

JAY MARK JOHNSON

THE PERCEPTIONS OF SPACETIME: THE CETONA MERCATO

by BARRY BARISH

This exhibit of Jay Mark Johnson shows very appealing, beautiful and familiar images of Cetona, but viewed from a very different perspective. Having had the pleasure of staying a week in Cetona this past summer and being very familiar after spending many pleasant hours in Garibaldi Piazza, I particularly relate to the images of the “Mercato” with people arriving and departing, shopping and socializing, as the weekly Saturday morning event unfolds.

The mercato images show dozens of people with their shopping bags and carts and vehicles (tiny cars, pickup trucks, motorbikes, etc), all migrating purposefully to the market. This represents a small slice of an event where the whole village participates in the mercato at nearly the same time and all in the piazza. Jay’s images show this changing scene as viewed over a short period on a Saturday morning by scanning the scene in time with the use of a slit camera. What results are powerful images of a busy changing scene viewed as the scan unfolds.

The final images looks both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, giving them special intrigue. There are no tricks! These are true renditions of what the eyes saw while observing the mercato, so it is familiar. But, we are not used to seeing time and space intermixed in the way where they are displayed together as in these photos.

They are visual delights, and they make one wonder about what really is space and time and how and why do we perceive them the way we do. Interestingly, a non scientific description of what space and time are all about is captured in the pithy remark that “time exists so that everything doesn’t happen all at once, while space exists so that everything doesn’t happen to you.” Of course at the mercato, everyone doesn’t come at exactly the same time nor do they go to exactly the same spot in the market.

As a scientist, I probably react to these images a little differently than many viewers. To me they capture in a wonderful way the deep connection between space and time, and that nature can be beautiful when viewed in unconventional ways.. Albert Einstein once said, “The ordinary adult never gives a thought to space-time problems.... I, on the contrary, developed so slowly that I did not begin to wonder about space and time until I was an adult. I then delved more deeply into the problem than any other adult or child would have done.”

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Nobel laureate James Franck, in talking about Einstein and his theory of general relativity said that “it is usually children, not adults, who reflect on space-time problems.” Maybe that is true, because children are so free and uninhibited.

Madeleine L'Engle, a famous author who recently died, actually wrote a most successful children's book on exactly this theme of spacetime, which she titled, “A Wrinkle in Time.” It tells the imaginative and playful account of the rescue of a father through time travel and other exotic phenomena, all of which can be contemplated in Einstein's world.

The playful images by Jay Mark Johnson of a perfectly ordinary event, the Saturday mercato, bring out for adults like me, much of the same playfulness, imagination and creativity that we could freely access when we were children. Perhaps they can inspire us all to think more about space and time in ways where we can create real images that are at least as appealing and interesting as those with space and time separated.

I leave you with one last quote from Einstein. He once said, “One thing I have learned in a long life: that all our science, measured against reality, is primitive and childlike—and yet it is the most precious thing we have.” Thanks, Jay, for showing us just such reality and beauty in your photos that are on display in this wonderful exhibit.

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