

JACQUES HENRI LARTIGUE

instants de vie

Fifty One Fine Art Photography is proud to present the first solo exhibition of the work of Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986).

Lartigue left an enormous body of work, consisting of approximately 100 000 snapshots, numerous diaries and about 135 self-composed photo albums, in which he documented his own environment. The world of Lartigue is a universe populated by racecars, airplanes, jumping people and the French bourgeoisie of the 20th century. He experiments with shutter speed and movement and his small stature results in some unusual framing in his early years. The work of Lartigue is a unique time document, an idyllic view into the bourgeoisie life of the past century.

The exhibition includes a number of Lartigue's iconic images, such as the photograph of his cousin Bichonnade (1905), floating above the stairs of the family home in Paris; the one of Monsieur Folletête, the secretary of his father, throwing the dog Tupy in the water of the 'Bois de Boulogne' (1912) and the image of the lady in fur coat in that same Parisian park, walking her two white dogs and throwing the young Lartigue a sideways glance (1911). Furthermore, there's a selection of portraits of women in the upper part of the gallery, one of the favorite recurring themes that pervade the work of the artist.

Jacques Lartigue was born in 1894 in Courbevoie, in one of the wealthiest French families of that time. For his eighth birthday, the little Jacques got his own glass plate camera (13x18) from his father, with whose camera he had already made some family pictures. He described and sketched every photograph he took extensively in his diaries, fearing that the image would have failed and therefore the memory of the moment would have been lost. It was the beginning of what he would do his entire life until 1986: the continuous photographing of his own environment. It took about sixty years and several cameras, till Lartigue, who until then in fact made a living as a painter, was discovered by the public. To some extent, he owes his fame to John Szarkowski, the former director of the photography department at the MOMA in New York, who planned a big solo show after seeing some of the photographs of Lartigue's many youth albums in 1962. The exposition got publicity in Life Magazine, by chance in the same issue in which the death of John F. Kennedy was extensively described. Hence, Jacques Henri Lartigue suddenly became a famous photographer and entered into the canon of photographic history. Collaborations with other great photographers followed (Richard Avedon put together the retrospective work 'Diary of a Century') and Lartigue was praised by among others Henri Cartier Bresson, Cecil Beaton, Helmut Newton and Jean-Loup Sieff. In 1979, Lartigue donated his collected works to the French government, who continues to manage the oeuvre of the photographer under the Donation Jacques Henri Lartigue and with whom was collaborated for the current exhibition.

The photographic work of Jacques Henri Lartigue is difficult to classify, because he primarily took photographs for his own pleasure. He described it as follows: "My self-centeredness alarms me. There is a spectator in me who watches, with no concern for specific events, without knowing if what is happening is serious, sad, important, funny, or not. A breed of extraterrestrial, who has come to Earth simply to enjoy the show. A spectator for whom

everything is puppetry, even – and especially – me!”. In this regard, Lartigue is often described as the ultimate amateur, who in his mania to capture his environment, made a detailed time document in order not to forget and was only added to the list of masters of photography later on. It also seems as if Lartigue lived in a sort of mundane bubble, independent from all historic events, in a world where everyone is pretty and young and no speck of ugliness is to be seen. It’s a bit strange, to say the least, that a photographer, whose work and life spans two world wars and drastically changing times, makes no mention of it in his images. Lartigue writes in 1917: “If this “journal” doesn’t mention the war, it is first of all because this is not a “journal”. It is my little secret ruse for preserving joys or my happiness, my immense happiness, all perfumed with inexplicable things”.

It is like this Lartigue’s work should be read, as a representation in images of the pure bliss of the photographer. His black and white photographs amuse by their vivid mobility, disarm with their unconstrained look and make the spectator smile through their pleasant foolishness.

Today Lartigue’s photographs can be found among others in the collections of the MoMA and the Met, New York; The National Gallery of Art, Washington; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum, Japan; Musée d’Orsay, Paris; Fotomuseum, Antwerp and the Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur. More than 250 shows of his work have already circulated worldwide of which only two were to be seen in Belgium (Namur, 2001; Charleroi, 2003).

*From September 7th till October 20th 2012 at Fifty One Fine Art Photography
Opening on Thursday September 6th, 6pm.*