer’s sun-and-shadow emulsion.

These impulses become fully evident in the opening stanza of “The Visual Chord.” Situating himself in relation to an evocative photo of sand, shadow, and light taken by Touchet in Death Valley National Park, the poet proclaims,

The beguiling light and shade form variant images out of dunes to allure you to grab pictures and exclaim delightful surprises. When light slides away and you are on your way to the tent, shade expands inch by inch into an oblong image unexpected and awesome again to the eye. (p. 17)

Zheng, thereby, brings his poet and his readers into the photograph, conducting an image-driven translation project through his verse in *Still Motion*. Transposing the “perception of an image” into “poetic imagery,” the poet brings his readers into the extended conversation he conducts with Basho over the course of the volume. Zheng engages the Japanese master’s hybrid, haibun form in “The Visual Chord,” moving the poem to its conclusion with a traditional, three-line haiku

that reads,

stranded on a beach
a humpback whale
in desperate silence. (p. 17)

In this way, throughout *Still Motion*, the poet speaks both to and from Touchet's photographic imagery. Zheng's variations on haiku, renga, and haibun progressions serve as the medium for sight and sound, along with word and image, to mirror each other. Within their volume, Zheng and Touchet excavate and enter the lived moment. Their collaborative exchange brings audiences into a deep, full, and immediate contact with the possibility and promise that arrive in their imagistic encounters with place and perception. As the poems and photographs in the volume span these spaces, they bridge what Berger describes in *Ways of Seeing* as the "always present gap between words and seeing." Throughout *Still Motion*, Zheng and Touchet open eyes, effectively illustrating Berger's contention that "our vision is continually moving," changing and illustrating its capacities, "constituting what is present to us as we are."

~Michael A. Antonucci



***Mississippi Hippie, A Life in 49 Pieces.* By Willy Bearden. (Deep Delta Publishing, 2024. Pp. 286, \$34.95, hardcover)**

In the rural South, boys named "William" at birth are normally called "Billy" shortly thereafter. A few of them, later on, become labeled "Willie/Willy." By high school, almost all of these people have outgrown "Billy/Willy" and

have become "just plain Bill." Not many adults remain "Willy." Of course, there is the obvious exception of the famous Willie Nelson . . . and our author here.

This memoir is by a well-known Memphis personality who has proven himself quite successful in his chosen enterprises. He has focused mostly on historical Memphis, in his publications and photographs, in several heavily-viewed documentary films, in organizing the University of Memphis symposia on the Delta, and general public relations.

His accomplishments might be surprising given the life he describes in 49 non-chronological vignettes.

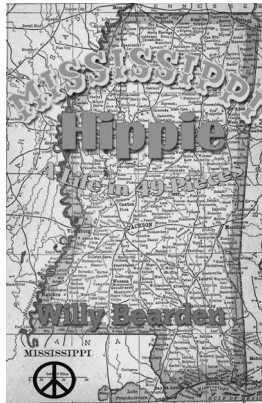
He grew up in Rolling Fork, a village in the lower part of the so-called "Mississippi Delta." The portrait he paints of the place, and his life there, is not pretty, but perhaps insightful of small town life in the American South, and especially the Mississippi Delta, during the last half of the twentieth century.

His father participated in the local "society of alcoholism," ("a beautiful pack of alcoholics"), his mother toiled hours daily "on her feet" in a beauty shop, he was a poor student who learned to read late and who, embarrassingly, had to repeat the seventh grade. At a young age, around the pool hall, roadhouses, and juke joints he learned all of the raw, crude clichés of Southern dialect. Growing up, his victories were few, but he did manage to tackle Archie Manning in a high school football game.

Bearden especially likes storytelling and *Mississippi Hippie* is his story, "his truth," that he hopes might enlighten and inspire others. His prose shines when he talks about some of the "characters" in Rolling Fork. These include his uncle "Doc," Sheriff Tarleton, and the longtime jailer.

Following his mother's guidance to become

literate, the author's life took on new meaning. He became an avid reader and eventually, he becomes a devotee of "Mr. Billy" Faulkner. That didn't mean his life was always smooth thereafter. His early love of music led to time in local bands, to a Hippie sub-culture of "sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll," then on to serious long-distance hitchhiking, and just "hanging out" with a few friends.



Along the way, Willy found that he could not accept the stereotypical attitudes of his town folk. On race: Probably because of his early friendships with black kids, he wasn't racist. On war: The anti-Vietnam protester of the 1970s finds that "I am more anti-war now than I was in my 20s." On religion: By his fourteenth year, Willy had shed his Episcopal/Baptist upbringing and found that he "had little use for church." His philosophical summation is simple: "be nice, or leave."

Like many from the Delta, after high school he made his way to Memphis. He saw in Rolling Fork, as in other Delta towns, "the slow and painful death that has lasted more than fifty years" and realized that he had to leave. At the end of his senior year in high school he drove to the mental institution outside of Jackson to see his father and left Rolling Fork. He tried a junior college and Ole Miss for less than a semester, before returning to Memphis and a few odd jobs: wholesale liquor deliveries, sold old tires (at least tried to), became an ordained "minister," and eventually got a job with Motion Picture Laboratory where he, after years, learned the film-making trade.

One clear intent of this collection of recol-

lections is to thank all the people who played a role in his life. In his first chapter, "The Book of the Dead," he writes that since his eleventh birthday he "kept a list of everyone I knew who had died." In his last chapter ("Memorial Day"), he explains that "a person doesn't die, for the second and final time, until their name is last said." Then follows a radically-innovative ending to a book: he writes the names of 370 deceased people who he remembers. He wants dearly to credit others for his successes. But while I do not know the author, I see it differently. I am more inclined to believe that he is one of those few who succeed on their own, from their own inner strength.

Bearden reeks of "tha Delta," and loves the notion of that "place." Fifty years after high school, he returned to buy a house in Rolling Fork where he penned this memoir. Perhaps he still wants to be called "Willy" because it keeps him attached to his Delta deep roots.

For those interested in "Delta studies" this book is a valuable contribution—to understand life at both personal and community scales.

~William V. (Bill) Davidson

