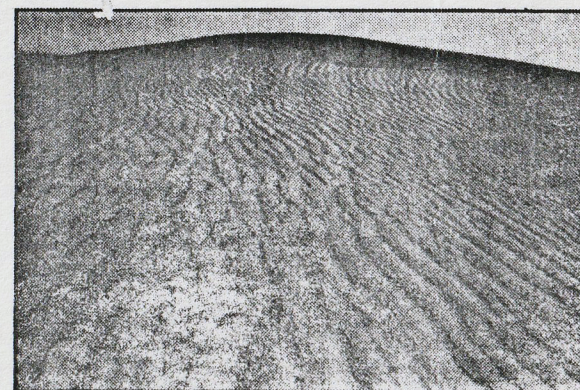


SMOLAN/PITE



SMOLAN/PITE

Midday at the Oasis

Rural North Africa, specifically Maghreb ("... the crescent-shaped region that extends across Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco"), is the subject of photographers Sandy Smolan and Jonathan Pite's monumental multi-image installation at The Hudson River Museum. Between two daily showings (2 and 4 p.m.) of the Carl Sagan/Milton Glaser/Phillip Glass collaborative *Exploration of Mars* (worth the trip itself), visitors can sit back for a close look at Earth. Against a plaintive soundtrack by Edward Giusto, the planetarium's six screens resonate with the contrapuntal play of shadowy images and bright light. The photographers, who spent a half year in the rural desert place, composed the piece along a simple narrative track: a town is visited, an oasis, a goat slaughtered, a beach seen. And always, there is the ocean and the sand. Called *The Maghreb Journals*, the piece shows at 3 p.m. at the Andrus Space Transit Planetarium of The Hudson River Museum, Trevor Park-on-Hudson, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers (call 914-963-4550 for directions; admission \$1.50, children \$1.)

the village

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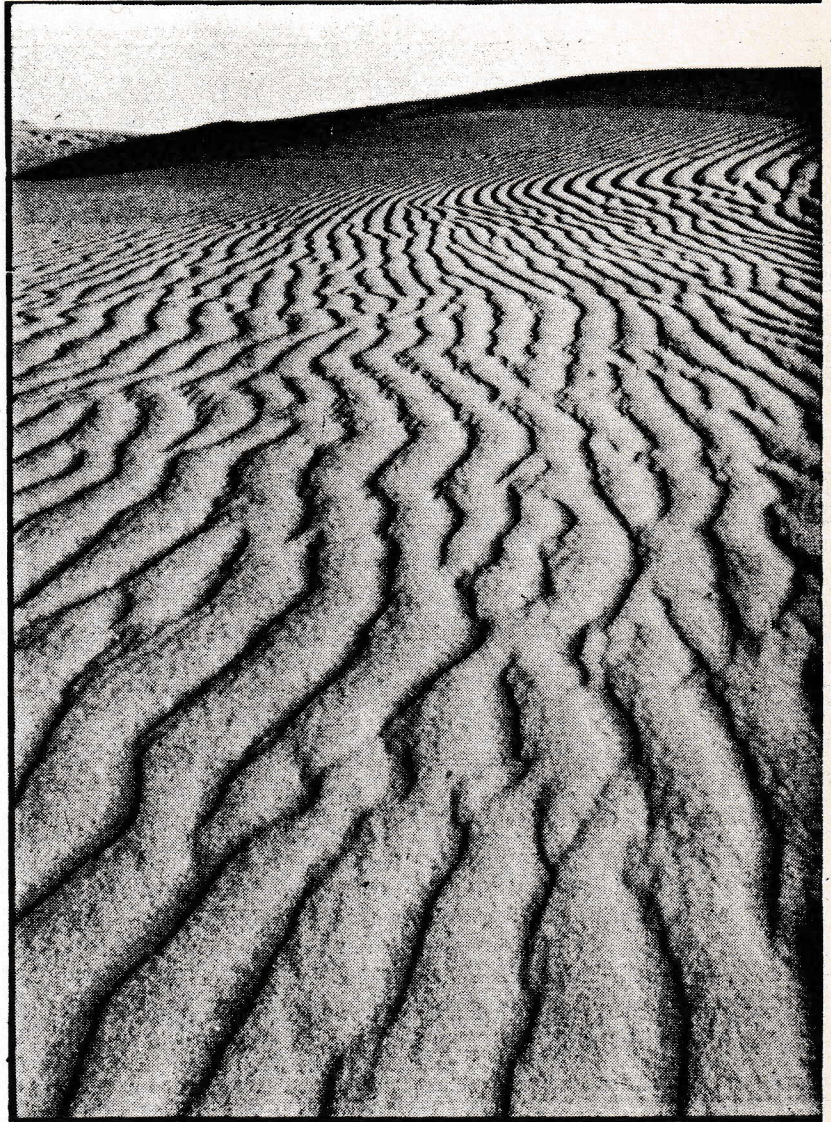
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Maghreb

by Lonnie Legg

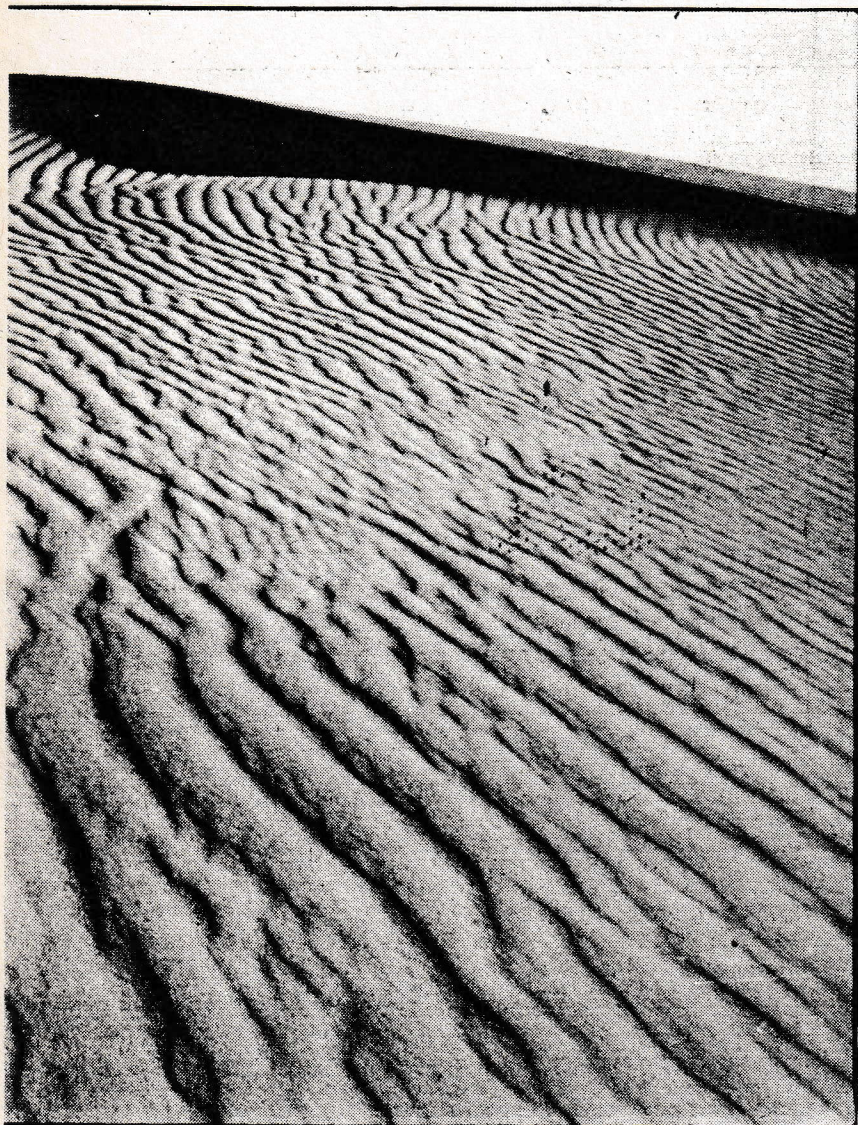
Although I wouldn't consider a trip to Yonkers "getting away from it all," there is a show at the Hudson River Museum (914 963-4550) which is guaranteed to take the chill out of a wintry weekend afternoon. *The Maghreb Journals* is a multi-image environment being presented in the museum's planetarium every Saturday and Sunday at 3 P.M. through February 25. The six-screen work is a stunningly poetic portrait of the journey of the two artists; Sandy Smolan and Jonathan Pite, through the North African Maghreb. On its original soundtrack, Edward Giusto, using a phenomenal range of instrumentation, interweaves music and replicated sounds indigenous to the region, orchestrating the whole to the changing visual patterns. The result of this innovative combination of sight and sound is a truly moving exploration of the emotional qualities of the landscape and of the people who inhabit its towns and villages.

Maghreb, that crescent-shaped region of North Africa which is comprised of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, is a land of striking beauty. All year round, a bright sun bakes the earth and its people. In the south, a dry wind whips and caresses into undulating crests and troughs the ocean desert of sand. Sharp, barren ridges of rock rise defiantly above the Mediterranean to the north and the Atlantic to the west. But *The Maghreb Journals* bear little resemblance to the travelogue compilation of sites and vistas one expects from a piece on such an exotic region. Smolan and Pite have avoided focusing on the spectacular beauty of sunsets, natives in garish dress and splendid cultural monuments, and have stripped away the veneer of romanticism, concentrat-



ing instead on the bare unreconstructed image. The power of its raw, primal beauty works both through the relationships between the separate images and, cumulatively, by evoking in the viewer a mood of serenity and awe.

The piece is not an impersonal record either, despite its objectivity. It is at once too general and too specific. Unlike the anthropological study, the recording of ethnographic detail is a secondary concern in this piece. The scenes the photographers reflect upon could have been taken anywhere in the region and nowhere in the show is reference made to a specific part of Maghreb. The land and the people we see are typical of all Maghreb. The type of landscape may



Magic

order to offer these people their compassion and respect. Gaining the trust of these people and gratefully participating in their daily lives, the two artists provided--in exchange for their hosts' hospitality--their eyes and their craft that the Maghreb people might create a portrait of the profound relationship with the land which shapes their lives.

Often, work which falls in the borderline region between two media (in this case, still photography and motion pictures) not only defines limits of the medium from which the work is derived, but at the same time provides information extending and clarifying our perception of elements of elements at the heart of the medium with which it overlaps. *Journals* provides this sort of perspective to cinema not only through its strong audiovisual dynamics but through its depth of exploration of the potentials of multiple imagery.

This result is the outcome of an initial aesthetic concern on the part of Smolan and Pite regarding the conditions in which photographs

change, but everywhere it is striking. The people, totally immersed in their Moslem faith, have many faces, lead one common life in service to their social order and their land.

The specific side of the work is a reflection of its overall honesty, for though general in its imagery, the overall quality of the work is the product of the particular experiences of these two young American artists. "We wanted to avoid a distant viewpoint that gives a sort of 'happy native' syndrome to portrayals of foreign countries," Smolan declares. Smolan and Pite chose the Maghreb, an easily accessible non-western culture, not for the sake of evaluation or for the assimilation of information, but in

and other art objects and films are ordinarily viewed. Their idea was that the physical distance between the viewer and the piece normally introduces impressions extraneous to the piece itself, modifying its expressive qualities. As a result of these considerations the artists formulated plans for a total sight and sound environment. "Our original idea was to build a room with the images screened on the walls and ceiling. The interrelatedness of the images was important, and we wanted to cut distraction. (A 180-degree presentation on the inside of a planetarium dome) was as close as we could come." Prior to their embarkation on the present North Africa project, their home town Boulder commenced

Smolan-Pite

construction on a planetarium. By the time six months had been spent shooting in North Africa and another six months editing the visuals and composing the score, the structure was near completion, and the first showing of *Journals* was arranged.

Presented on six screens, the piece is arranged around a loose narrative structure; the desert, a visit to a town, an oasis, fishermen at work, the aid or feast of the slaughtered goat. The soundtrack was composed in movements to these events, each movement consisting of two parts: a breathing in (crescendo) and a breathing out (diminuendo). By meticulously programming the twelve projectors--two for each screen being required for the smooth fading in and out of each image--from start to finish, the creators have perfectly orchestrated the combinations of images displayed at each instant during the piece, timing transitions so as to channel attention and producing a rippling of visual rhythms, relationships of ima-

gery, location of image within the array, and the sensitive use of darkened screens set up complex relationships within the mind of the viewer. These associations have the effect of altering the amount of space evoked by a single image and alter the viewer's sense of time and state of emotional arousal. Spaces are contracted, rows of dunes seem to stretch endlessly, and images are endowed with a sense of timelessness. In addition the photographers have interspersed series of shots which pan across or dolly into scenes or simulate motion within the image (e.g. leaves moving in the wind.) Most of the show, however, is straight still photography, yet, nevertheless, the evocation of illusory time and space is essentially cinematic. In fact, the manipulation of time and space is stronger here than in not only almost all of the static-image experimental film work I've seen but a lot of commercial cinematography as well.

Since they both deal with an American experience in a Moslem culture, I



Smolan-Pites

Smolan-Pite



was tempted, in preparing this review, to contrast Pite and Smolan's sincere integrity against the perverse sensation mongering of the blatantly chauvinist *Midnight Express*. However, the article by Tom Hinckley scheduled for the next issue, though less harsh in its indictment than I would have been, saved me from such a comparison, which in any case would not have done justice to *The Maghreb Journals*. The sensitivity and respect of its makers speak for themselves through the moving spirituality of their imagery. Moreover, the successful realization of the potential of the innovative format is strong testimony of the artistic dedication of Pite and Smolan both in the field and in the studio. The work, unique both technically and thematically, is a must for anyone interested in current art and makes one hope to see more of these two artists' work in Manhattan in the near future.

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IN THE GALLERIES



Two different worlds

By GIL REAVILL

This is the story of two photographers, two of their shows, and finally, two different worlds.

Jonathan Pite and Sandy Smolan recently exhibited a "visual essay" called "The Maghreb Journals" at Fiske Planetarium. Pite has a separate exhibition, at Miner's Gallery until the end of the month, of "A Close Look; Enlarged."

Both shows are multi-image — "Maghreb" is a multi-screen slide presentation complete with original score. It is an opulent, richly experimental show, headed for a month-long exhibition at the Hudson River Museum in New York.

The show is the product of the photographer's six-month sojourn in that stretch of the North African coastline called the Maghreb, a crescent-shaped area that extends across Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

NORTH AFRICA is a world well-suited for the frozen drama of film. Nature and tradition have not yet bowed before the juggernaut of modernity (Americanism). The landscapes are harsh, elemental — the mutable, lunar desolation of sand scissars across the blue expanse of the Mediterranean — a habitat not to be molded to human desires and which sometimes irretrievably destroys those

desires.

There is also the illusory romance this region holds for the outsider. It is the land of the open bazaar, veiled women, legal hashish. The land of Camus' *Plague*. The Barbary Coast. Fantasies out of everything from *The Battle of Algiers* to "Ahab the Arab."

Smolan and Pite have stripped away this romanticism and focused instead upon the bare, unreconstructed image, their work intentionally banal but thereby primary and powerful. When the haze of preconception has cleared from the Maghreb, we find a simple, bare-bones sensuality — stark doorways framing ragtag smiles of children, a woman in an exquisite posture before a fire-grate, the artful slaughter of a goat.

"We wanted to avoid a distant viewpoint that gives a sort of 'happy native' syndrome to portrayals of foreign countries," Smolan declares. Accordingly, the two lived as close as possible to an Arab lifestyle, to the extent of suffering intermittent attacks of "moor's revenge," the North African version of the famous Mexican malady.

BUT THE SHOW is more than a travelogue of slides garnered by two tourists. The multi-screen technique is pushed to its experimental limits, adding quasi-cinematic movement to the

stills.

"We were working with how people perceive," Smolan says. Pite adds: "Our original idea was to build a room with the images screened on the walls and ceiling. The inter-relatedness of the images was important and we wanted to cut external distraction. Fiske was as close as we could come."

The show has some narrative structure. A town is visited; an oasis, an *aid* (goat-slaughter), a beach are seen. And always, in between, the dunes, stark, oceanic. Each locale has a series or "movement" structured around it.

The structure of the movements, according to Pite, is "a sort of breathing in and out, a pulse. In each movement there is climax and relaxation."

This effect is helped along by the fine score which Edward Giusto built around the libretto images. The technique here was counterpoint — for example, savage percussion matched with the serene, sepulchral visuals of the dunes.
