

photograph

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In Profile

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Peter MacGill knows the value of a good thing when he sees it. Before he broke the record for the sale of a single photograph in 1985 (Paul Strand's *Wall Street*, to the Canadian Centre for Architecture) for \$170,000, or, placed Thomas Walther's collection with the Museum of Modern Art for reportedly more than \$20 million in 2001, the then-18-year-old English major was sitting in Professor Steven Leibman's basement classroom at Ohio Wesleyan one day in 1970, watching as his favorite professor played a carousel of 80 slides. It was Robert Frank's *The Americans*—just three short of Frank's total of 83—in order, and MacGill was hooked. "That was it," says the blue-chip photo dealer from his office overlooking the snowy stretches of 57th Street. "There went my English major. There went my history classes." MacGill has been dealing photographs for some 38 years, 28 of them at his present gallery, Pace/MacGill. The gallery's first show was in 1983, a solo offering of André Kertész's *Distortions*, and today the gallery's stable includes Richard Avedon and Harry Callahan, Robert Frank and Irving Penn, Robert Rauschenberg and David Byrne—to name a few. MacGill's key to success, at least in part, is his ability to bring critical and institutional attention to the masterworks he feels deserve it, all the while keeping the passion of his own, near-boyish awe for the medium's key practitioners intact. "You ask me what the purpose of a photo gallery is?" says MacGill. "That's simple: To allow the photographer to make pictures; to do our job as well as they do theirs."

At 6 feet 3 inches, MacGill is taller than most, with the lithe bearing of a 58-year-old who knows his way around a triathlon. The youngest of three children of an Episcopal priest father and "unhappy housewife" mother, MacGill grew up north of New York City, first Scarsdale and later Wappingers Falls. A photo enthusiast since childhood, he took photos at the age of seven with a Brownie camera he got with a gift of S&H Greenstamps from his grandmother, and, later, at age 10, with his dad's twin-lens reflex, all the while devouring the photo-saturated periodicals of the day: *Life*, *Look*, *The Saturday Evening Post*. By 13 MacGill was shipped off to boarding school. At 17, he went on to Ohio Wesleyan University, landing an internship at Light Gallery his senior year. He hung Stephen Shore's first solo show; he blind-stamped André Kertész's portfolios. "That was a time when nobody gave a shit about photographs," says MacGill, "except us, and it was our job to get people to pay attention."

After graduating in 1974, he worked for two years at Tom Halsted Gallery in Birmingham, Michigan, then spent the next two years (1976–78) in Tucson, Arizona, serving as a curator at the Center for Creative Photography, all the while earning his MFA degree—and taking pictures—until a lecture MacGill heard at the Society for Photographic Education, given by art historian Robert Fort, helped him focus his considerable energies further still. Fort felt that too many people were taking photos, and not enough of them promoting the great work that had already been made. MacGill left the darkroom for good and went back east, first returning to Light Gallery, and then, in 1980, dealing privately out of his East 22nd Street apartment. In 1983, Arne Glimcher and Dick Solomon suggested the three become partners in a photography gallery that would be run entirely by MacGill himself. The rest, as they say, is history. "Glimcher said 'You know, if we put your name on the door, you can't fail,'" and I said, "I have no choice *but* to make it succeed." □