

The New York Times

A Sly Virtuoso in Praise of Just Plain America

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Published: June 3, 2005



Museum of Modern Art

"To Those Who Made the Supreme Sacrifice, Bellows Falls, Vermont" (1971)

IN Lee Friedlander's view of Lake Louise, snow-capped mountains loom over a pine forest tumbling down to the shore. Mountains, trees and a puff of clouds, perfectly poised over the farthest peak, reflect in the water, making an hourglass pattern, a Rorschach, out of half of the photograph. The other half is a jumble of boulders: dozens, in as many shades of gray, echoing the mountains.



Museum of Modern Art
"Galax, Virginia" (1962)

The image is dense, nearly abstract - and frenetic. "Like Ansel Adams on crack," somebody said. Mr. Friedlander picked a miraculous spot from which to shoot his Canadian vista where the reflected curve of a distant, bosomy-shaped outcropping mirrors a rock in the foreground, the two nearly kissing in the picture, collapsing depth. Complicated but gorgeous, the photograph presumes that viewers have brains in their heads and wish to use them. This pretty much describes Mr. Friedlander's retrospective, opening Sunday at the Museum of Modern Art, which, with nearly 500 photographs, is big and relentless. So is Mr. Friedlander's talent, which may partly remind you of Auden's great remark that "every 'original' genius" has something "a bit shady about him."

In Mr. Friedlander's case, that's a compliment. Photography is also a bit shady, after all. As Mr. Friedlander once put it: "I only wanted Uncle Vern standing by his new car (a Hudson) on a clear day. I got him and the car. I also got a bit of Aunt Mary's laundry, and Beau Jack, the dog, peeing on a fence, and a row of potted tuberous begonias on the porch and 78 trees and a million pebbles in the driveway and more. It's a generous medium, photography." Now 70, Mr. Friedlander made a splash nearly 40 years ago, along with Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand in a show at the Modern called "New Documents," put together by John Szarkowski. After that, he became a regular at the museum, the subject of three exhibitions before now.

His retrospective, organized by Peter Galassi, Mr. Szarkowski's successor as chief curator of photography, argues in full his standing as a major American artist of the last half-century and defines his voluminous legacy. Steeped in Walker Evans and Robert Frank, Mr. Friedlander chose the American vernacular scene in the broadest sense as his *métier*, then embraced all the duplicities, sleights of hand, dumb-luck rolls of the dice and other sly pleasures of his medium.

With Winogrand's appetite and aplomb but with fewer neuroses than either Winogrand or Arbus; without Mr. Frank's anger or Evans's caustic wit - just by being rather cool and nonchalant, he has, over the years, refined a mischievous but fundamentally rigorous and unforgiving style. Is that a bed in the middle of a street, or the reflection of a street in the window of a furniture store? His best works have always required a second or third glance, which is, not coincidentally, the point about much of what he photographs.

Clever jigsaw puzzles, his pictures frequently reveal themselves to be laconic, austere poems to what Mr. Friedlander has termed "the American social landscape," meaning mostly ordinary places and affairs, in which his camera uncovers not just a ripe and haunting chaos but also comic grace.

You can see it early in the show in his familiar "monument" series, from the 70's, surveying statues and plaques, obelisks and reliefs, those ubiquitous and often forlorn objects dotting city parks and lingering on traffic islands, like overdressed wallflowers at a prom, waiting to be noticed.

Mr. Friedlander undertook to shoot monuments when patriotism in America was at a low point and cynicism was high. He photographs a statue of Andrew Jackson on horseback so as to make the former president look as if he's shooing away pigeons, a statue of a doughboy as if he's stalking two women on a sidewalk in Stamford, Conn. He photographs the Gateway Arch in St. Louis so that it resembles a stream of urine coming from the flagpole on the state capitol building, a picture more fetching and funnier than it sounds.

And he finds a granite statue of a warrior-goddess clasping a sword and shield (the statue is dedicated "to those who made the supreme sacrifice") on a grassy hill in a small town in Vermont - one of those ludicrous, provincial imitations of Athena meant to convey civic grandeur. A matron carrying a handbag crosses the empty street behind the statue, as if about to replace the goddess and take her own turn on the pedestal. It's a sight gag, of course. But it ends up, in Mr. Friedlander's typically matter-of-fact, allusive fashion, quietly praising rural rectitude.

Mr. Galassi calls this hipster wit, to convey Mr. Friedlander's breezy humor, although the hipster is clearly bound up with the traditionalist. The pictures, as Mr. Galassi points out, glance variously backward toward predecessors like Paul Strand (in a baroque series about factory workers), and to other luminaries, before doing very much their own thing.

In the vein of Henri Cartier-Bresson, for instance, Mr. Friedlander maintains a polite distance when he takes portraits (these aren't his best works), except when the subject is himself. Then he tries out all sorts of weird angles, suggestive shadows, ridiculous spatial eruptions and distorting close-ups. A headboard becomes a hairpiece and he turns into an aging Elvis. He hides behind a thicket of branches like St. Francis in the wilderness. The affect is pitiful, slack and clearly put on. Heart-on-sleeve emotion is not Mr. Friedlander's m.o., fortunately.

Instead, he turns a common blunder of amateur shutterbugs - photographing something nearby with one's back to the sun - into a sublime and irreverent leitmotif. His shadow plays the role of alter ego, sticking to the back of a woman's fur collar, clinging to a lamppost as a parade of drum majorettes passes by, reclining like a stuffed doll on a chair, or catching in a revolving door. A conceptual angle involves photography's putative realism, Mr. Friedlander's shadow giving the lie to the standard notion that photographs are windows onto the world - mute, not manipulated, images.

He came to this position just in time. Mr. Friedlander grew up during the heyday of magazine photojournalism, when famous photographers were documentarians and self-appointed moralizers or they shot fashion spreads. Hardly anybody took them seriously as artists.

Born in the small town of Aberdeen, Wash., trained briefly in Los Angeles, he started out, in the mid-50's, making portraits of jazz musicians for magazines and record covers (color portraits, the only color photographs in the show); and he did that even after the Modern cottoned to his work. Mr. Friedlander didn't photograph poverty or children; he shot parking lots and telephone booths and torn chicken wire fences and glowing television sets in dark, empty rooms, eerie, noirish pictures that looked like collages.

He was, consciously or not, in sync with big cultural and social changes that would gradually transform the status of photography as art, just as they would alter the character of the country. Pop artists like James Rosenquist and Robert Rauschenberg were, at the time, devising their own deadpan, ironic *mélanges* of everyday detritus. While they were thumbing their noses at the Abstract Expressionists, Mr. Friedlander was turning up his collar to the woolly sentimentality of "Family of Man" photography, deciding, as Mr. Galassi writes in the show's catalog, that the meanings of the world are "too complicated, and too precious, to be subjected to a prepackaged morality."

Which they obviously are. So in pictures like the one he took in 1972, of a dog sitting at a vacant street corner in Albuquerque, N.M., what results is not a moral parable, although it is, in its regard of the mundane, uplifting. The picture shows a weedy intersection, with a parking lot across the street, a nondescript house next to the parking lot, a hotel or blocky low-rise apartment building in the background, some traffic lights and telephone poles cluttering up the middle distance, and the hood of a parked car jutting into the frame from one side. It's hard to make out the sign on a roadside stand (is it Dog House?).

Nobody is around except the dog, and in the early morning, or maybe it's late afternoon, the slanting sun multiplies the geometry of intersecting lines (all those poles and wires) by throwing long shadows onto the sidewalk. This is the picture's basic formal point: that there's an uncanny logic, a kind of native visual order, to urbanscapes and other nowhere places in America that we fail to, or choose not to, look at - which we pass through to get to where we're really going.

What clinches the picture - its punchline - are the several shadows that make barking dog shapes. Did Mr. Friedlander see them when the shutter released? No doubt. The effect is another pun, rewarding our patient scrutiny while conveying Mr. Friedlander's dry-eyed respect for this sort of desolate and derelict place and for the camera's ability to remake it. That street corner in Albuquerque is no thing of beauty (nor is it meant to look like one), but, transformed into a two-dimensional, black-and-white image, it acquires an eloquence that is a thing of beauty.

Noticing these little visual miracles, one by one, is not easy in a show whose overwhelming size is meant to prove Mr. Friedlander's capacious energy and the persistence of his favorite themes. The exhibition ends with his landscapes, which alone are almost too much to take in. During the early 90's, Mr. Friedlander traded in his Leica for a Superwide Hasselblad. It produces big, square-format pictures, tonally rich, phenomenally detailed, ideally suited to the Western views he started to make.

Like that one of Lake Louise, the best of these photographs announce themselves as wild spectacles. They're wild the way nature is wild. In the density of their information (Mr. Friedlander calls it "embroidery"), they relate to the city scenes. And like those scenes, they're about vernacular America: purple mountain majesties and fruited plains, but minus the transcendence and flag waving. Ornate, devouring everything in sight, they let Mr. Friedlander get back to his Western roots without succumbing to any hint of nostalgia.

Wonderment may be close to the mark. But not wonderment about nature or clichéd America so much as wonderment about how weird a photograph can look - how, like the world, it can remain incredibly strange and unfathomable. As Mr. Friedlander neatly said, it is a generous medium, photography.

Correction: June 11, 2005, Saturday:

A photography review in Weekend on June 3 about the Lee Friedlander retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art misidentified a building shown in a photograph that also includes the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. It is the city's Old Courthouse. (The State Capitol is in Jefferson City, Mo.)