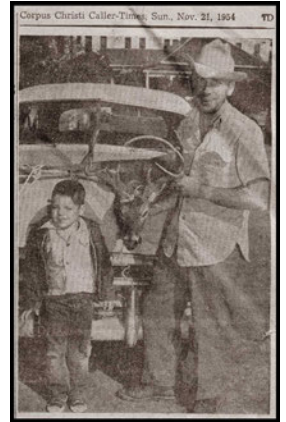


Series Number Three
Cattle Auctions - 1987

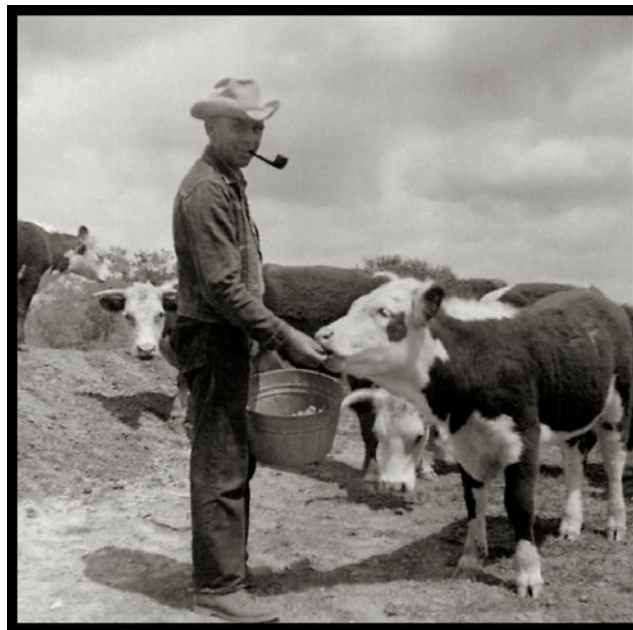
Twelve Photographs
Michael Nye

Cattle Auctions: 1987

Butchers can be kind and gentle people. My German grandfather Fred Hobrecht was a butcher. He owned a small one-room grocery store on Bowie Street in Beeville, Texas - fresh meat hung from hooks. I never saw him kill a cow or hog but did see him once chop off the head of a rooster who lost his voice at that very moment. After my father died I found an old newspaper clipping of us standing next to his 1950 Chevrolet – a dead deer was strapped to the hood. The article read: “Paul Nye shows the nine-point buck he bagged . . . north of Utopia. The Lad on the left is his son, Judge 5.” They called me Judge when I was small because I was serious. I remember never liking the idea of hunting.



I grew up around cattle. My father leased some ranch land in South Texas and on weekends we built fences, vaccinated, searched for and counted baby calves along dry creek beds. The cows were Herefords – brown and white with thick necks and curly hair- mostly friendly. They originally came from Herefordshire, England and were admired for their adaptability in harsh climates.



Paul Nye -my father, 1953

When we arrived at the ranch my father would honk and yell out “HeeeYall – HeeeYall!” – We threw out Purina Hi- protein Range Cubes – called “cow candy”. The cows came running, chasing us, wagging their tails and tongues, mooing for more. They seemed content in wide peaceful pastures – eating green grasses – each nose pointing toward soft breezes in late evenings.

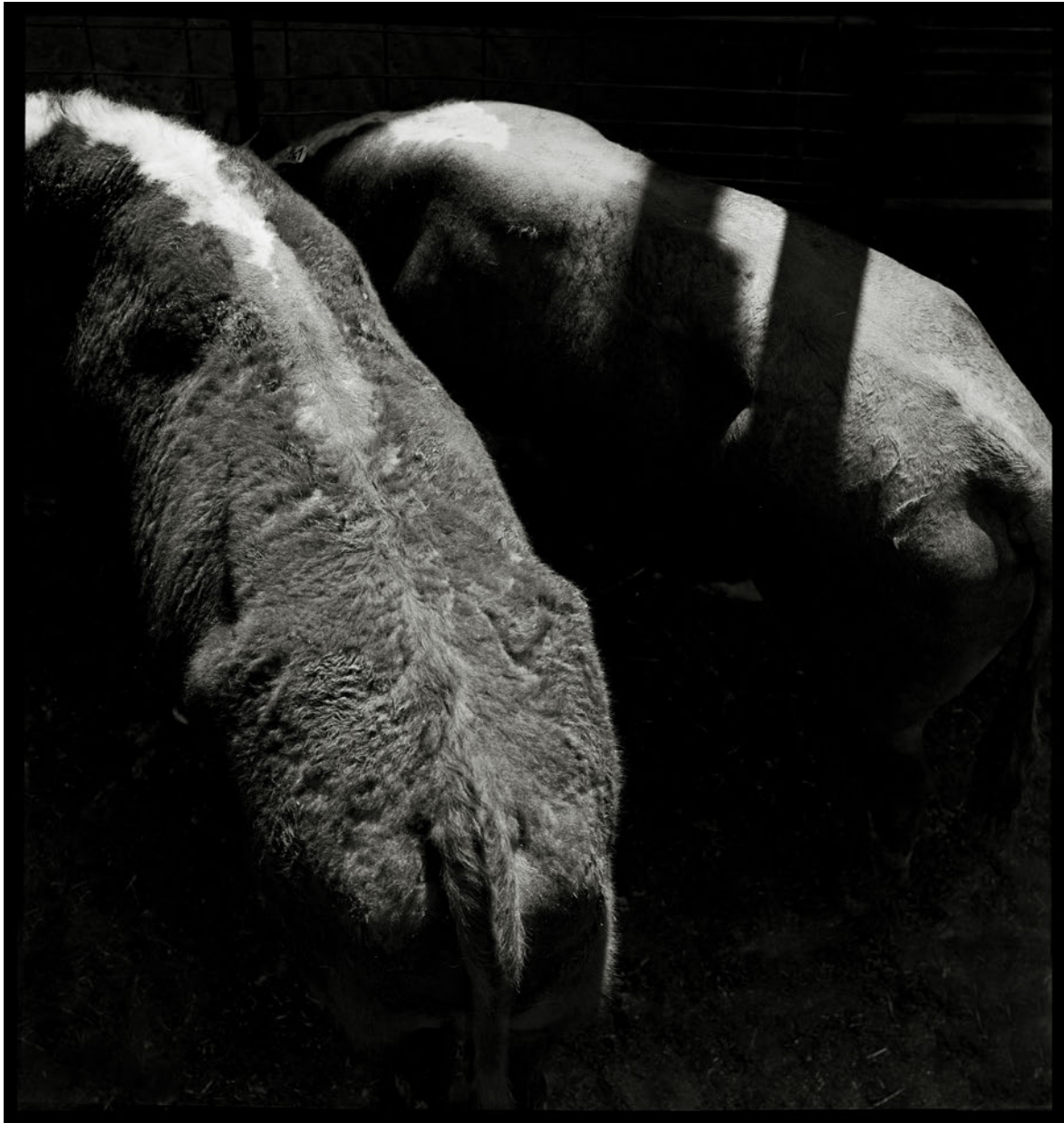
The San Antonio Union Stockyards was established in 1889. In 1950, during one year alone, over one million cattle passed through. The stockyards closed in 2001 when the numbers dwindled. My first visit was on a hot summer afternoon in 1987. The walkways were high and circled above the fenced in cattle - waiting. I remember staring in disbelief. Tens of thousands of cows mooing, bellowing, and snorting bodies mixed with heat and sweat and the toxic smell of manure. Everything was in motion.



Cows # 1

In the center of the stockyards was an arena where the cattle were bought and sold, some to re-stock local ranches - however most were sent to slaughter. Stockyard workers directed the cattle to various pens and trucks to be shipped out to their final destinations. The auctioneer's high-pitched omnipotent voice echoed above us all.

I purchased an old 4x5 Graflex RB/Super D camera for \$45.00 dollars. It was manufactured in the 1920s. The advantage of the camera was using large 4x5 negatives and instead of placing it on a tripod, it could be hand held. (Alfred Stieglitz used this same camera model when he made his cloud series of photographs which he called "Equivalents". He said that the clouds represented clouds but they were also were symbols -representing profound human emotions – like music, fear or joy.)



Cows # 2

From the walkways high above the surrounding stockyards, I could bend over the railing – two hands gripping the 4x5 Graflex camera – head inside the dark bellows and my legs gripping, holding onto the lower metal bars so as not to tumble below.

Every person I encountered asked: “What are you looking at?” “What are you photographing?” The act of photographing means that one is also paying attention to what is seen. Dr. Welch Diamond, an eccentric collector, photographed his mental patients in England in 1850. He wrote – “We are surrounded by things which have been lost, some things simply disappeared while others appear not to have existed at all. It is quite possible to look at something without seeing it. Discovery or rediscovery usually results from a change in perspective.”



Cows # 3

I don't know what cowboys know. Two of the images were made on a cattle ranch in South Texas. The cowboys I met were hardworking, solitary, and understood the complexity and behavior of cattle and horses. They were committed to the herd's good health. The difference in attitude and care between cowboys working on ranches and stockyard workers is enormous.

The stockyards reeked with resistant realism. What I did observe were cows brought into unfamiliar spaces and pushed and moved by cattle prods and whips. Some workers were considerate while others were cruel and efficient.



Cows # 4

The cattle were mostly treated as a commodity. There was no sense that they felt hunger or pain or pleasure. The cattle were under stress. They were constantly re-organizing themselves for protection. Their instinct was to huddle in groups – cattle bodies tightly pressed together - moving as if they were one larger entity – always some were leading, others following.

In the darkroom I noticed patterns of movements and form. The harsh sunlight revealed deep shadows of gates, metal pins and outlines of heads and horns and ears and bodies. Some cows were ready to fight – others huddled and waited.

I thought about business men and women, heads down, walking to work in the early mornings – crowds gathering into sports arenas cheering – arms waving in the air -- grocery store shoppers waiting in checkout lines – school children running in circles on playgrounds. There is intelligence in the unity of sounds and movements.

Perception seems to be circular and mathematical. Each new memory and understanding adds to subsequent perceptions and experiences. Seeing and thinking are inseparably linked. Looking is not enough.

This series is about remembering. What is forgotten is lost. The Union Stockyards are now abandoned. Commercial buildings and neighborhoods are now living in these same spaces. I have seen many abandoned train stations -- bus depots -- department stores -- stockyards -- movie theatres -- each and every one -- thick and dripping with time.

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Cows # 5



Cows # 6



Cows # 7



Cows # 8



Cows # 9



Cows # 10



Cows # 11



Cows # 12