

learning curve



for Jim Dow of Boston's Museum School, teaching is a continuing education

Whether he is shooting the chockablock interior of an English mom-and-pop shop or a five-section panorama of a timeworn bush-league ballpark, Jim Dow looks for detail. He renders his subjects with the richness and clarity that only an 8x10 view camera can deliver. His images are about the physical world rather than airy concepts—in other words, they aren't in the least postmodern.

But Dow's abiding sense of duty as a teacher at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has led him to keep an open mind about other kinds of photography, including the endless permutations of contemporary art. "I still have students who want to be the next Nick Nixon, and that's fine," he says. "But more and more of them look to Matthew Barney. So I think as a photo teacher you have an obligation to broaden your outlook."

Dow has broadened his outlook with years of biweekly day trips to New York's SoHo district. After a cup of coffee with his



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dealer, Janet Borden, he visits as many as 20 galleries in a furious afternoon, shooting handheld slides as he goes. That investigation and those slides form the backbone of the Museum School's contemporary-art survey class, which Dow teaches with a colleague. Dow's multidisciplinary excursions have also included a class in colonialism in photography and literature, taught with a colleague in the visual and critical studies department at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, with which the Museum School has a joint degree program. But every other year, Dow teaches photo history, a course in which he inundates students with his own library of 50,000 slides. And each semester, he teaches studio classes, darkroom and all. Yet even that long-standing task has been influenced

Above: "Highway Sign, U.S. 72, Burnsville, MS, 1978," one of Dow's early color photos. **Below:** "The Boston Garden Set Up for Basketball, 1993," from four 8x10 negatives. **Left:** Museum School mentor Jim Dow.





Above: "Diner Detail, U.S. I, Linden, NJ, 1972." Left: "Manze's Pie & Mash from Rear, Peckham, London, 1993."

by his belief that "to teach photography in a meaningful way, you have to be up to speed with contemporary theory—post-modernism and whatever comes next."

Twenty years ago, Dow admits, he might have railed against such theoretical thinking. "I came to realize that this art-school tradition of 'I like it, I don't like it' is just crap," he explains. "Now I'm reluctant to pass a value judgment on student work, except on the integrity of its commitment. If students are interested and working hard, I'll do any-

thing I can to help them realize their ideas."

Dow looks at student work the same way he does SoHo shows. "If I walk into a gallery and see something I don't like, I make myself stay. I want to figure out why I've had that reaction, and I usually end up taking something away from the work after all."

Dow's 25 years of teaching, along with the financial need to take on commercial work, have sometimes made it difficult to sustain his own photography. (Grants—including four NEA fellowships and a Guggenheim—

have helped.) So whenever he does get on the road, shooting is a race against the clock. "I know exactly what I want to photograph," he explains. "All I need is the time to do it." Fortunately, Dow's energy and documentary agenda make him more productive than most photographers. The evidence: His baseball pictures are traveling as part of the Smithsonian's SITES program and were exhibited last spring at the Eastman House in Rochester, New York.

Dow recently returned from his seventh trip to Argentina, where he was documenting vernacular architecture. His continuing search for "individuality and idiosyncrasy" in man-made structures meshes perfectly with his teaching philosophy. "You can't teach a vision, but I wouldn't want to if I could," he says. "The great pleasure of teaching is that your students always surprise you." —RUSSELL HART

