

Mining a Rich Lode of Photographs

By Taylor Holliday

One of the best-kept secrets of this mountain-ringed, cactus-studded Western town is its claim to the widest and deepest mine of photographic history in the U.S.

Tucson is home to the Center for Creative Photography, founded at the University of Arizona 30 years ago by none other than Western-wilderness-photo icon Ansel Adams to preserve the work of America's greatest photographers. Today its holdings include 80,000 photographs by thousands of men and women, as well as the complete archives of 50 masters, including Adams, Edward Weston, Garry Winogrand, W. Eugene Smith and Richard Avedon.

Envisioned by Adams as a complementary institution to museum photo departments—which focus on collecting singular works and masterpieces of the art form—the CCP is first and foremost a place to study photographic history, housing not only great works of art but also photographers' personal papers; articles and books written about them; and evidence

**HARRY CALLAHAN:
THE PHOTOGRAPHER AT WORK**

Center for Creative Photography
Through May 7

Exhibit then travels to the Art Institute
of Chicago from June 24 to Sept. 24

of their working process such as negatives, contact sheets and proof prints.

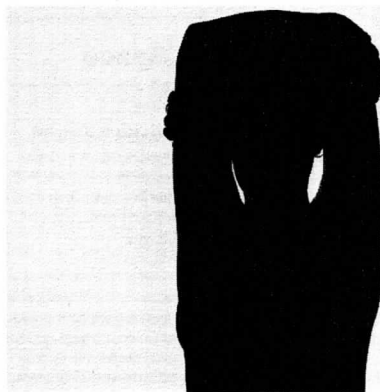
Its role as a mecca for photo insiders, however, does not keep the center from sharing its treasures with the general public. As well as the archives and a large photographic library open to the public, it has a state-of-the-art gallery on the university campus where it displays exhibitions before sending them on the road to other museums.

"Harry Callahan: The Photographer at Work" (up through May 7), which will travel to the Art Institute of Chicago from June 24 to Sept. 24, is a landmark show for the center, a close look at exactly how the creator of one of its first archives—an unassuming, reticent, in many ways conventional Midwestern photographer—became one of the great innovators of modern American photography.

Callahan (1912-1999) is known for concentrating on a very few subjects (nature, buildings and people, as he summarized them) over his long career and yet never becoming repetitive, always finding a new way to approach them. Along with Aaron Siskind, Frederick Sommer and Wynn Bullock, he was one of the founding photographers of the CCP, invited by Adams to leave his legacy in Arizona alongside his.

"It's analogous to having Picasso's complete archive and his [painter] friends' complete archives as well as their letters to each other," said Amy Rule, the center's head of research.

As others have pointed out, Callahan is one of the least well-known of photographers of his stature—even though he has had numerous high-profile exhibitions, including a 1996 retrospective at the National Gallery of Art that toured the country's major museums.



Callahan was known for concentrating on just a few subjects. One of his favorites was his wife, Eleanor, shown above in silhouette.

Perhaps it is because he was one of the least self-promoting. Though he worked with the center from 1975 until his death to create his archive and leave a master set of exhibition prints, and therefore understood the importance of creating an in-depth record of his career, he nonetheless declined to talk much about his work, saying, "To make a statement would be against my nature." And he left almost no written records—no diaries, letters, scrapbooks or, most surprisingly, teaching notes, though he spent 30 years teaching photography, at avant-garde painter-photographer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's Institute of Design, or New Bauhaus, in Chicago and at the Rhode Island School of Design.

What Callahan did leave behind was an extraordinary number of negatives (more than 100,000) and proof prints (more than 10,000). His career stretched from the late 1930s to the 1990s. And his working method was to go out almost every morning, walk the city he lived in and shoot, shoot, shoot. The highly disciplined photographer then spent most every afternoon making proof prints, or test prints, of that day's best negatives.

"What this show became I could never have predicted," said Britt Salvesen, center curator and exhibition organizer. Letting the primary source material in the archive dictate the show, instead of vice versa, Ms. Salvesen was able to reconstruct Callahan's working process and creative breakthroughs, his relentless experimentation behind the camera as well as specific choices and decisions leading to a final exhibition print. (In black-and-white photography, it typically takes many test prints to arrive at the perfect final print.)

Due to the archive's size, curating a show from it "has its overwhelming aspects, certainly," she said. "We use the proofing process to understand him. But when counts get into the thousands and tens of thousands, you have to make choices. I concentrate on one period, place or theme at a time. Or I can dip into and out of the archive. I also rely on serendipity. If I find something, I go with it. It's either that or reschedule the exhibit for 2025."

Among the 124 prints and accompanying archival material in the exhibit are some rare and revealing words from Callahan about one of his most famous early images, "Weeds in Snow" (1943), which is just that—weed fronds sticking up out of a blanket of snow—but looks more like an

abstract line drawing.

"I tried to print [it] like a so-called 'classic' print—tone, texture and all that—and [it] didn't look any good...and finally I printed [it] contrasty, very black and white, which was sort of anti what Ansel was talking about, not at all classic. And that turned out to be what I was after, and I hadn't known it," he

told an interviewer years later, describing his break from Adams, who had been his first inspiration.

Callahan was credited with creating a synthesis of the romanticism of Adams and the experimental formalism of Moholy-Nagy. An 8x10 negative of some trees by the Chicago lakefront, shown in a framed light box next to an exhibition print of it, demonstrates how he darkened the trees, intentionally suppressing negative detail through high-contrast printing to convey both a formal meaning (the graphic contrast of black against white) and a romantic, symbolic one (the stark loneliness of winter).

Contact sheets (unenlarged prints of strips of negatives) of female pedestrians in Detroit and Chicago, shot furtively and fanatically in the 1940s and '50s, allow one to follow his attempts to capture telling tales in their faces. By recognizing the negatives Callahan chose to make exhibition prints of, the gallery visitor can see how the photographer distinguished between successes and failures.

Numerous prints of his wife, Eleanor, his most famous recurrent subject, along with proof prints and negatives, reveal not only his career-long dedication to subject and themes but his experimentation with multiple exposures, high-key lighting, the snapshot aesthetic and color photography.

The revelations continue in the Yale University Press catalog. For example, for all his dedicated, dogged work, Callahan produced, he estimated, a half-dozen final images a year. As the archive, and this smart show, make clear, the self-taught, regular-guy Callahan was living proof that perseverance is the key to greatness.

But even the most complete archive can't answer all questions. So the CCP builds on its holdings with educational programs such as the recent Harry Callahan symposium, which brought some of the country's top photography historians and curators together with Callahan's family, gallerists and former students, such celebrated photographers as Emmet Gowin and Linda Conner.

As the symposium discussion veered into digital photography and its dominance, the center's importance as a keeper of the history of film photography came even more clearly into focus.

Ms. Holliday writes about travel and the arts.