

# Magnum in Parvo

by Charles A. Riley II

*That things go round and again go round  
Has rather a classical sound.  
~ Wallace Stevens, "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating"*

Halfway through a rainy autumn afternoon spent reviewing the torrent of submissions for ***The Circle: Small Works Exhibition***, I stepped back for a break. It was partly the usual juror's fatigue after wading through many thumbnails that reflected an abundance of talent among the photographers attracted by the invitation. Although I have been on sculpture and painting juries before, the first round of images onscreen was a reminder of my old job as a magazine editor scanning our photographer's contact sheets with grease pencil in hand to circle the eight or twelve final shots for that month's fashion feature.

As with editing, curating is a process of elimination with an eye toward the composition of a whole with interesting parts. I was determined to help Alex pull together an exhibition with the blend of unity and variety that did justice to the theme as well as to the level of talent. However, after reviewing many images for a while, it seemed as if images of concentric circles disturbing the surface of water were recurring.

The next day I realized I was missing a crucial philosophical element out of the unwarranted fear of repetition. Far from redundant, each of the superbly composed and meticulously observed images had the virtue of illuminating a different aspect not just of nature but also of the motif itself. As with the sharp-focus detail in the foreground of an Old Masters painting - that telltale iris or primrose rendered with horticultural precision - the photographs were lessons in rigorous looking. They teach us to examine our world with the keen eye (and even ear) that poets also apply, taking mimesis to the level of epistemology.

The modest scale of these works is in itself a focal virtue. The aesthetics of the miniature, expressed in the wonderful Latin phrase "magnum in parvo" ("great things in small"), is a healthy corrective to the overstated and often empty over-reliance on monumental scale of Contemporary artists, including many photographers. A scholar's rock set on a wooden base in a Chinese calligrapher's studio, may in its few inches of twisting stature suggest the vertiginous vertical paths of an entire sacred mountain. In a similar way, a tiny page in an illuminated manuscript can unveil a landscape or city from Medieval history. Power is packed into an economic space, just as a mere fourteen lines in the hands of Shakespeare can hold volumes of emotional drama.

Part of this extraordinary mental expansion is made possible by the theme that was chosen. The circle is more than a symbol or iconographic element, a schematic guide to composition or figure. It has the archetypal depth that reaches beyond abstract thought to an original pattern. You can find it in so many masterworks by Robert Delaunay, Charles Demuth, Robert Mangold, Wassily Kandinsky (I do not count Damien Hirst's dots, which I find trivial), as well as in the photography of Harold Edgerton, Edward Weston and Man Ray among so many others. You know the circle is more than just a schema when it becomes an obsession of Leonardo da Vinci. There it is, inscribing the nude in his philosophically immense drawing "Vitruvian Man."

In his notebooks, among so many meditations on water, is this gem of observation, the perfect introduction to this revealing exhibition at Alex Ferrone Gallery: "The stone where it strikes the surface of the water causes circles around it which spread out until they are lost; and in the same manner the air, struck by a voice or a noise, also has a circular motion, so he who is most distant cannot hear it."

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