When I was studying with Nathan Lyons at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York, in the mid-1970s, someone gave me a couple of offset prints of photographic portraits by John Wood. They are straightforward full-face portraits; the subjects—a young woman and a young man—look directly into the lens with great openness and affection. I liked these portraits right away, and have kept them with me for more than thirty years. (I learned only recently that the subjects were Wood’s students at Alfred University.) Over time, they have come to be, for me, icons of the ideals of teaching—an Adam and Eve of pedagogical possibility based on trust.

One unusual thing about these simple portraits is that they have always been clearly and unmistakably identifiable as works by Wood. Out of all the millions of photographic portraits made in the last 170 years, why and how is this pair of portraits so remarkably recognizable as the work of a particular practitioner? Is it their guilelessness and honesty? Is it the clarity of composition and presentation? Or is it the fact that no one but Wood would think to do something so simple and pure so well?

“Purity” is not a term that has often been applied to Wood’s work. In photo-historical terms, he is thought of as one of those renegades who went against “pure photography” by incorporating drawing, painting, collage, and every other technique he could get his hands on into his practice, thus ushering in the multimedia 1960s that caused a crisis in “straight photography.” Long before it became the signal medium of the avant-garde, collage was a folk art, practiced by children, lovers, and grandmothers. I suspect this is one of the reasons Wood was initially attracted to it, just as he would later make art out of whirligigs. And there have always been strong folk qualities, including insularity and self-sufficiency, attached to photography itself, which long delayed and much complicated its acceptance as fine art.

From the jaded perspective of our pluralistic present, those once furiously enforced and ferociously defended divisions seem quaint. Now that those and most other boundaries have dissolved, and digital imaging has normalized “impurity” and made the combination and alteration of different kinds of images commonplace, Wood’s
work emerges as an especially prescient and relevant progenitor. It presages much of what has been done in mixed-media over the last two decades, and looks forward to the digital future.

Wood took his first drawing class at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester in the third grade, and has never stopped drawing: "Drawing is the thing that affects me the most," he has said. "I'm continually in a state of drawing and no day goes by that I don't draw something—mark making, calligraphy, the kinetic motion of the movement of the hand, are very important to me; probably more important than anything else."

His next big discovery was the kinetics of flying, when he became a bomber pilot in the Air Force. "I was a pilot for a long time," Wood has said, "and some of the changes of space that take place as you go from looking out at the horizon straight ahead to moving up where you may be looking down, where there's no horizon, are the kinds of things that have activated my work, more than any romantic notion of landscape." Photographer and scholar Laurie Snyder, who wrote her master's thesis on Wood's work, tells us that in the Air Force, he had a German Robot camera, developed for aerial gunnery work, which exposed half-frame 35-millimeter negatives "as fast as you could press the button," and that he did his first sequence photography (what he later called "positional sequences") with this camera.

At about age twenty-seven, after rattling around a bit, Wood discovered László Moholy-Nagy's 1947 book Vision in Motion, and was transformed by it. Moholy-Nagy's vision of the new unity of art and technology—which he propounded first at the Bauhaus and later at Chicago's Institute of Design—had photography at its center, and promulgated the idea that the process of making art is integral to the making of meaning; in other words, form reveals meaning. Soon after Wood discovered Vision in Motion (as well as The Language of Vision, 1944, by another Institute of Design luminary, György Kepes) he applied to the Institute of Design program and was accepted in 1950 on the G.I. Bill. His work at the Institute ranged from "purely abstract exploration to image making of one sort or another." His most important teachers there were Harry Callahan and Art Sinsabaugh; Aaron Siskind was also a big influence, although Wood never took a class from him. When he graduated from the Institute in 1954, Wood immediately took a job teaching photography and printmaking at Alfred University in southwestern New York State, where he remained for the next thirty-five years.

In Wood's work, the photograph often represents the given thing, what is received of the world. The work then is to put that given and received thing into play, to activate it conceptually, aesthetically, and kinesthetically. For Wood, that means transforming it haptically, through the hand. His drawing and collaging and intricate manipulations of images are a way of understanding and informing photographs. In the conflicted history of "art photography," this has been considered, in some quarters at some times, a heresy. But it is a heresy that preceded the orthodoxy, and will certainly outlive it. The "pure" photograph was a temporary, though powerful, fiction. Photography was born out of a desire to write and draw differently, to write or draw with light, and was always integrated with other arts. Speaking of the way Nathan Lyons was the first one receptive to the idea of hanging photographs, drawings, and collages together, Wood said: "I wanted them viewed in relation to each other, not as separate mediums, but rather as images that flowed together."

Wood's work has always concentrated on the permutations of an image, a symbol, a sign, and from this intense investigation has arisen an involvement with what I would call the image unconscious, and Wood, I think, would call the exigencies of shape and structure. "Shape is very strong with me," he says. "I like the idea that shapes have a life unto themselves, which is not a narrative life, but some kind of feeling that affects us very strongly. I think these things are universal." One gets the sense from some of Wood's works that he could spend the rest of his life investigating the possibilities of one simple shape, like a triangle. He once said of Buckminster Fuller, who lectured at the Institute of Design when Wood was a student there: "He would start with a little triangle and gradually the whole world would evolve out of that."

Political issues come into Wood's work beginning with his opposition to the Vietnam War and his antitwar photo-collages of 1963 and 1964, and continue in different forms to address issues including gun violence, nuclear waste and proliferation, and ecological concerns. Wood addresses these issues, in most instances, in compositional terms. He brings representations of these things into the formal logic of his work, and then examines and expands upon the results. He wants the viewer to be able to see what happens, preferably without prejudice or a lot of prior assumptions. What does a gun in a landscape, or an oil spill, or the problem of what to do with nuclear waste, look like?

The sense of "implicate order"—a term used by theoretical physicist David Bohm to refer to an undivided wholeness and interconnectedness arising from a hidden or enfolded order—is very strong in Wood's work, and this sense of order has an ethical dimension that is offended by threats to it. These threats are intentionally allowed into the visual ordering of the work so that the menace becomes visible and palpable. The effects are structural and implicit rather than superficial and explicit.
In the 1970s, Wood wrote: “Maybe the time has come/For creative photography/To encompass the large/Problems without propaganda./Or journalism.” And in 1977: “I would like my pictures to be abstract/And poetic visual images/Of friends and the world/No story telling/Sometimes slight propaganda and quiet protest./On the edge of clear meaning.”

Wood has always been careful to leave some leeway for viewers to find meaning in his work, thus implicating us in its making. He also implicates us, as citizens, in the problems he addresses. It is not enough to point a finger at politicians, or corporations, or the army, he insists; in a putative democracy, we are all responsible for what happens.

Sometimes the protests are so quiet that their referents are only revealed in their titles, like Maine Permits Moose Hunting (1983), Chain and Monument Shadow (1990)—across the foreground of which falls a shadow of the Washington Monument), or Thoughts of Nuclear Waste (1981). But the “quiet” in “quiet protest” is a relative term, and some of Wood’s political works do turn up the volume. His L.B.J. and Hands images from 1965 turn on the senses that President Lyndon Baines Johnson had blood on his hands because of his inability to stop the war in Vietnam, that he was attempting to “wash his hands of it,” and also that whatever else happened, he was still subject to the agency of U.S. voters and protesters, raising their hands in opposition to the war. Mi Lai Massacre (ca. 1969) graphically encourages viewers to look more closely at the images of atrocities in Vietnam, since these things were done in our names. And the Loudspeaker Collage (1968) is an explicit call to speak out and be counted. The fact that the handprints in this collage derive from those on prehistoric cave walls gives them a certain gravity. In his 1962 book The Eternal Present, historian Siegfried Giedion wrote that such images of the hand “always express a supplication to invisible powers.”

Later works, like Flag and Eagle Pelt (both 1985) and Eagle Pelt Doublet (1985), appropriate the national symbols of America to register a quiet but pronounced protest about the direction in which the country is heading. These images are perennially potent. Critic David Denby recently called the U.S. occupation of Iraq “a dead eagle hanging around our necks.”

The Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 prompted Wood to create Exxon Valdez Series: I Made a List of 62 Water Birds with Color in Their Names, and a host of related pieces. In one of the worst man-made environmental disasters in history, eleven million gallons of crude oil were spilled into Alaska’s Prince William Sound, devastating marine life of all kinds and killing an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 sea birds and 250 bald eagles. Aerial photographs of the heavy sheen of oil on the water’s surface and close-up photographs of oil-coated rocks and dead birds brought the catastrophe into focus.

Characteristic, Wood responded to the disaster with images of great power and subtlety, in his extended series of bird names: Green Heron, Cinnamon Teal, Blue-winged Teal, Golden-eyed Red-throated Loon. One rather anomalous image, Laurie’s Cobble with 1/4 tsp. Asphaltum Spill (1989), is perhaps the most affecting of all. A small round stone covered by a spreading stain of pitch black oil is photographed from above, at close range, which has the effect of monumentalizing it and making it intimate at the same time. In this image, Wood brings the point of irreversibility and responsibility home, into the personal, but ends up making an image that evokes a whole planet blackened by pollution.

Also from this time comes a related series of reflections on the problem of nuclear waste—Baby Loons and Bomb (1987), the Cactus and Cooling Tower doublet (1988-90), Pear Tree Cooling Tower and Apples (1991), and Cooling Tower: With What Will We Store Our Waste (1991)—that are both subtle and devastatingly direct. “I think that art has its greatest effect when it makes people sensitive to life,” Wood has said. “And that’s more important than how well or badly images can stir people to immediate political action. That belief gives me the courage to do the kind of things I do.”

When I met with John Wood in his studio in Ithaca in May 2007, he tried to recall something John Berger had written about poetry being the only real counter to the awful indifference of the world. After I left, I found the quote at the end of Laurie Snyder’s thesis on Wood, where she notes that he often uses the quote to end public presentations about his work. It is from Berger’s 1984 book And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos:

Poetry makes language care because it renders everything intimate. This intimacy is the result of the poem’s labor, the result of the bringing-together-intimacy of every act and noun and event and perspective to which the poem refers. There is often nothing more substantial to place against the cruelty and indifference of the world than this caring.

Wood has always been too modest to apply these last words celebrating the substantial caring of poetry to his own life’s work, but we now can, and do, in retrospect and respect. 

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All images courtesy the artist.