ON THIS DATE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Discover photography now, through its past. Click on any date to access a long read posted that day.

05/02/2019
FEBRUARY 5: KINDRED

February 5: One can feel a kindred spirit with a photographer who responds likewise to their subjects.

Today Gallery FIFTY ONE, Zirkstraat 20, Antwerpen, Belgium commences its exhibition Louis Stettner: A Day To Remember, that continues until April 6th 2019.

Louis Stettner (1922—2016) was a Jovian figure in photography, connected with both the loosely defined ‘New York School’ and also with French Humanist photography, as he divided his adult life between the American metropolis and the European city. That fusion was evident in the aptly titled and recent retrospective (2016) Ici Ailleurs (‘Here, Elsewhere’) at the Centre Pompidou, Paris held just a month before his death.

Curator Clément Chéroux, then head of the Pompidou’s photography department defines Stettner’s work as “influenced by the American tradition of street photography but also by a compassion and attention to detail that is closer to the French tradition of humanist photography.” Since moved to SFMoMA, Chéroux exhibits Louis Stettner: Traveling Light there, concurrent with the Gallery FIFTY ONE show, until May 26, 2019.

Despite his stature, I feel an affinity with Stettner and though I hesitate to be so bold, I experience, in a particular photograph, and in a specific series, a kindred spirit. I refer to his photograph, made on a 4” x 5” negative with a tripod-mounted camera, of boys in Aubervilliers who look curiously and patiently, and with a typical French savoir faire, into his lens.
Stettner has tilted his view camera lens panel forward in the manner usually used with a small aperture to gain extra 'depth of focus' in accord with the **Scheimpflug Principle**, but in this case he has kept the lens aperture wide so that a plane of sharpness extends from the boys' eyes into the space of the image. It catches on the head of the passing woman, whose amused glance over her shoulder we can read clearly (while her feet are way out of focus). In the distance the tip of the smokestack at the end of the street is the last point in focus. Above and below that plane is a palpable soft focus that increases with distance from that intersecting plane. The rather haphazardly arranged telegraph wire mounts on the buildings are so blurred as to make the wires invisible.

It is evidently cold (witness the warm clothes) and despite some blue sky there is no direct sunshine on this late afternoon, and it has recently rained on the cobbled **Rue du Goulet** (along which we look to the south toward Rue David and the back of the Victor Hugo Elementary School). Therefore the wide aperture used (often only f/5.6 on a view camera) is necessary for a shutter speed (1/60th sec. in these conditions) that will prevent blur from subject movement (the walking girl)—but is the choice also dictated by a desire for this novel focus effect? The tilted lens panel has also exaggerated the convergence of the buildings on either side of the street so that the whole scene is **expressionistically off-kilter**.
It is a photograph by someone who knows his view camera intimately, can handle it on-the-fly for rare street photography, and is prepared to take risks and innovate to an extent I have not seen in imagery from the forties. As he writes:

“...very often it is when we push our camera to its most extreme limits that we get the most interesting results. The slight blur of a hand moving downwards will sometimes stress the movement or a low f-stop might throw the background pleasingly out of focus. Just remember that no daring is fatal.”

The use of tilt-shift lenses these days centres on a particular technique known as the 'miniature' effect, increasingly used as a mere gimmick, in which a landscape scene, usually urban and viewed from an elevated perspective, is photographed with the lens tilted away from the ground plane so that sharp focus is limited to a narrow band with all behind and in front right out of focus, as seen here in a more purposeful example by Australian photographer Ben Thomas.

The viewer understands the scene as having been made at a macro scale because such shallow focus is an artifact of shooting (and real-life seeing) at close range, and consequently it is hard to shake the impression that we are looking at a photograph of an intricate and realistic architect's model, a miniature peopled by cute little figures. In my own work, like Stettner, the technique, used differently in each instance, is to use focus to emphasise several parts of the scene.

However, Stettner was not a photographer for whom technique is an end in itself; perhaps that is why his use of the tilted plane of focus for him was a dead end;

“Long ago I abandoned any notion of there being anything possibly fascinating about the scientific aspects of the photographic process. What is important is the end product, the photograph, I solemnly affirmed. Any kind of technical fascination en route I wrote off as gadgetry, tinkerism and pure irrelevance.”

Born in Brooklyn in 1922, Stettner left for Paris in 1947 and returned to New York in 1952. Over the following decades he made numerous trips between the two countries before permanently settling in the French capital in 1990. After beginning photography in his youth with a Box Brownie he swapped it during the 1930s Depression era for a large format camera; “a brazen, brassy Mae West of a camera. A big, brawling 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 view camera with tripod, black skirt and all,” purchased from the dead-broke boyfriend of a waitress who worked for Stettner’s mother in a tearoom off Broadway.
In the last year of WW2, after training, he was sent as a combat photographer first to New Guinea and attached to the US fleet invading the island of Mindoro, then covered fighting in mountains of the Philippines, and after the armistice arrived in Hiroshima. After discharge and return to New York he met Arthur Fellig (Weegee) and made a series Subway, then in 1947 he traveled to Paris where he was commissioned to select prints from significant French photographers including Brassai, Izis, Édouard Boubat, Robert Doisneau, Willi Ronis and Daniel Masclet for an exhibition at the Photo League’s New York gallery (1948). It is during this time, after his youthful and indelible experience of war, that the compassionate photograph of the two boys was made, in full consciousness of the contemporary work of these, the crème de la crème of the Humanist movement, and it is also in 1947 that Stettner was following in the steps of Eugène Atget, photographing the streets of Paris with a large format camera (below).

His photograph of the boys in the street is not made in the City of Light nor with any nostalgia or francophilie. Its location, Aubervilliers, is a French commune located in the banlieue of Paris to the north of the city in the Ile-de-France and bordering the 18th and 19th arrondissements. Its identity and that of its population inherits the legacy of industry and work.

If we look again at this photograph we can see that Stettner points us deliberately toward the smokestack in the background which he picks it out, with focus, from its surroundings, at the same time connecting it with other elements that he wishes us to notice. It is not the chimney of the former match factory at 124 rue Henri-Barbusse protected in 2005 as one of the most beautiful chimneys in Europe (though known by its neighbours as releasing a pall of coal smoke that was “yellow, very heavy and absolutely suffocating”), but it is one of many. At the time of the photograph construction of new housing had been virtually halted since the 1920s in favour of room for more factories, though even then, industry was in decline. The houses that line the street are not pittoresque, but crumbling, crowded and substandard. The boys and the girl inhabit an unattractive, dirty and rundown environment, but their lively, optimistic humanity is projected into the foreground.
Stettner was an active member of the leftist Photo League in 1948 and just as he was being employed by the organisation it was blacklisted as 'subversive and anti-American' during the McCarthy era, by Attorney General Tom C. Clark. Consequently his stay in Paris was extended for five years. It is his politics as a self-proclaimed Marxist that prompts his making of this photograph, its radical perspective, and the evidence it acccents.

Here his humanism is evident as he photographs exhausted commuters, or those expectantly departing on long-distance train (a means of transport being displaced in that decade by domestic air travel). They are seen grainily in the dim light, oblivious of the camera, often through the grimy glass of carriage windows, but with the unromantic though empathetic eye of one inured to travel who is aware of the value to his subjects of snatched moment of stillness and solitude amongst the crowd. They stand in comparison to other series on this subject, most obvious being those of Walker Evans and Helen Levitt, though I suggest they are close in spirit to the bolder, more heartfelt approach of the latter than to Evans’ timid and clandestine camerawork. Such sentiment pervades all of Stettner’s many images of workers in which he is concentrated not on a ‘type’ or on collecting specimens (as was Evans) but on what his subjects are doing and feeling.

Again, I seem to have unconsciously followed in Stettner’s footsteps, 50 years too late, in making my own images of workers in trains during my hours of commuting from country to city.
The title of this exhibition *A Day To Remember* repeats that of an interview with **Paul Strand**, whom he first met in 1939, that Stettner conducted for *Camera 35* in 1972, amongst the many strongly opinionated and passionately argued articles he wrote for that magazine in a monthly column first entitled *Speaking Out* and then *A Humanist View*. Perversely, he crossed swords with both **Minor White** and **Edward Steichen**, and had a short fuse for what he saw in abstraction or overt manipulation as ‘ego-tripping’ ‘belly-button photography.’

In that interview Strand states; “Soft focus is something that weakens a picture, although it gives the photographer an easy way of simplifying reality”. Given that admonition, it is little wonder that Stettner, then into his nineties, turned to a large format camera of the dimensions used by his hero; an 8x10 Deardorff he used in his final years to photograph in Les Alpilles in Provence where Van Gogh often painted, assisted by his wife Janet who recalls;

"**He fell in love with the tortured quality of the trees and landscape shaped by the wind of the mistral…which inspired him to get out his Deardorff he had purchased 10 years before and never used, as he hadn’t identified a subject to photograph that would merit the detail possible with that large negative.**

**Well, destiny intervened — a master, his subject, and the perfect camera coming together over a three year period when we traveled there thirteen times to photograph. Louis was ninety the first time we went, with his full facilities which had always been more than abundant, a complete mastery of the technical aspects of the field camera, and a vision of Whitmoneque proportions. The result was a series of fifty photographs (82 x 100cm) which we also developed and printed in his darkroom (necessitating the cutting of a hole in the ceiling so the Durst would go high enough…)...they contain much of what the Aubervilliers photograph first fleetingly contained."