

A Day to Remember

by Louis Stettner

Opening reception: Saturday, February 2nd 2019 from 2 until 6 pm

Show: February 5th - April 6th 2019

FIFTY ONE

Gallery FIFTY ONE is proud to announce that we are now representing the Estate of Louis Stettner (USA, 1922 - France, 2016). This inaugural exhibition will include over 40 works, both well known and recently discovered in the artist's archive that will be on view together for the first time.

Louis Stettner was born in New York in 1922 of immigrant Austrian parents. His photographic career spanned seventy years, beginning at the age of 13 with the gift of a box camera. Four years later he joined the Photo League, a cooperative of photographers in New York devoted to socially conscious photography. This organization became one of the earliest influences on his development as a photographer. After enlisting in the army and serving as a combat photographer with the US Infantry in the Pacific (1942-45), Stettner left his homeland on a three-week trip to Paris, which extended into five years. It was during these post-war years in Paris that Stettner encountered the French humanist school and photographers like Brassäi, Henri-Cartier Bresson and Edouard Boubat. As a 'working photographer', Stettner defended social commitment and idealism in photography. With his camera he wanted to interpret the world around him, particularly the daily lives of the working class, which he photographed with great respect.

In 1952 he returned to the US, where he found a night job at a security company, roaming the streets by day with his camera. While regularly traveling from 1952 through 1965 to photograph France, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal and Mexico, Stettner spent long periods photographing in New York and Paris, two cities he referred to as his "spiritual mothers". Brassäi notably wrote of his friend: "Stettner is irremediably a city dweller. By this curious affinity which binds each temperament to a theme, to a predetermined subject, he finds his true element in the Capernaum of the big city, where all is art, artifice and intelligence, sweat and secretion of man." In 1990 Stettner returned to France permanently to photograph, paint and sculpt, living in Saint-Ouen, a nearby suburb of Paris.

Over the course of his long career, Stettner developed a unique photographic language that melded the boldness of American street photography with the poetry of French humanism. Additionally, Stettner was technically unusually gifted: his prints are invariably of high quality as he considered the personal interpretation of the negative in the darkroom to be an integral part of the photographer's creative process.

In this exhibition, we marvel at the honesty and dignity of pictures of a pneumatic drill operator, an assembly line worker, fishermen from Ibiza (Pepe and Tony), or farm workers protesting their conditions. Most of Stettner's intimate portraits of the city dweller have been taken candidly in the streets of Paris and New York. We see silhouettes of men making their way through Times Square, a family carrying their child in Paris, an old man counting his change on a snowy Christmas Eve in an Ile Saint-Louis bistro. We see lonely passengers in the station waiting room and through train windows on their commute in and out of the city, playing cards, reading newspapers, dozing or in a private reverie exhausted after a day's work. While Stettner defined himself as a realist focusing on the quotidian subjects, he further extends our vision with glimpses of atmosphere which separate us from the subject. Examples include 'Manhole'; 'Windshield', and complex environmental compositions like 'Man of the Twentieth Century' and 'Downtown, Near Canal Street'.

Stettner's oeuvre reflects an obsession with the photographic medium, patiently cultivated over a lifetime spent interpreting, transforming and translating surface appearance to reveal the essence of the subject. Today his work is seen as a significant contribution to the history of photography and has attracted critical acclaim. A comprehensive retrospective, *Traveling Light*, is on exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art until May 26th. Previous retrospectives were held at the Centre Pompidou (2016) and the Bibliothèque nationale de France (2012), Paris. His works are included in major museums and private collections throughout Europe and the US.