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Revisiting Some Well-Eyed Streets



Estate of Garry Winogrand/Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
Garry Winogrand's "New York World's Fair" (1964), part of a retrospective of his work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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The photographer Garry Winogrand refreshed classic street photography in the 1960s and '70s, influenced by (and influencing) the increasingly warped sensibility that had started to shape the broader culture. Using a snapshot style, he captured the nation's unseemly nervous breakdown in stark black and white.

Since his death in 1984 at 56, though, Mr. Winogrand's reputation has waned. But one of the goals of an ambitious exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is to restore and clarify Winogrand's place in 20th-century photography, to offer viewers the chance to re-evaluate Winogrand's unruly and grand oeuvre.

"Garry Winogrand," which runs in San Francisco through June 2, is the largest Winogrand retrospective ever mounted and the first major United States museum show of his work since 1988. It is scheduled to travel next year to the National Gallery of Art in Washington (which helped organize it), the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Jeu de Paume in Paris.

The show, organized by the photographer Leo Rubinfien, traces the arc of Winogrand's career, from the ebullience of his early New York pictures to the much darker vision of the late work. In "Day of the Dead" (about 1979), for example, a woman is sprawled at the side of a road in Los Angeles as a Porsche moves past.

Mr. Rubinfien was a star-struck 20-year-old student in 1974 when he met Winogrand, who became his mentor. His deep familiarity with Winogrand's work gives him an appreciation of its dual nature.

"One side is a great exuberant warmth, a love of the plebeian energy of American life," he said, "and the other side is a persistent despair, that it's all out of control and that it will end up badly. The two are so welded to each other that in any one of the best photos, you don't know whether to feel elated or horrified, and you feel both."

Mr. Rubinfien pored over 22,000 contact sheets and close to a million pictures to find the 275 images in the exhibition. Nearly half of the photographs have not been shown before. And the exhibition reflects Winogrand's outsize ambitions. "I don't always think more is better, but in this case, having a lot of pictures helps us understand the depth and breadth of his vision," said Erin O'Toole, an assistant curator of photography at the San Francisco Modern who contributed to the show's catalog. (With more than 400 pages, it was published by Yale University Press.)

Mr. Rubinfien said the exhibition grew out of an urge to remind people of Winogrand's true standing among 20th-century photographers. "I did this because no one else was doing it," he said.

It's not that Winogrand lacks advocates. "When you look at the history of 20th-century photography, in terms of people who brought something different and shaped an era, you think about Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans — and you also think Garry," said Maria Morris Hambourg, an adjunct curator at the Museum of Modern Art and the founding curator of the photography department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "He was in that circle of specially talented seers without whom you can't quite imagine the century."

She suggested that his reputation may have declined partly because of his influence on younger photographers. "Once you change the way people look at the world," she said, "other people build on that."

Mr. Rubinfien also said that the "tremendous disarray" of Winogrand's archives and estate when he died has also made his legacy difficult to define, when compared to others in his photographic generation like Lee Friedlander, Robert Frank and Diane Arbus.

"Garry had a wild energy, very intense, very fast at shooting," Mr. Friedlander, who was a close friend of Winogrand's, wrote in an e-mail. "I've never known anyone to outwit him, either verbally or photographically."



Garry Winogrand, about 1967-68.

Courtesy Eileen Adele Hale



Estate of Garry Winogrand/Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
Winogrand's "John F. Kennedy International Airport,
New York (1968).

Winogrand was born and raised in the Bronx, but he moved west, helping to chronicle the country's suburban shift along the way. His savvy, often-off-kilter eye was equally at home in airports, at livestock shows and on whatever frenetic street he happened to find himself on. Sometimes carrying two cameras, Winogrand shot a vast number of pictures — he left more than 6,600 rolls of unprinted film when he died — and didn't worry much about organizing them. "The world isn't tidy; it's a mess," he once said. "I don't try to make it neat."

Looming over Winogrand's legacy is the influence of the longtime director of photography at the Museum of Modern

Art, John Szarkowski. He included Winogrand in an important 1967 exhibition, "New Documents," alongside Arbus and Mr. Friedlander, and was his most significant institutional champion.

But Szarkowski thought Winogrand's work fell off after the early 1970s. In the posthumous 1988 Winogrand show at the Modern, "Figments From the Real World," Szarkowski gave the late work short shrift. That retrospective came to be the definitive view of Winogrand, but one that Mr. Rubinien questioned.

"My journey was to find out, was Szarkowski right about the late work?" he said. "There was a weakening, it's true, but in spite of that it has its own very powerful, bleak character."

"Garry Winogrand" features about 60 late pictures. To prepare for the show, Mr. Rubinien burrowed into the Winogrand holdings at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson. "If you had asked me before this project what his greatest period was, I would have said 1966-70," he said. "But now I'm convinced it was 1960-64."

Mr. Rubinien also included a previously overlooked gem, a 1961 image of three fashionable women sporting towering bouffants as they cross a New York street. Selecting such pictures was agonizing, Mr. Rubinien said, since the show carries more emotional weight for him than it would for most curators.

"It's enormously poignant for me," he said. "Respect isn't a deep enough word for my feeling about Garry. It's more like belief."