

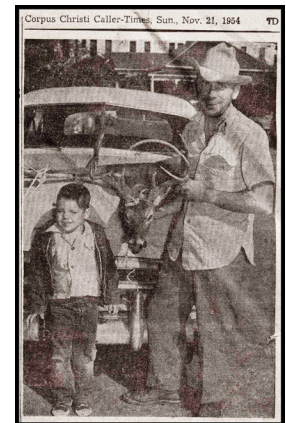
Series Number Two
Cattle Auctions
Photographs 1987 - Essay 2025

Fourteen Photographs
Michael Nye

Cattle Auctions:

sympathy - cattle - slaughter - alive - sounds of mooing - closeness - protection - bellowing - destination - uncertainty - invisible impulses - behavior - sadness - sweat & heat - very nose was pointing east toward soft breezes - cow-boys - dust & dirt - understanding - stockyard - intense smells - unfairness - auctioneer's voice - waiting - remembering

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 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 killed . . . 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 or act of hunting and killing.



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

When we arrived at the ranch my father would yell out, *"HeeeYall – HeeeYall!"* We threw out Purina Hi- protein Range Cubes known as "Cow candy". The cows came running, chasing us, wagging their tongues, mooing for more. They seemed content in their wide peaceful green pastures. Every nose was pointing east 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 cattle, waiting. I remember staring in disbelief. Tens of thousands of cows were bellowing, their bodies were mixed with heat, sweat and the toxic smell of manure. Everything was in motion.

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

I purchased a 4x5" Graflex RB/Super D camera for \$45.00 dollars. It was manufactured in the 1920s. This 4x5" view camera was designed to be used without a tripod, hand held. Alfred Stieglitz used this camera model when he made his cloud series of photographs which he called "*Equivalents*". Stieglitz said, "*The clouds represented clouds but they were also were symbols representing profound human emotions like music, fear or joy.*"

From the walkways high above the surrounding stockyards I could bend over the railing, my head inside the camera's dark bellows and legs holding onto the metal bars so as not to fall and tumble below.

Every person I encountered asked: "*What are you looking at?*" The act of photographing means that one is 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.*"

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 workers at the Union Stockyards were not cowboys. Some were considerate while others were cruel and efficient. The stockyards reeked with sadness and resistant realism. The cows constantly re-organized themselves for protection. Their instinct was to huddle in groups, bodies tightly pressed together, moving as if they were one larger entity. Some cows were ready to fight, others huddled and waited.

In the darkroom I thought about the invisible impulses of our shared moods and movements. Fear has a sway. Confidence has a twirl. Business men and women, with their heads down, walk to work in the early mornings. Crowds gather into sports arenas, cheering, and waving their arms in the air in unison. Couples walk slowly holding hands. In grocery stores shoppers waiting in checkout lines are lost in their private thoughts. On school play-grounds children run in circles laughing and shouting in their tiny voices.

What is forgotten is lost. This series is about remembering. I have seen abandoned train stations, bus depots, department stores and movie theatres. Each and every one has its own history and fading memories. The Union Stockyards are now torn down. In this same space of land and moving sky, commercial buildings and young neighborhoods are growing their roots. The sounds of mooing are still visible.



Cows # 1



Cows # 2



Cows # 3



Cows # 4



Cows # 5



Cows # 6



Cows # 7



Cows # 8



Cows # 9



Cows # 10



Cows # 11



Cows # 12



Cows # 13



Cows # 14