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ART; The Man Who Learns Anew From Each Picture

By CHARLES HAGEN
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When Harry Callahan expounds on his philosophy of photography, he speaks in a husky twang that recalls his upbringing as a Michigan farmboy. The 79-year-old Mr. Callahan, his round Buddha-like face occasionally breaking into a quick smile, is sitting with a visitor in his Atlanta apartment. On the wall behind him are oversize prints of two photographs. One, of the heroic figure of a woman walking along a Chicago street, is among his most famous. The other -- a lyrical image of a tapestry of leaves on the ground, each a different shade of gray -- is relatively unknown.

As he talks over the course of a long afternoon, Mr. Callahan returns again and again to the central belief underlying his work: that for him, making a photograph remains an act of profound discovery.

Even today Mr. Callahan takes photographs almost every day; a show of his recent work is on view at the Pace MacGill Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, through Jan. 11. "If I didn't know what to do with myself right now I'd probably pick up a camera and go out and shoot some pictures," he says with a chuckle.

In fact, Mr. Callahan's success is in many ways based on sheer persistence. Through constant application, he notes, "you get rid of that damned familiarity and get closer to where you should be. To me this is the super-meaningful part -- to get up in the morning and go out and keep working."

These days Mr. Callahan, long regarded as one of the greatest photographers of his generation, is reaping a bumper crop of honors. The first photographer chosen to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, in 1978, he continues to be the subject of a seemingly endless series of exhibitions, books and awards. Last year he was given a major retrospective at the Pompidou Center in Paris. Another survey of his career is scheduled for 1994 at the High Museum in Atlanta, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington has recently begun to buy Mr. Callahan's pictures as part of its effort to acquire work by a few particularly important photographers.

The hallmark of Mr. Callahan's photography is his continuing ability to produce fresh images from a small number of themes. "I think I've photographed the same things all my life," he says. "Buildings and grasses and people walking." And indeed, these themes can be found in Mr. Callahan's first serious pictures, made in the early 40's, and in his work today. His current show includes not only color images of decaying buildings in Atlanta that echo images he made on the streets of Detroit in 1941, but also black-and-white photographs of the nearly abstract patterns formed by grasses in the mountains outside Atlanta.

At 79, Harry

Callahan has a simple working philosophy:

Get up, go out and keep a fresh eye on the world.

These latter pictures recall earlier photographs in which Mr. Callahan recorded the linear forms made by marsh grasses or weeds in the snow. But where his earlier pictures of weeds, printed in high contrast, were often reduced to patterns of squiggles against plain backgrounds, in the new images the plants resemble luxurious swatches of hair or close-ups of ruffled fur.

Along with pictures of this sort, in which he emphasizes the abstract qualities of familiar subjects, Mr. Callahan has long pursued more adventurous images. In one group of multiple exposures from the early 50's, for example, he photographed the angular shapes made by the tops of row houses in Chicago, then turned the film holder of his 8-by-10 camera upside down and photographed them again. The resulting pictures feature jagged architectural forms floating against a bare white sky, like flying saucers done up in a Victorian style. For another series, made in Providence, R.I., in the 60's, Mr. Callahan photographed people on the street in harsh sunlight. He then used the same film to take pictures off a television set, creating random juxtapositions of images in which the quotidian reality of the city street was contrasted with the artificial glitz of TV.

Mr. Callahan's work strikes many observers as cool and a bit distanced, concerned more with formal qualities like line and tone than with emotional expression. That cannot be said of a remarkable set of images he made of his wife, Eleanor in the 40's and 50's. Mr. Callahan photographed her nude and clothed, indoors and out, alone and with their daughter, Barbara, in straightforward compositions and multiple exposures. The result is an intimate, deeply loving portrait that extends over many different photographs and more than 15 years. This extraordinary portrayal recalls Alfred Stieglitz's photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe, only without Stieglitz's sometimes overly strenuous esthetic exertion.

Combined in his carefully crafted but surprisingly daring images are two major influences that shaped photography in this country. On the one hand is the American version of Modernism embodied in the idea of "pure" or "straight" photography, in which the medium was used to describe the world as directly as possible. On the other hand is the influence of the Bauhaus, the

the short-lived but innovative German school that, until it was shut down by the Nazis in the 30's, tried to bridge the gap between avant-garde art and practical design.

Mr. Callahan first came in contact with the ideas behind straight photography in 1941 when Ansel Adams visited his camera club in Detroit. An avid amateur photographer, Mr. Callahan was working as a clerk in the accounting department of the Chrysler Motor Company. Adams, then a young photographer who would later become renowned for his majestic black-and-white photographs of the American West, belonged to an avant-garde whose members included Stieglitz, Edward Weston, and Paul Strand.

Despite their different backgrounds and interests, these artists shared a belief that photographers should not borrow techniques from other arts but should use their medium to do that which it alone could do: record the world in precise and profuse detail.

Seeing Adams's pictures convinced Mr. Callahan that he didn't need exotic subjects to make interesting photographs. "Where I grew up there wasn't anything spectacular nature-wise, like the Grand Canyon or Yosemite," he says. But when he saw certain photographs in which Adams had aimed his camera down and photographed patterns of waves and rocks, Mr. Callahan remembers, "I thought, my gosh, I can do that here. A footprint in the sand can be my sand dune."

The most important thing Mr. Callahan got from Adams was a sense of confidence in his own eye. "What I realized when I saw his pictures was that I could see," he says. "I could see how to make a print; somebody didn't have to explain to me what developer to use or anything. And, really, that's the main thing."

Two years later he first came in contact with the experimental legacy of the Bauhaus when the famed Constructivist artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy invited him to join the faculty of the



Alan S. Weiner for the New York Times

Harry Callahan, whose recent work is on view at the Pace/MacGill Gallery - a few themes and a lifetime of variations

Institute of Design in Chicago. I.D., as the school is still known, was the successor to the New Bauhaus, which Moholy-Nagy had founded in 1937 with the aim of continuing the Bauhaus's emphasis on visual experimentation and practical design. Mr. Callahan stayed at I.D. for eight years, moving to the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence in 1964. He continued to teach there until his retirement in the late 70's.

Despite his many years of teaching, Mr. Callahan denies that he had any special aptitude for it. "I really didn't have much to teach," he says now. "I didn't even believe in it. I felt so strongly that everybody had to find their own way. And nobody can teach you your own way."

Over the years Mr. Callahan has arrived at a number of deeply held beliefs. "For me the thing about art is that it's always something strange," he says. "You're constantly breaking rules to try to get to something new. In terms of art, the only real answer that I know of is to do it. If you don't do it, you don't know what might happen."

Photos: Harry Callahan, whose recent work is on view at the Pace MacGill Gallery -- a few themes and a lifetime of variations (Alan S. Weiner for The New York Times)(pg. 35)