VANGUARD
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Vivian Maier: Out of the Shadows at PCNW

by T.S. FLOCK on Mar 12, 2013 7:00 am

No Comments

Image courtesy of Photo Center NW

In 2007, a real estate agent named John Maloof purchased a large archive of photographic prints and negatives from a bank auction. The archive had been seized when the owner was no longer able to pay the fees for the locker where they had been stored. Maloof later acquired more of the photographer's work at auction, but details about the photographer remained elusive. He had a name—Vivian Maier—and in 2009, when he saw that name in an obituary, he was able to learn a little more about the woman who appeared in some images—holding a Rolleiflex against her chest with an inscrutable, stern expression, reflected in shop windows and hotel mirrors—but much remains unclear.

Hearing the story of Vivian Maier will no doubt lead some to lament that her work was not better known and appreciated during her life, which ended after a head injury at the age of 83. Her early life was spent in New York and France, but we don't know precisely where. What we do know of her later life is a tad depressing and spare. Starting in the '50s in Chicago, Maier spent 40 years working as a nanny, and during this period Maier was an avid flaneur and traveler, capturing the sights of her time with a brilliant eye for composition.

Maier's works on display at Photo Center NW are but the tiniest fraction of her prolific life's work, which is preserved in over 100,000 negatives and prints. She was a street photographer of the highest caliber, and this modest exhibition is yet an admirable primer to her work that reveals the great divide between artists like Maier and the now ubiquitous Instagrammers uploading ephemera constantly.

Maier was something of an anomaly, described as being political and opinionated when engaged, but intensely private otherwise. She wore unassuming, street-ready clothing—including menswear—giving her a sort of urban camouflage. We know that she spoke to some of the people she photographed, as her archive also includes audio recordings of conversations she had. However, some of her best work is decidedly candid and anonymous, such as a piece labeled "Man in Doorway," wherein a shabby, slouching figure melts into the shadows—more an arrangement of cloth than a man.

Image courtesy of Photo Center NW

This image is also an example of Maier's fondness for liminal and marginalized subject matter. The uncertain politics of the era and the wealth and largesse of the post-war economy fed into a blossoming culture of image that has come to fruit in our time. Photography and movies were becoming a dream factory for America, but artists like Maier did not buy the hype. She continued to document life in its complexity—even the unsavory parts of it—with a magical combination of pathos and objectivity, not so much defying the glittering propaganda and expectations of the age as ignoring them in favor of the real stuff of life as it was happening according to her own vision.

That said, it is interesting to note that from what we gather here she did not record much of her life with the families who employed her. She spent 14 years with one family and in her final years some of her former wards placed her in an apartment and paid her bills, sparing her from the indigence that had already parted her from her life's work. Photography today is largely treated as a vanity project, an unending autobiography edited to highlight one's consumption habits. How contrary to the work of a woman who sought decisive moments in the lives of other humans and objects, absent of a narrative for them and for herself, from which we can glean only the faintest notion of what came before and after—and like many great photographs, these still images do come to life for us, the before and after dissipating in perfect circularity in the mind, like ripples in a pool around that decisive point of entry.

This is not to say that all of Maier's works function on that level. Some are simply beautiful, even if to our eyes they pose as a bit of cliché or stock imagery. Three tulips shot in Highland Park, IL are arranged such that they form a delicate family. One leans its open petals against another while at a distance a "child" comes up short. A pair of gloves on a window sill form pleading hands in another image. In both cases, the subject matter is nothing novel, but the mastery of the medium—such perfect lighting and composition—refutes any accusation that Maier was merely pedestrian. If anything, she elevates this species of image by doing it just right.

The exhibit at Photo Center NW is mostly broken into sets of four images around a theme—beach scenes, market scenes, day and night, as examples. For an archive of this size, this makes taking in a glimpse of the work feel manageable yet satisfying. One of the more striking series focuses on darker imagery that walks a compelling line between film noir and religious iconography. Two photographs in particular ("Man Looking Out Light-Filled Opening" and "Ticket Booth") are dominated by darkness. The face of the "Man" is lit and turned in just such a way that one cannot tell if he is smiling or grimacing and the hall in which he stands could be institutional or industrial. "Ticket Booth" is richly layered, one of those great spontaneous collages enabled by the wider focus of the camera. Arches and spots of light behind the camera, carved walls beyond, and the stoic woman—her mouth pursed just above the speak hole—merge into a tableau both classic and sinister. The hint of a sign that seems to read "Adults Only" further suggests how marginal this place may be.

This game of mirrors is expanded more literally in one work where Maier is only a silhouette in a mirror and frame shop window, but a portly boy is captured in a humorous pose from two angles. This is in stark contrast to the most striking image from the Beach quartet—a girl peering from within a broken culvert, mostly obscured by crumbling ferroconcrete, eyes regarding the camera with more than a little suspicion, even more than the ambiguous gaze of the woman in "Ticket Booth." In both cases, there is a physical barrier between the camera and the subject, and while this removes a sense of immediate peril it does nothing to blunt the penetrating power of the lens.

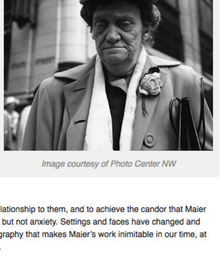


Image courtesy of Photo Center NW

Then as now, photographers were often been obliged to explain themselves when taking pictures, but for different reasons. Cold War paranoia was very real, but privacy is now at an even higher premium in an age where fears of surveillance and perverse voyeurism have peaked and images can be broadcast to the whole world with the click of a button. The proliferation of cameras has changed our relationship to them, and to achieve the candor that Maier did in her subjects almost requires that there be unease but not anxiety. Settings and faces have changed and disappeared, but it is this change in how we view photography that makes Maier's work inimitable in our time, at least in the volume of unique images that she produced.

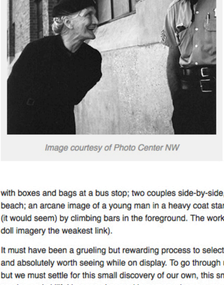


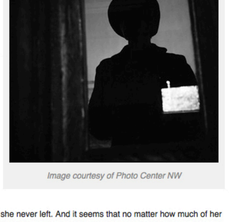
Image courtesy of Photo Center NW

In any event, the effect of these dismembered figures will always pale beside Maier's humans, who are no less scarred and incomplete in some cases. The aforementioned "Man in Doorway" is a prime example. To juxtapose a dismembered doll beside that image would have been too on the nose, and thankfully that didn't happen. Instead we have an image labeled "Men Standing in Doorway," which happens to include the most interesting doll figure in the exhibit. Two men, one black one white, are conversing and gazing to the right from a doorway. Beneath them, the girl doll sits naked and dingy with arms outstretched. It is not a didactic image, but it is complicated and loaded by the racial and sexual politics of the time.

These images of physical thresholds speak to both the spatial and social liminality found in Maier's photos. Indeed, even figures seen in open spaces are studies in boundaries and transition: an old woman with a bandage by her eye chatting (almost flirtatiously) with a police officer; a family burdened with boxes and bags at a bus stop; two couples side-by-side, kissing, laughing, halfway to coitus on a crowded beach; an arcane image of a young man in a heavy coat standing over a fire in a snow-dusted playground, caged (it would seem) by climbing bars in the foreground. The work is elegiac, never macabre (and this again makes the doll imagery the weakest link).

It must have been a grueling but rewarding process to select the works to be shown, and the selection is admirable and absolutely worth seeing while on display. To go through undeveloped negatives must be a tremendous thrill, but we must settle for this small discovery of our own, this small peak into Maier's world. It is a tonic to have these precise and skillful images observed in person when we are so saturated by images less thoughtful and infinitely more vain and propagandistic. Maier knew she had something special, otherwise she would not have remained the steward of the hundreds of boxes of material that were sadly taken from her before she died. That commitment to the work and the physical stewardship of it is something generally unheard of in our time, certainly to today's street photographers, and the need to immediately broadcast one's work certainly takes away from the private pleasure of it.

Perhaps there are other men and women out there working as Maier did and we will not know it until they have passed or have finally reached the time they deem to be ripe for sharing the moments they captured. Perhaps this exhibit will inspire them to continue their work in the meantime, in the shadows and margins. Perhaps they will make arrangements to remain a mystery like Maier, though that, too, seems impossible in our time. Maier and her work are a special document of a place and time not so long ago and still recognizable to us, as we are still the ripples of many decisive moments from that era. The work is not nostalgic, though it may naturally evoke nostalgia for some. It is a testament to true individuality—inexplicable and unaccountable—exemplified by a woman who was fiercely dedicated to her art. Based on what little we know of her, she seemed to have also enjoyed a mutual loyalty with those closest to her, but we can only speculate and this—unlike other aspects of her personality and life—is peripheral to the work. Maier remains a sort of anchoress, her camera the chamber she never left. And it seems that no matter how much of her work may be released to the world, much of her story will remain in shadow—perhaps as she wanted it.



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Vivian Maier: Out of the Shadows is on display at Photo Center NW through March 23