

Street Life

by Vivian Maier

Opening: Saturday, May 7th 2022, from 2 to 6 pm
Show: May 10th - July 9th 2022

FIFTY ONE

In anticipation of the Vivian Maier exhibition at Bozar in Brussels (Self portraits, 08/06-21/07/2022), FIFTY ONE TOO presents a solo exhibition that offers a glimpse into the diverse oeuvre of this artist who continues to fascinate and inspire.

Vivian Maier was born in 1926 in New York to an Austro-Hungarian father and French mother. During her childhood, she regularly spent time in France. In 1951 she began working as a nanny, first in New York and from 1956 in Chicago, where she would live until her death in 2009. In her spare time, she roamed the streets taking pictures of everything she encountered. Maier zoomed in on all that was part of modern street life. From street scenes, gestures and portraits of people she met on the sidewalk, to architectural details, newspaper headlines, signs and slogans: Maier considered every theme interesting to photograph extensively. Her photographs show us a cross-section of urban life in prosperous mid-century America. In this period of great social and political change, Maier had a peculiar affinity with children and people living in the margins of society - such as the black community, the disabled and the poor - and was strongly interested in racial conflicts and social inequalities. She would also often turn the camera towards herself, creating more than 600 captivating self portraits in which you often only see her shadow or reflection in a shop window or mirror. Not having received any formal training, her photographs nevertheless possess an impeccable sense of composition, timing and framing. From the 1960s on, she also started shooting in color.

Maier was an avid collector, which was not only expressed in the compulsive keeping of newspapers, metro tickets and memorabilia of all kinds, but also in her obsession for the act of photographing, which was for her an all-consuming activity. From the early 1950s until the mid-1990s, she made more than 120.000 negatives, countless homemade documentary films and audio recordings. However, she rarely created prints from her negatives, leaving behind piles of undeveloped film. Hardly anyone knew of her photographic activities during her lifetime, up until 2007, when her photographs came to light when Chicagoan historian John Maloof discovered her work by accident upon purchasing a box of her negatives at auction. Immediately recognising the potential of the work, Maloof started to successfully reconstruct and promote Maier's oeuvre. His 2013 documentary 'Finding Vivian Maier' (nominated for an Oscar in 2014) recounts and reenacts this discovery. Today, Maier's photographic oeuvre is internationally renowned and shown in exhibitions worldwide.

However, up until now the details of Maier's life remain largely unknown and an important part of her work undeveloped. In an audio clip that was part of the recent solo exhibition at the Musée du Luxembourg we hear her say "I'm the mystery woman." The fact that she never promoted her work and rarely printed it during her lifetime, coupled with her eccentric personality, gave rise to the 'Vivian Maier myth' of the mysterious photographing nanny. But, as researcher Pamela Bannos argues in her 2017 biography 'Vivian Maier: A Photographer's Life and Afterlife', the story of the nanny savant has blinded us of her true achievements and intentions. According to Bannos, Maier should be regarded as a photographer who supported her activities by working as a nanny, and was extremely conscientious about how her work was printed and cropped. The person that appears from the sources, when looked at carefully, is a complex one. Maier - often dressed in unfeminine clothes - was an intelligent, quirky and independent woman (in 1959 she even set out on a world tour all by herself, taking her to Europe, Asia and Africa) with an ironic sense of humor. But she was at the same time a lonely soul with misanthropic tendencies and struggling with mental health issues such as an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Author Ann Marks writes in 'Vivian Maier Developed: The Untold Story of the Photographer Nanny' (2019) that Maier cultivated secrecy and stubbornly refused to show her pictures, which suggested that "her need to possess was stronger than her need to see her images." While there will always be some kind of enigma surrounding her character, it is clear that Maier is much more than just the 'photographing nanny', leaving behind an invaluable body of work.