

PACE/MACGILL GALLERY

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Irving Penn: Uncommon Elegance

by James Servin



A year and a month after **Irving Penn**'s death at age 92, the innovative, ferociously creative and exceedingly disciplined photographer is being honored with a show that shines a light on his personal musings and the inner mechanisms of his far-reaching talent. The more than 20 prints on display in "Archaeology," which opens today at the Pace/MacGill Gallery, offer respite from the finely wrought glamour portraits (and even more pristine Clinique advertisements) Penn is known for, lending instead a view into the workroom of an artist's mind, with results that are elegant and arresting, even when the subjects are a stack of bones, a decaying skull or a decomposing pear strategically arranged with cherries on smashed porcelain.

Organic, everyday subjects were nothing new to Penn, noted **Peter MacGill**, president of the gallery, which began representing Penn in 1987, nearly a decade after "Archaeology" was completed. "Look at what he was doing between 1949 and 1950; he was photographing the most beautiful women in the world and the most important literary figures during the day for *Vogue*, and then at night he was shooting portraits of art-school models," said MacGill. "The photographs he did for Condé Nast were beautiful, usually small gelatin-silver prints. The prints he did at night were on 16" x 24" paper—huge—and they were radically toned and developed. If he had four cylinders, he fired on twelve."

Intensely productive right up until his death, Penn continually stretched his creativity by balancing professional commissions with personal projects, working with equal vigor on all. Pace/MacGill director **Kimberly Jones** explained that the process of platinum printing, which took Penn hours to execute, allowed him to administer subtle shifts in shading with each print, so that no two (even in a series of 50, as is the case with a portrait of choreographed bolts, pipes, and nuts titled “Construction Leftovers”) are alike.

There’s a comfortingly familiar, earthy quality to the show. The works in “Archaeology,” which have been relatively obscure until now, make the viewer feel as though they’re gazing into Penn’s personal curiosity shop. “Mr. Penn’s son, **Tom**, told me that the bones he photographed were ones they’d given the dog, and he dug them up,” MacGill said with a smile. Rather than switching up his subject matter just for the sake of contrast or shock, Penn gave equal value to every object or person he focused his camera on. “What was most important to Mr. Penn,” said MacGill, “was bringing significance and beauty to whatever subject he chose—through photographic scene and clear vision.”