

## PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW; An Outward-Gazing Eye That Explored The Inner Life

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Published: March 24, 1996

NO DOUBT EVERY WORK OF art embodies the impulse to self-expression, but for most of recorded history that has not been art's primary goal. Since the days of the cave painters, art has been in the service of gods or spirits, religion, royalty, country, community and individual patrons. And, of course, ambition, and the need to earn a living. The idea of making art chiefly to express or to discover one's feelings was scarcely conceivable until the Romantics devised the myth of the bohemian artist, and it did not gather much momentum until the 20th century had digested the lessons of Freud.

The Surrealists tried to tap into the unconscious in the 1920's, but the Depression and the threat of war deflected a lot of creativity into the realm of social document and protest. Then, when World War II wiped out the old sureties and hopes and left many people feeling they had nothing to rely on but the self, Abstract Expressionists tried to put the subterranean self on canvas. They, at least, had gesture and abstraction to play with. When photographers wanted to express their own inner lives, they were stuck with a medium that was fixated on the outer world.

How Harry Callahan addressed that issue is the subtext of "Harry Callahan," a 116-print, 50-year retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in Washington that runs through May 19 before traveling. The same photographic challenge turns up in "Harry Callahan: Theme and Variation," a show on view at Pace Wildenstein MacGill in Manhattan through April 6; there, 52 images cover almost as great a time span.

Both of these exhibitions adroitly combine well-known and virtually unknown images to trace the themes and experimental forays of a man who has been a major influence on American photography in the second half of the century. Callahan's influence stems not just from his pictures of his wife, Eleanor (which have made her distinctive naked form recognizable from across a gallery), nor from his spare images of weeds and vines, of preoccupied faces on the street or of empty and radiant beaches, but also from the fact that he has taught many big names in the field and many who went on to teach the next generation.

Hired by the Institute of Design in Chicago in 1946, Callahan headed its department of photography from 1949 to 1961, then established the photography department at the Rhode Island School of Design and taught there until 1973.

Born in 1912, he bought his first camera in 1938 and in 1941 took a workshop with Ansel Adams, who persuaded him that photography did not have to follow traditional, camera-club dictates but could be the product of an individual sensibility. So his personal chronology landed him in art -- he was never interested in photography as a commercial enterprise -- at a moment when artists were beating an organized retreat into the psyche.

His stylistic ties to those artists are evident. By 1949, he was photographing the utter flatness of small segments of walls mottled or scumbled over like early paintings by Ad Reinhardt or Lee Krasner. Or walls as heavily plastered as the thick impastos of Willem de Kooning, or overrun by long drips of paint or scrawled words. Or sections of building facades where windows marched in precise geometries across the picture plane. And sometimes he pictured Lake Michigan from above as if it were a flat plane barely inflected by subtle textures, like a Barnett Newman or a later Reinhardt painting.

(Photography's connections to Abstract Expressionism were strong. The art critic Thomas Hess once suggested that Aaron Siskind's photographs of abstract shapes and gestural swipes of paint on walls might have influenced Franz Kline's painting as much as Kline influenced Siskind.)

Callahan also made high-contrast images of weeds in snow and ivy tendrils on glass, bare calligraphic lines of black on a white ground, some in all-over patterns, looking rather like automatic drawings. These scribbled, indecipherable messages remind us that the word "photography" literally means "light writing." They work by stripping the medium down to its bare bones to see if it still functions, and they find that it dances, ever so decorously. Callahan, a first-rate printer, reduces photography's long, tonal and spatial range to the absolute minimum of black, white and flat -- a reduction analogous to abstract artists' giving up narrative content and illusion and relying on flat canvas and paint alone. In 1946 Callahan wrote that he hoped to create "a body of work that is a continuous piece of a life."

"It will show me as a young person and as an old man," he went on; not the literal person -- he took only a handful of self-portraits -- but his "instinctive visual life." In the National Gallery catalogue, Sarah Greenough, the curator of photographs at the museum who organized the show, writes that Callahan has unwaveringly insisted "that his work is his life and that he wanted to tell the history of his life through his photographs."

If his work is his history and a way to understand his relation to the world, then its affinities to Abstract Expressionism offer a prime example of the way individual experience gets expressed in a style dependent on social context and determined by the historical moment. There is also a suggestion here that a photographer seeking ways to reflect his unconscious, instinctive life might well find himself rewriting the visible world in terms of abstraction. Alfred Stieglitz had done so with the sky in his "Equivalents," which were meant as metaphors for his emotions, and Minor White did something similar with rocks and reflections in his quest for spiritual expression.

Callahan, seldom entirely abstract, was far too intent on experiment, on seeing things freshly, and on the world and its look of loneliness to cling to any one approach. He was deep in experiment from the beginning, moving his camera to made designs of light and reflections and double exposing to set trees and cars and city streets in motion. He made color slides from 1943 to 1964 but did not even print them until the mid-70's when he began to work exclusively in color and traveled to far-flung places like Morocco, Portugal, Italy and Wales. Double exposing in the camera, as opposed to carefully superimposing two negatives in the darkroom, courts the kind of accident and chance that were central to Abstract Expressionism.

Bound as he is by the camera to the world's appearance, Callahan yet tends to see life emptied out, remote or formally reconstructed. Generally he approaches the human condition from a distance, or by taking the temperature of the surroundings. His street scenes, when they are populated, show people isolated or in hushed and anonymous motion in multiple exposures. His telephoto images of women in the city catch them unaware and pronounce them alienated.

"Bob Fine," circa 1952, the only portrait of a man with a specific name in either show, is a great field of black broken by a long, irregular teardrop of light, actually the gap between two buildings. At the base of this teardrop stands the tiny, one might almost say negligible silhouette of a man. Only Callahan's extensive and respectful series of his wife, at times with their daughter Barbara, speaks of intimate and continuing connections.

NOT ONLY DOES HE occasionally pare photography down to its core, but he also works at the lower limits of perception, frequently struggling with darkness to extract a precious measure of light. In Callahan's cities, shadows have lives of their own that threaten to engulf buildings and space; people barely escape, emerging into light like surprises. Pale grasses are nearly eaten up by shadow, as if night were constantly descending and day had to work hard to stake its claim.

Then there are his bouts with nothingness: empty skies, empty shadows, the almost empty surface of the sea. His sea and beach pictures hover on the borders of obliteration. "I think," he said, "that every artist continually wants to reach the edge of nothingness -- the point where you can't go any farther." The confrontation with nothing, and by extension with the limits of art, perception and human endeavor, sounds like an existential paradigm.

Inner life can be channeled into art; there it may be transformed beyond recognition. De Kooning's paintings are turbulent, Reinhardt's infinitely orderly, not necessarily descriptions of the artists. Callahan's cool, formal and distant images are made in pursuit of freedom from restriction. He once said: "I love art because it doesn't have rules like baseball. The only rule is to be good. That's the toughest thing to do." The idea that the unruliness of art has advantages over the constraints of baseball looks to me like a homer.