

Harry Callahan

12.14.11

AUTHOR: MARA HOBERMAN

10.02.11-02.11.12 *The National Gallery of Art*

Harry Callahan began making photographs in 1938, at the age of twenty-six, teaching himself to use a camera while working as an accounting clerk for General Motors in Detroit. The one hundred—some photographs brought together in honor of the upcoming centenary of his birth (in 1912) represent six decades of informal, yet iconic, portraits of America. Despite the unavoidably nostalgic imagery of Callahan's early streetscapes and quotidian scenes (ladies in gloves, men in hats, classic cars), his photographs are remarkably timeless. Their freshness owes to Callahan's consistent experimentation, both technically (the ways he manipulated film in the camera and darkroom) and conceptually (the subjects he chose and how he depicted them.) Throughout his career Callahan toggled between realism and abstraction, integrating elements of both genres in his most arresting photographs.

Callahan's earliest works reveal the combined impact of two major influences: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (who eventually hired Callahan to teach at the Institute of Design in Chicago) and Ansel Adams. Like Moholy-Nagy, Callahan experimented with multiple exposures to create surrealist cinematic effects. In a more extreme example of abstraction, *Camera Movement on Flashlight*, 1946–47, Callahan uses pure light to achieve painterly streaks. Adams's influence, on the other hand, comes across in Callahan's near-religious reverence for nature's perfection. In *Grasses*, 1950, which depicts a snow-covered lawn, Callahan celebrates the graceful form of individual blades of grass. Here Callahan also plays with scale and composition, making it initially hard to identify the black spears that starkly contrast the bright white field.

The heart and soul of this show (and arguably of Callahan's oeuvre) are the portraits of his wife and unflinching muse, Eleanor. In Callahan's photographs she appears posed and candid; up close and from afar; nude at home and in her street clothes shopping in downtown Chicago. The gallery dedicated to Eleanor is a love letter to the artist's domestic life and also represents the apogee of his hybrid abstract-surrealist-realist style. From straightforward head shots to ghostly double exposures to abstract formal studies of light, shadow, and line, Callahan captures not only his wife's physical likeness but her spiritual essence.