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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW;

A Master of the Frame: Intricate Compositions From Lee Friedlander

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Ample evidence of Lee Friedlander's importance in contemporary photography can be found this summer in New York City, where his quirky black-and-white images have been featured in four exhibitions, three of which are still on view. This profusion of shows demonstrates, to anyone who still needs convincing, that Mr. Friedlander is one of the current masters of the medium, as well as one of its most versatile and prolific practitioners.

The Museum of Modern Art is presenting pictures from Mr. Friedlander's most recent book, "Letters From the People," published last year by Distributed Art Publishers, while a selection of Mr. Friedlander's work from the late 1960's appears at the Pace/MacGill Gallery. His images are also included in a survey of photographs of graffiti on view at the Zabriskie Gallery. Earlier this summer, the Robert Miller Gallery exhibited landscapes taken by Mr. Friedlander under a commission from the Canadian Center for Architecture, to document parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.

The show at the Modern offers a virtuosic demonstration of Mr. Friedlander's command of the formal elements of photography. In both book and exhibition, he proceeds methodically through the letters of the alphabet and numbers, recording everyday examples found in signs, posters and other public manifestations; at the museum the pictures are stacked high, turning the walls into crazy marquees.

Mr. Friedlander is a master of the frame, the fact that a photograph nearly always includes more details, telling or not, than the photographer expects. Whereas a painter can decide to leave out background incidents if they seem out of keeping with the painting's main subject or overall mood, a photographer must take them into account, and adjust the image accordingly.

As he has done throughout his career, Mr. Friedlander turns this characteristic to his own advantage in his new work, using each letter or numeral as a pretext for a formal arabesque. Sloppily scribbled or printed in different typefaces, the letters have distinctive personalities to begin with; Mr. Friedlander incorporates them into intricate compositions built on complex spatial and tonal relationships.

In one image, a blocky A on a sign is shadowed by the ghost of a painted-over B beneath it, while in another a B on a restaurant window is juxtaposed with the diners inside. In a third, a C, written in spray paint, drips down a wood panel as if encrusted with moss. When he's finished with the alphabet, Mr. Friedlander performs similar transformations on numbers, from 1 to 9 and beyond, and then on words, phrases and whole walls filled with writing.

The pictures include flashes of Mr. Friedlander's rude humor, as in a shot of an airplane nuzzling one loop of a figure 8 painted on an airport window. Elsewhere the tone is exuberant; a white S appears on a black ground covered with white scratches like sparks of energy.

Some signs feature political tracts and pungent scatological messages, but others are surprisingly tender: "I Love You" is scratched into the soaped windows of a store under construction. This grand river of language breaks down at the end into torrents of disconnected words and letters appearing on walls and light posts, an urgent babble of messages drowned out by one another.

Mr. Friedlander first achieved fame as a street photographer whose images, related to Pop Art, offered an ironic depiction of the underside of the American scene. The sociological dimension of his work can be seen most clearly here in the photos of phrases and sentences, some of which are like folk poetry and hint at the personalities of the people who wrote them.

For all the pleasures offered by the Modern show, these pictures work best as a book, where the sequence of pages reflects the forward thrust of the project. "Letters From the People" is the 13th in the string of distinguished books Mr. Friedlander has produced since 1969; nearly all have made effective use of book design and picture sequencing to heighten the impact of individual images.

People unfamiliar with Mr. Friedlander's long career may want to stop at Pace/MacGill to see examples of his early work, alongside selections of images by Garry Winogrand and Diane Arbus, before going to the Modern. They may also visit the Zabriskie Gallery afterward to see how his pictures relate to those of other contemporaries.

Taken together, these shows demonstrate Mr. Friedlander's mastery of the game of chance and discovery, which has been a central creative strategy for photographers in this century. They suggest that despite his long-treasured position as an outsider, he may have become the closest thing around to a grand old man of the medium.

"Lee Friedlander: Letters From the People" remains at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, Manhattan, through Sept. 11, while "1969: Context and Event" is at the Pace/MacGill Gallery, 32 East 57th Street, through Sept. 2. "Graffiti" remains at the Zabriskie Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue, near 57th Street, through Sept. 8.