SAUL LEITER

'The quiet brilliance of street photographer Saul Leiter' by Paul Keegan, on April 6th 2024 on The Specatator

Paul Keegan

The quiet brilliance of street photographer Saul Leiter

The reticent, negligent grace of Leiter's tiny fugitive images of Manhattan are well served by this new Milton Keynes exhibition

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'Pull', c.1960, by Saul Leiter. © Saul Leiter Foundation

This is the second exhibition of mid-century New York street photography at the MK Gallery in Milton Keynes. The first, in 2022, surveyed the work of Vivian Maier, who at her death left behind a vast quantity of prints and negatives: evidence of a hidden life unsuspected even by those in whose household she lived and worked for four decades. There are continuities between Maier and the subject of the current show, Saul Leiter. They were contemporaries, loners who lived into their eighties (Leiter died four years after Maier, in 2013), prolific but uninterested in recognition, their reputations largely posthumous.

Leiter was born in 1923 in Pittsburgh, like Andy Warhol and, like Warhol, he got out. His father was an austere Talmudic scholar, and Leiter dutifully studied to become a rabbi. When he gave up theology school in 1946 and moved to New York to pursue painting, he was promptly disinherited. Introduced to photography as an outpost of avant-garde concerns by the youngest of the abstract expressionists, Richard Pousette-Dart, Leiter began to try his hand in black and white, then in colour, at a time when the latter was regarded as the province of advertising, or vacation snapshots, or the news from nowhere found in *National Geographic* magazine.

Street photography was a response to the growth of American cities during the 1930s and the Depression, which encouraged a new documentary candour – and was well served by the small and silent 35mm Leica, available from 1924. But the street came into its own as a subject after 1945, when photographers embraced graininess, blur and the Manichaean dramas of monochrome. With no formal training, and no agenda, Leiter began to explore what lay to hand: his circle of friends, his immediate surroundings. After he found an artist's studio apartment on East 10th Street in 1952, he stayed put for the next 60 years – alone, more or less: a downtown local, documenting a few blocks of the East Village. This included the view from the Third Avenue El (an elevated railway line which was closed in 1955), whose 14th Street station was a balcony of sorts looking on to the doings below, and an opportunity for pin-sharp images of pedestrians, captured through cracks in the floorboards.

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Leiter's style was oblique from the outset: interrupted views, windows and mirrors, glimpses and reflections, confusions of outside and inside, individuals seen through mist and steam, rain and snow – so many veils. His reliance on available light meant wide apertures and a reduced depth of field, as did the slow emulsions of early colour film: a constant dialogue between what is in and out of focus. The constraints encouraged a wise passivity rather than any attempt to control outcomes. Leiter was uninterested in cropping his prints or nudging the development process. The street was itself an improvisation, the sidewalk a ballet of cross-purposes. Above all, he explored the gap between what is seen and what is known: 'A person's back tells me more than the front.' Isolated by his camera, his subjects tend to look preoccupied. He often used a telephoto lens, which sees only what it wants to see, compounding his tendency to abstract from a scene in the interests of a general aesthetic statement.

New York photographers were typically outsiders. Maier was a servant of sorts. Helen Levitt, the daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants, was an intensely private figure who lived alone. Garry Winogrand described his occupation as 'survivor', and Leiter often repeated his belief that 'being ignored is a great privilege'. The photographer had become as marginal as his subjects, but also at home in their midst. Leiter's imperfect snaps of the human subject – spectral, always in the wrong place – were also a form of self-portraiture. It is a far cry from the *droit du seigneur* which Henri Cartier-Bresson had exercised over his 'decisive moments', as though breaking in an unruly horse. No matter how off-centre or off-balance, order and proportion reign inside the tiny frame of Cartier-Bresson's Leica. The picture tells a story, and its narrator is omniscient. Levitt and Leiter both saw the 1947 Cartier-Bresson exhibition at MoMA and admired it, but drew new conclusions for their own work.

Leiter is now described as a neglected figure, a belated pioneer. But he removed himself, after early encouragement – not least when he sidestepped Edward Steichen's invitation to take part in the most famous photographic exhibition ever mounted, *The Family of Man* at MoMA in 1955. Having escaped his own family, the idea of joining a 'family of man' seemed a dubious alternative, not least as its claim to universality glossed over uncomfortable facts of oppression and subservience. In any case, photographers were keen to distance themselves from social concerns of the kind that had co-opted photography during the 1930s. No longer a sociological tool, the camera was creating its own facts.

Leiter polished his few square inches of metropolitan ivory. He refused to travel – whether into suburbia or out into the great wilderness, those two sides of the quintessential American coin. Whereas Lee Friedlander or William Eggleston revealed America as a place seen from a car, Leiter's serial refusals must complicate any notion of him as a lost leader. 'Ahead of his time,' we say, but the idea of a hidden pioneer is a contradiction. Leiter's photographs are messages in bottles, a counterfactual history running in parallel. How, one wonders, can his 'experimental' colour photography be epoch-making, as is routinely claimed, if it was invisible to the epoch in which it was being made? The 1976 exhibition of Eggleston's work at MoMA is rightly seen as the visible moment when colour was accepted into polite avant-garde company. His garish large-format investigations of banality in the American South were a paradigm shift. He took pictures of things no one would photograph. Colour as a new kind of knowledge had arrived, and the idea took hold that some stories could not be told in black and white.

Leiter belongs in both camps. On one of his few forays out of Manhattan, in the 1960s, he went to Paris, and the MK Gallery includes a view, in contre-jour, of traffic stalled along the quais, shot from inside a darkened restaurant, glass door ajar, canopy half-visible overhead. A dull afternoon light pours down between the Haussmann buildings riding at anchor in the distance, before bouncing off the curved bonnet of a Citroën DS in the foreground. Like so many of Leiter's images, it speaks of time spent against the flow, and seems to have composed itself. Wherever he looks, Leiter's monochrome eye finds the same scene (barely a scene) waiting for him, a city silent and half empty, the mirror of his own absence. His black-and-white prints often recall Eugène Atget, and like Atget he was drawn to window displays, shadows, mannequins, reflections – and deserted streets. This is his individual vision. In a sense it says nothing, with care, and is intensely involving.

By contrast, the colour work is talkative. The familiar New York tropes are ever-present: traffic lights, yellow taxi cabs, signage of all kinds, the weather as a prop, the striving human subject. And the borrowings from abstract art: a touch of free-floating colour here or there (a red umbrella, a dab of neon), large areas of empty foreground blocking the view. The analogue reds and greens look bleached, because Leiter liked to experiment with expired film stock. In 'Footprints' (c. 1950, see below), shot from directly above, a woman negotiates a snow-covered sidewalk, beneath a bright umbrella, pursued by the prints made by all the previous feet. In 'Mondrian Worker' (1954), a workman assembling or disassembling a shed appears to be imitating the blocks of colour and black dividing lines of a Mondrian. In 'Taxi' (1957) a masculine hand, bronzed, cufflinked, urbane, holds a strap – all that can be seen in the rear seat of a passing taxi. Pure *Mad Men*.

'Footprints', c.1950, by Saul Leiter. © Saul Leiter Foundation

Street photographers tend to complicate any neat account. They are prolific, they act on impulse, and they leave a chaos of unacted intentions. Maier left behind more than 100,000 negatives (most of them discovered only in 2007). After Winogrand's death in 1984 a third of a million undeveloped pictures were found in his studio. Leiter left a modest 15,000 black-and-white prints, 40,000 colour slides, and an equal number of black-and-white negatives. Janet Malcolm suggested that photography needs to be protected against itself, by a process of constant winnowing.

But this makes little sense for a figure like Winogrand, for whom the activity was its own end. He had no interest in the museum wall as a destination, or in the material aura of his work ('anyone who can print can print my pictures'). The passage from archive to oeuvre, cherished by curators, is an uneasy one. Quite simply: why these photographs and not those? Photography traded loss of authority for a new kind of power, located in the image's refusal to explain itself. Rather than answer the question 'Why me?', an Eggleston photograph asks the viewer: 'Why you?'

Leiter is a curious case. He too saw his work as having no exhibition value, but he also harboured aesthetic ambitions, left over from his beginnings as an aspiring painter. His photography is weakened by its painterliness and the pursuit of abstract motifs within the textures of the everyday. To use an old-fashioned word, it is arty.

The MK exhibition makes no attempt to be chronological, wisely, since there is no career as such and no clear development. It gives prominence to the work in black and white, otherwise sidelined by the myth of Leiter as a colour pioneer. The clue is scale – the colour prints are invariably larger, or too large, with more space than they need. At his best, Leiter is a black-and-white miniaturist. Reproductions in books do not convey this aspect. But Leiter's tiny fugitive images of Manhattan have a reticent and negligent grace, and their epigrammatic clarity is well served by the MK installation: nicely underlit, unfussy, five rooms in enfilade, the pictures at eye level, where they can talk without raising their voices.

Saul Leiter: An Unfinished World is at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, until 2 June.

WRITTEN BY

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