



TRUTH, BEAUTY

THE LATE LARRY SULTAN UNDERSTOOD HOW PHOTOGRAPHY COULD TURN PROSE INTO POETRY
BY RUSSELL HART

► Few photographic publications of the 1970s created the stir that *Evidence* did. The book seemed to vindicate the idea that a photograph could be beautiful even if its creator didn't specifically intend it to be. Conceived by young, high-concept California photographers Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, the work winnowed images from vast corporate and government archives — the remaining evidence of tests and accidents, products and projects, the varied enterprises of the military-industrial complex.

The photographs were presented without explanation. By depriving them of their original meaning and purpose, Sultan and Mandel gave these prosaic documents a new life — surreal, darkly funny and even poetic. In one,

for example, hard-hatted men wade knee-deep through a sea of soap foam; in another, a man with a flaming plastic bag on his head stands nonchalantly, hands on hips.

Twenty-five years later, Sultan published another, seemingly very different book. Deeply felt, *Pictures From Home* includes his own photos of his mother and father, forced into early retirement in suburban Southern California. Sultan clearly posed his parents for many of these portraits, but the object of his artifice seemed to be to universalize the aimlessness that often comes with retirement in our culture. What could be more real, in an American sense, than an image of an older man (here, Sultan's father) practicing his golf swing?

Why is this picture so affecting? Because as with the photos in *Evidence*, what it shows transcends description: the grassy green of the carpet, succor to a golfer not getting to the links as much; the golf club echoing the TV antenna, raised as if to receive a life-sustaining signal; the skinny, tapered legs of an old man losing muscle mass, as old men do; the proper driving form, easier to retrieve from memory than a grandchild's birthday. Even the sheer curtain is perfect, fading the suburban backdrop to focus everything on the figure. To borrow from the title of the great book of natural-light studio portraits by Irving Penn, whom Sultan followed too soon in death at age 63, the picture is a world in a small room. AP