

SAUL LEITER: 24.11.2016 - 28.01.2017

Saul Leiter's Fragmented Fashion by Pedro Simon on Pedro Simon The Blog on November 25th 2016

## Saul Leiter's Fragmented Fashion

*You don't look at a [Jackson Pollock](#) painting; you don't look at a [Willem de Kooning](#). You look into them. The same is true of these titans of abstract expressionism's contemporary and close associate, Saul Leiter's photographic work, in which the subject is often fragmented, obscured by reflections, condensed between surfaces, or otherwise obstructed by passers-by and blurred incidental foreground detail.*



Harper's Bazaar, Mexico (fashion), 1960

Drawn to surfaces and textures, to shapes and shadows, and to the fluid expanses between the abstract and the figurative, Leiter, speaking of the ambiguity that runs through his work, once said: 'I like it when one is not certain what one sees. When we do not know why the photographer has taken a picture, and when we do not know why we are looking at it, all of a sudden we discover something that we start seeing. I like this confusion.'

Leiter (1923 > 2013), born in Pittsburgh, had moved to New York in 1946 intending to be a painter – in the early days he exhibited alongside de Kooning – and although he continued to paint throughout his life, he became engrossed with the creative potential of photography as an art form. Starting with black and white, by the early 1950s he was successfully experimenting with colour, and in 1953 a substantial group of his colour photographs were selected by [Edward Steichen](#) for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

Perhaps on the basis of his street photography – for which he is best-known – of New York's East Village, where he lived and worked for more than 60 years, Leiter has been lumped in with the amorphous '[New York School of Photography](#)', which is said to have included, among others, pragmatic photojournalists such as Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Bruce Davidson, Robert Frank, William Klein, Helen Levitt, and Weegee. Leiter, however, who happened to reside in the city over the same period as them, was light on social realism. He possessed a



Self-portrait with Deborah

sensibility that was rooted more firmly in fine art, and while stylistically his work was closer to the '[New York School](#)' painters, his lyrical treatment of subject matter had much in common with the gentler compositions of an earlier epoch: that of the [Impressionists](#), and with the paintings of French symbolist artist [Pierre Bonnard](#) (1867 > 1947), who endeavoured to evoke mystical ideas, emotions, and states of mind via the medium of scenes from everyday life.

In the late 1950s, recognising Leiter's unique eye for beauty and elegance combined with a modern edge, art director [Henry Wolf](#) commissioned him to photograph fashion, first for Esquire and later for Harper's Bazaar as well as for Show. Very soon Leiter was working in Europe for the French magazine Elle, and in Britain for Vogue, Queen, and Nova. Nevertheless, the fickleness of the fashion world ensured that his good fortune didn't last, and he sank into a lengthy period of obscurity. In time, however, his reputation was restored after several exhibitions at New York's Howard Greenberg Gallery in the 1990s, when his work experienced a new surge of popularity and his colour photography, in particular, garnered wide acclaim. A monograph, [Early Color](#), was published by Steidl in 2006 and was quickly followed by a series of international exhibitions, beginning with In Living Color (2006), at the Milwaukee Museum of Art. Solo shows of Leiter's photography have since been presented at Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris, the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, Musée de l'Elysée, Lausanne, and Diechtorhallen, Hamburg. His work is now included in the permanent collections of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Art Institute of Chicago, The Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, among many other public and private collections.

[Saul Leiter](#) at [Gallery Fifty One Too](#) in Antwerp, which has regularly shown Leiter's work, runs concurrently with the city's FOMU Foto Museum retrospective. The majority of the photographs included in the Gallery Fifty One Too exhibition, however, have never been presented before, and provide insight into less familiar elements of the photographer's diverse oeuvre, particularly his work for fashion magazines.

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