

# The Aesthetics of Simplicity

TOM SMART shines a light on Michael Torosian's Lumiere Press, publishing limited edition photography books for the past 30 years.

AMONG THE PORTFOLIO of some two dozen books that have emanated from Michael Torosian's Lumiere Press, based in Toronto, the modest, elegant volume *Edward Weston: Dedicated to Simplicity: A Reminiscence*, by Cole Weston, embodies an entire aesthetic that has remained true since this title, the press's first, was issued in 1986. With it, Torosian signaled that intelligibility would be a fundamental element of his creed as an editor and designer. He and his press have never broken this faith with the reader.

Over the past three decades, Torosian and Lumiere Press have produced some of the most elegant, poetic and beautiful limited edition books on photography. His accomplishments have received many citations over the years from the Alcuin Society, recognizing the press's excellence in book design, and from the American Institute of Graphic Arts.<sup>1</sup>

Simplicity is Lumiere's hallmark. Clarity, precision, proportion, attentiveness: these are all qualities that characterize its books. In their appeal to many senses at the same time—the visual, the tactile, even the aural—they elevate the experience of reading beyond just absorbing and processing words and images that appear on the pages. These books are objects that reward careful, unrushed viewing and reading by inviting the curious reader to comprehend meaning not only in what is seen and said on the pages, but in the object's materials and methods of their making.

The forms of the stories that the individual titles tell are particular to their subjects. A bio-

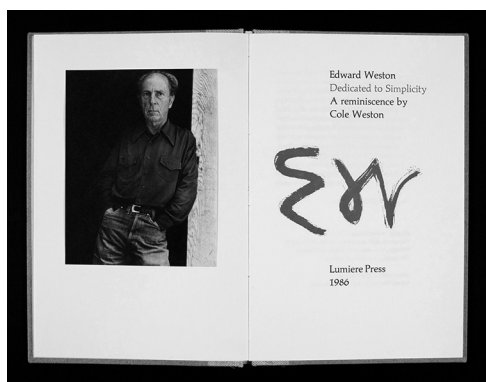
graphy might suit the narrative of one volume, while an interview may be adopted in another, and reminiscences in a third. Straightforward prose, poetic indirection, allusion, reportage, even contemplative essay: the spectrum of literary forms is adapted from one volume to the next, all in the service of the material. Each

book aims to illuminate the underlying ideas clearly and coherently.

The press's reputation is based, ostensibly, on its significant, deep list of photography books. On the surface this is accurate. The presentation and elucidation of subjects and themes related to the history, theory and practice of photographic art is the principle that connects the individual titles. And yet, Lumiere

Press's books provide much more than information on the art, artists and contexts surrounding the relatively brief history of this art form, now somewhat shy of two centuries old. Torosian has made it his project to redefine the purpose of an art book dedicated to exploring this young vein of art history by transferring points of reference and even modes of description from an array of artistic expressions beyond the visual arts, to reveal a photograph's poetry and its author's intentions.

In brief, Torosian's press has created an entirely innovative literary form in which image, text and object all converse in subtle ways to create new kinds of meaning about the subject matter—photography and photographers—and about how the book itself can amplify the message of the medium.



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Edward Weston: *Dedicated to Simplicity*, 1986  
(frontispiece and title page).

## SEEDS OF A SPECIAL MARRIAGE

Photography is Lumiere's genetic code. Torosian began his creative life as a young man with a keen interest in the art form, an appetite that was sated by a father who acquired for his son a darkroom, borrowed books on photography from the local library for him to pore over, and encouraged him to explore his muse.

The fruits of this parental support are borne out in Torosian's earliest photographs, which show more than a gifted amateur's understanding of modernist principles and pictorialist devices. From the beginning, Torosian demonstrated adeptness with composition in a formalist sense, while blending its abstractions with an affinity for finding subjects in the urban maelstrom.

His work shows that his eye was drawn to asymmetry, complicated balances of the geometries of daily life in the city, and to visual poetry that chance cast in front of his lens. Clearly, even crisply captured on film, Torosian's neatly ordered compositions are modulated by metaphor and symbol. The objects and images comment indirectly and often critically on something that lies beyond the edges of the format. More than simple looking, reading his photographs is a requirement if you want to discern the many layers of their significance.

Photography and books defined the young man's creative landscape; Torosian saw that the two were perfectly suited to each other. He believed that the natural way of presenting photographs was in albums, a format stimulated by his understanding and analysis of Edward S. Curtis's 1,500 images presented in the 20 volumes of *The North American Indian* (1907–30). The Curtis project demonstrated to Torosian the perfect convergence of forms, solidifying in his mind that his own project would inevitably involve the marriage of books and photographs.

From this kernel Lumiere Press grew as a fine art publisher devoted to presenting and interpreting photography in limited edition books. To accomplish this, over time Torosian outfitted his studio with an Intertype machine that casts hot lead into type, a Vandercook printing press, and a century-old German-made machine for sewing signatures. With this equipment,

he began to produce what is now a precisely organized inventory of titles and proofs.

Torosian boasts that, with the exception of a night-school bookbinding class that he took from Emrys Evans, then conservator at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, he is self-taught. He always viewed the book—the album form—as the “true medium of photography.” Thus, his creative path was set as a photographer and a publisher who married the two art forms.

Among Lumiere Press's early titles are three books treating Torosian's own photographs, all of which serve as solo exhibition catalogues. *Aurora* documents his 1987 exhibition of portraits at New York's Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery.<sup>2</sup> *Toronto Suite* (1989) presents a series of portraits of artists who comprised the stable of Toronto's esteemed Isaacs Gallery.<sup>3</sup> And *Anatomy*, published to accompany an exhibition at Toronto's Sable-Castelli Gallery in 1993, presents a dozen duotone-reproduction visual tonal essays of the nude female torso.<sup>4</sup>

If there are connecting threads to these three volumes, they involve regarding the human face and anatomy as sites (conflict zones, almost) for the expression of unresolved tensions, both physical and emotional. The human anatomy also radiates as wide a tonal range as possible in the medium. They are emblems of Torosian's belief that there is a simple yet mystical truth that runs through the brief history of photography: that the medium's language is elemental, or as he puts it: “A moment is preserved from the visual world. How simple a definition; how powerful an acquisition.”<sup>5</sup>

## AN AUDACIOUS APPROACH

Powerful simplicity is the essence of the 1986 book on Edward Weston. In short, it embodies the quality of excellence that is at the core of Lumiere's work. It also epitomizes near-perfect bookmaking.

Analyzing its component parts reveals much about Lumiere Press's guiding aesthetic. First and foremost, it is comfortable to hold in the palm of the hand. It has a satisfying weight and size that balance well, allowing for easy access to what lies between its covers, which we are told are “three unpublished photographs printed

from copy negatives on gelatin silver paper and tipped in . . . ”<sup>6</sup> The acreage of light that comes off the pages lends the publication a contemplative mood, all the better to savour the direct, uncomplicated portrait that the son writes of the father.

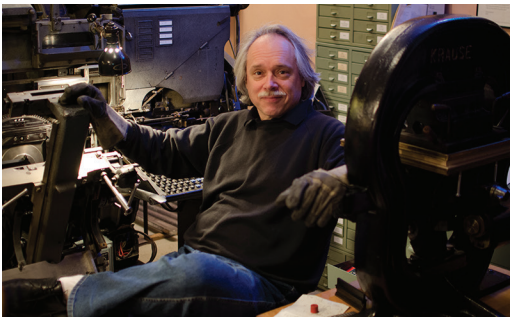
The book’s format finely glosses its contents, which tell of Weston’s spare, ascetic, uncluttered life that is so finely reflected in his work. Lumiere’s book is precisely rendered so as to stand in for the artist’s aesthetic. It is both testament and nuanced interpretation of a life—Weston’s—and his entire corpus reduced beautifully to this singularly accessible and modestly authoritative volume.

The Weston book heralded an approach to bookmaking that is as audacious as it is creative. Torosian blended the album format with a literary form, usually the sole precinct of poetry books, which held that a book’s design should serve as a simulacrum of its subject’s artistic expression. In other words, the published object, its formal qualities and materials, had to amplify the photographic art and artist it was meant to serve.

HOMAGES TO ART AND ARTISTS

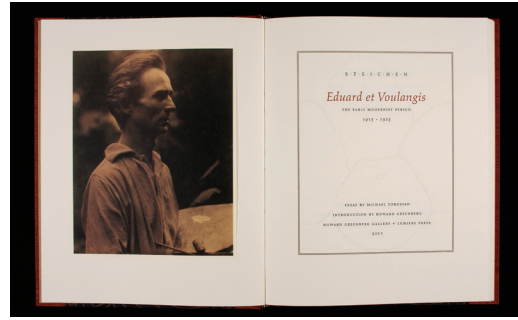
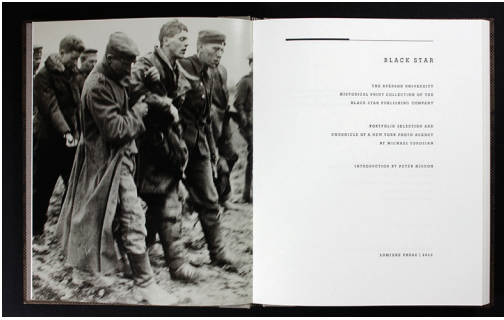
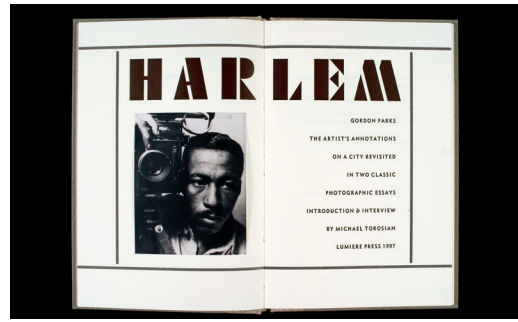
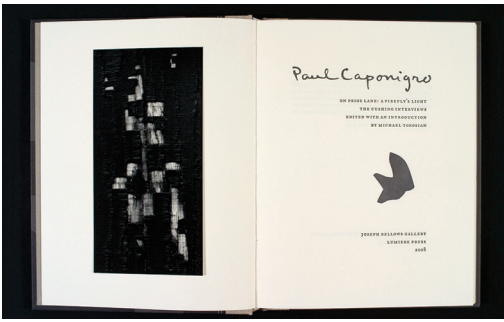
Having asserted a creative vision in his Weston book, Torosian demonstrated in his productions the elasticity of his guiding rubrics, and his pursuit of excellence in all its fullness. What followed were books that effectively and affectionately pay homage to their subjects on their own terms; no two productions are exactly the same. Each distills a simple essence, expresses it clearly, and presents it to the reader within the conventions of this innovative album idea. He shows how the album format has the capacity to reveal new knowledge about photographic art and bookmaking of a high order.

For example, *The Confessions of a Tree Taster* (1987), a volume on Toronto’s mid-20th-century documentarian, humanist and author Michel Lambeth, followed the Weston. Autobiographical, it includes just one of his photographs (a 1950 self-portrait), and two facsimiles—one of a manuscript page from the short story, and another of a wood engraving—and a short story written by Lambeth in 1971. Together, these modest elements are bound in a nearly identical format as the Weston (the differences lie in the interior



Top to bottom: Michael Torosian (portrait by Hanah Ryu Chung); Lumiere Press workshop, Intertype machine keyboard; Michael Torosian at the Intertype machine keyboard.





Clockwise from upper left: Paul Caponigro: *On Prior Lane: A Firefly's Light*, 2008 (frontispiece and title page); Gordon Parks: *Harlem*, 1997 (title page spread); Steichen: *Eduard et Voulangis*, 2011 (frontispiece and title page); Black Star, 2013 (frontispiece and title page).

design sensibility and in the typefaces), but the former's philosophical spirit has been replaced by a cathartic tale of reconciliation and absolution.

Within the constraints of aesthetic simplicity, Torosian found fertile soil for creative experiment. A volume on Aaron Siskind, *The Siskind Variations: A Quartet of Photographs and Contemplations* (1990), channels the idea of a book as an analogue of a musical composition, in particular a quartet of variations. Its four essays, or "contemplations" transcribed from conversations between Torosian and Siskind, examine four of the artist's photographs in prose that is allusive and contemplative; Torosian describes himself on its title page as the mind who "orchestrated and edited" the volume.

Indeed, from his earliest books, Torosian looked to the other arts for different kinds of creative sensibilities that could be translated into the particular grammars of the limited edition book. There is an appealing harmony in the interplay of the formal elements of a Lumiere Press book with its photographic reproductions and its editorial content. Music frequently provides

cues on harmony, rhythm, interval, modulation, counterpoint and many other devices that are transferable to a book's composition.

So too the sensibilities of dance found their visual equivalents on a Torosian page (especially in the Siskind book), or in the way texts and images flowed to tell unique multi-sensory stories. Action, energy, duration, cadence are important factors to consider when reading a Lumiere Press book and appreciating the harmonious or even cacophonous interplay of all the parts. To orient you in the reading of a title, Torosian prefers to provide a prefatory gloss in the form of a kind of open-ended sentence or prose image that succinctly sets the stage or attunes the mind and eye to what they are about to behold.

A volume on Lewis Hine, published five years after *The Siskind Variations*, serves as a vehicle for an affectionate series of "memories and meditations" on the artist's life and work written by Walter Rosenblum.<sup>7</sup> Echoing the binding and format of the Weston and Lambeth volumes, the Hine has an intimacy absent in its two close cousins owing to a kind of gentle melancholy that is

evoked by the photographs of new immigrants to the United States awaiting naturalization. In these it is easy to discern Hine's genius for interpreting anxiety as a condition of humanity. This is evoked by Torosian's choice of typeface (Linotype Old Style Number One with Torino for display) to convey a subtle, plangent mood that emphasizes the same quality embedded in the Hine images.

And still another title shows how visual image-making strategies of chance and jazz riffs inspired a publication. Paul Caponigro's *On Prior Lane: A Firefly's Light: The Cushing Interviews* (2008) is a contrapuntal reflection on the artist's life, career and creativity in the form of transcribed interviews between Caponigro and Torosian. The calm, friendly tone of the prose set down sympathetically on the mould-made Hahnemühle Biblio paper page in Linotype Falcon is the near-perfect replica of a Bill Evans composition that elevates an attentive listener (or reader) to an entirely different state of consciousness.

Caponigro's modernist sensibility and the pure, essential poetry of his art are beautifully captured and exactly evoked. The book illuminates Caponigro's prefatory remark that "Feelings will apprehend the spirit more quickly than the mind ever will." The truth of this is borne out in this work, which has the added distinction of a cover design that Torosian created in a moment of spontaneous inspiration. It perfectly evokes the feeling of the volume and the sensibility of the artist it treats.

#### HISTORY LESSONS IN IMAGES

In addition to these published "homages" to art and artists, Lumiere Press has also issued titles of a more historical nature that probe the expressive range of photojournalism as an art form. *Gordon Parks: Harlem: The Artist's Annotations on a City Revisited in Two Classic Photographic Essays* (1997) revisits two iconic LIFE magazine photo essays by Parks from 1948 and 1968 treating the conditions of African Americans living in Harlem. The modesty of the Lumiere volume belies the astringency of Parks's photo essays and his words recounted in a relaxed voice to Torosian, who sets them down with a plain simplicity, all the better to highlight the latent accusations that he levels at his readers.

David Heath's *Korea Photographs, 1953–1954* (2004) and *Black Star* (2013),<sup>8</sup> as Torosian designed them, are meant to accentuate the uncanny sense that a photograph can be a lot of things, but of the many, perhaps time machine is the most potent. These books express cogently his idea of the preserved moment. Both take the particular and transform it into a myth of decline and fall.

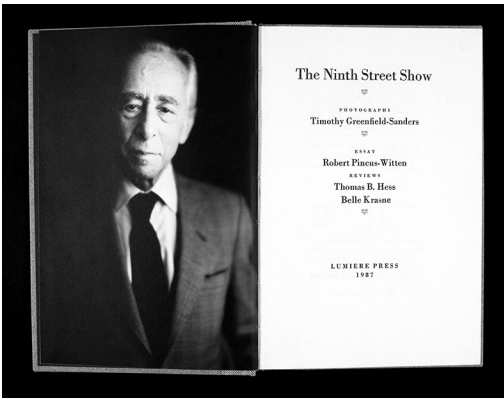
The former's elegiac mood is made palpable by the sombre tones of the bindings and the intended banality of the straightforward prose. The latter traces an historical odyssey through the 20th century via significant episodes preserved in the New York photo agency's archive. The book is an object lesson on how a large archival deposit can be rendered coherent and intelligible through the judiciously curated selection (and publication) of singular works of art from the chaos of plenitude. As Lumiere Press shows us in this volume of understated elegance, an impactful story can be told that resonates as a lament for all that was lost in the mid-20th century.

#### A NEW LITERARY FORM

Yet, of all Lumiere Press's publications, my favourite is *Steichen: Eduard et Voulangis: The Early Modernist Period, 1915–1923* (2011). For me, it is the embodiment of a set of principles and an aesthetic that have remained true for Lumiere since day one. In an unwavering drive toward uncompromising publications on the art and history of photography, Torosian has given us much more than a bibliography of titles comprising exemplary production values. From his mind and hand a new literary form has emerged, which is evident in the *Steichen* volume.

The contents include *Steichen's* images, two of which were previously unpublished, tipped in on pages that sensitively frame the prints in the warm values of the rag Somerset paper. The accenting borders on the prints themselves have also been printed in a hue congruent to that of the rag paper. This invisible detail has the precise purpose of seamlessly blending page and picture without the visual interruption of poorly attuned colour harmonies.

While it is true that its subject explores *Steichen's* career between 1915 and 1923, the book is a rare form of sorcery in the way Torosian



The Ninth Street Show, 1987  
(frontispiece and title page).

transforms its material aspects and function into something else entirely right before our eyes.

This is aided by the binding and weight of paper, which were selected to make the task of turning the page unencumbered, easy. In fact, the more one is immersed in the book, luxuriates in all its sensual properties, a strange phenomenon occurs. The book disappears, leaving only the spirit of its subject, Steichen, as it is traced on his prints and described in his interlude in Voulangis, a time of personal crisis and transformation in the artist following the Great War.

Torosian’s ability to plumb deeply the creative person perceptibly highlights Steichen’s search for meaning and artistic relevance at Voulangis, a quest that caused him to burn his paintings to prevent them from being seen as commodities to be collected as “adornments for the bourgeoisie.” From the shadows of what was surely a debilitating depression, Steichen began to formulate a simple aesthetic position into a moral construct and a prescription for a self-actualized creative life.

As much as he found the activity of painting as pandering to elitism, he found in photography, as Torosian writes, “a connection to the world and a corrective to the demoralization he was experiencing.” His years in Voulangis, heralding the birth of modernism in photography, involved an inquiry into “the thing-in-itself,” a simple statement that masks a complex theory of perception probing the duality of perception and being.

There are echoes of Steichen’s ideas in the example and aesthetic of Michael Torosian’s Lumiere Press. Just as Steichen had to find an expressive form by immersing himself in a history, then shedding it to give birth to a new form, so too did Torosian. His life and work at Lumiere track an arc of creativity as a kind of metamorphosis of simplicity—a chrysalis that unveils the complex beauties that can be imagined from the marriage of photography and the fine art of limited edition books.

1. The exhibition catalogue *Lead and Light: The Evolution of Lumiere Press* (Toronto: Ryerson University Image Centre, 2013) provides a complete bibliography of Lumiere Press publications from 1986 to 2013 and includes a list of the awards the press has received for its work.
2. Michael Torosian, *Aurora* ([New York]: Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery; Toronto: Lumiere Press, 1987).
3. Michael Torosian, *Toronto Suite* (Toronto: Lumiere Press, 1989).
4. Michael Torosian, *Anatomy* (Toronto: Lumiere Press, 1993).
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. *Lead and Light*, note accompanying the entry for Edward Weston: *Dedicated to Simplicity: A Reminiscence*, by Cole Weston (Toronto: Lumiere Press, 1986). All subsequent titles are published by this press and cited only by publication date.
7. Lewis Hine: *Ellis Island. Memories and Meditations of Walter Rosenblum on the Life and Work of an American Artist* (1995).
8. *Black Star: The Ryerson University Historical Print Collection of the Black Star Publishing Company: Portfolio Selection and Chronicle of a New York Photo Agency* (2013).

~ Tom Smart is Curator and Supervisor of Education at Brampton, Ontario’s Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives, and a contributing editor for Devil’s Artisan. He thanks Chester Gryski, a private press book collector and director of the Alcuin Society, for his generous assistance with this article.