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Fruits of a Scavenger's Eye

'Nationality Doubtful': The first U.S. retrospective on Josef Koudelka since 1988.

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Josef Koudelka:
Nationality Doubtful
Art Institute of Chicago
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Had Josef Koudelka never done anything but "Gypsies," his 1960s photographs of the Roma in his native Czechoslovakia, he would have justified his time on earth.

It's a series the 76-year-old has never stopped editing, producing several book versions over the past 40 years. One of the virtues of his newest retrospective, "Nationality Doubtful," co-organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and the J. Paul Getty Museum, is that we can more easily see why he wouldn't want to let the project go.

This career survey is roughly chronological, and the first room suggests that the young Mr. Koudelka already had two traits crucial for a photojournalist's success: peripatetic nosiness and a scavenger's eye. Images of a spiked coil of bramble on a beach in Poland (1958) and of a beach-goer in Italy standing on one leg while wrestling on (or off?) a pair of shorts (1961) reveal an early affinity with Henri Cartier-Bresson, an artist with whom he would later forge strong professional and personal ties.

Another group of pictures from the mid-1960s, when Mr. Koudelka was documenting Prague's avant-garde theater for a small magazine, shows him experimenting with blurred or attenuated focus and harsh black-and-white contrast. He has credited his being around the stage, watching the gestures of actors, with training him for "shooting real-life situations."

These lessons were certainly put to good use in the Roma camps of rural Czechoslovakia, a series he began in 1961-62. Unlike Cartier-Bresson's typically furtive, sidelong glimpses of strangers in the street, Mr. Koudelka's encounters with his subjects are performative, face-to-face. An almost electric current of

trust and appreciation flows between his receptive lens and the Roma children mugging for the camera, the solitary teens leaning against a wall or the stoic elders seated like royalty on wooden chairs.

If the bands of musicians, prostitutes and horse traders appear poor and dirty but also cheeky and strong, that may be because the photographer was too. Like Béla Bartók transcribing the songs of Hungarian peasants, Mr. Koudelka was not just being an ethnographer but feeding an ambition he didn't know he had and that might otherwise have dissipated. His acceptance by the people in these camps, which he visited for weeks at a time over the course of seven years, resulted in hundreds of pictures.

The first prints that visitors see here are regrettably of more historic than aesthetic value. Dating from his first solo show in Prague in 1967, they are mounted borderless on board, a style that was popular then, giving them a slick luster. The series nonetheless became his "calling card," in the words of AIC curator Matthew S. Witkovsky, both within Czech art circles during the '60s and even more so beyond its borders after the Soviet-led invasion in 1968, when Mr. Koudelka fled the country and became somewhat of a gypsy himself.

Mr. Witkovsky's installation marks this defining event in the artist's biography with a corridor that splits the show in two, as if dividing his work into "before" and "after." The corridor walls are lined with Mr. Koudelka's photographs of the Czech resistance, taken with feverish intensity between Aug. 21 and 27, 1968.

These documents of mass protests in Prague, when unarmed young people jumped atop tanks in the streets, may be his most famous pictures in the U.S. First published in magazines in London and New York on the first anniversary of the invasion, they became the basis for a CBS News report by Walter Cronkite. The report plays on a monitor here beside an array of Mr. Koudelka's photos of the graffiti and posters that would cover the city at night and be torn down by Warsaw Pact troops the next day.

Mr. Koudelka was by that time a refugee in England. For many years his authorship of the 1968 images was protected under the pseudonym of "P.P." ("Prague Photographer.") He soon resumed his "Gypsies" project by visiting Roma camps in England, France, Ireland and Spain, trying to merge fresh impressions with the original impulse into a new, definitive book. Its many redactions can be seen in vitrines around the show, while one room offers a more satisfying group of prints made in 1968-69.

Following Mr. Koudelka's career isn't a simple task, and the choppy installation doesn't make it any easier. Did he ever take a color photograph and, if not, why? The issue isn't addressed here. But wall texts are blessedly kept to a minimum, and the catalog is outstanding.

In a pair of catalog essays Mr. Witkovsky examines the many editorial fingerprints on "Gypsies" and compares Mr. Koudelka's style with that of his less-celebrated Czech colleagues Markéta Luskačová and Dagmar Hochová. Amanda Maddox from the Getty has done research on the artist's fugitive years in England (1969-84), when he seldom had a permanent address and owned little more than a sleeping bag, a toothbrush, eyeglasses, a few sets of clothes, two cameras and lots of film.

The photographs that he shot in the 1970s and '80s on travels around Europe, collected in his 1988 book, "Exiles," are as eloquent and startling as anything from his Czech years. Ireland yielded several classic images, including a portrait of three kneeling men on a stormy beach that has the solemnity of a presentation of the Maji. France, of which Mr. Koudelka became a citizen in 1987, offered happy hunting, too. An animal silhouetted in the snow at the Parc de Sceaux is recognizably a dog but also looks like an alien creature from another dimension. A dead crow hanging on a wire against a wheat field recasts Van Gogh's symbols in an even darker light.

No curator has solved the problem of exhibiting Mr. Koudelka's panoramic landscapes. Show too many, and their rocky barrenness can stupefy; show too few, and a format that has preoccupied the photographer since 1986 will be unfairly represented.

Mr. Witkovsky's solution isn't the answer. Segregating the majority of these works in a room across the hallway may sound reasonable in theory. But lining the walls with layouts from a select few of his 12 panoramic books, such as "Black Triangle" (1994) and "Wall" (2013), and joining them with a handful of mammoth inkjet prints, compromises both. And while it's hard enough to view small, offset images in ribbony lines displayed above eye level, it's impossible when the contemplative mood in the room is

interrupted by loud screams from Bruce Nauman's brutalist video "Clown Torture" playing in the next gallery.

That said, the retrospective provides a useful X-ray of Mr. Koudelka's sensibility. Almost every landscape here was shot at sea level or on plateaus, and almost nothing above the tree line. He seems continually drawn to water (oceans, rivers, beaches), to scrubby woodland, to walls of cement or to ancient piles of stone.

Puzzling as ever, however, is why this gregarious photographer, with friends around the globe, has largely excluded humanity from his published work now for more than 25 years. "Where are the people?" Cartier-Bresson once asked after reviewing his friend's panoramas. Mr. Koudelka has every right to picture earth's vacant landscapes, but it's not sentimental to expect that his camera's spacious frames might accommodate some inquisitive children or a misbehaving dog or two among the ruins.

Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.

Image: Slovakia (Rakúsy) (1966, printed 1967), from 'Gypsies.' Josef Koudelka/Manum
Photos/Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery