

SAUL LEITER – street photographer with the eye of a painter - June 2026

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'Untitled' (1960) © Saul Leiter Foundation | Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE

# Saul Leiter: street photographer with the eye of a painter

When Saul Leiter emerged as a photographer in the late 1940s and 1950s, a fresh wind was blowing through the New York art world. The end of the war had set many things in motion, and numerous new voices were making their mark on photography, with illustrious names such as William Klein, Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson, and Robert Frank. Leiter was one of them.

Text: Mats Pylyser  
Photographs: Saul Leiter Foundation | Courtesy  
Gallery FIFTY ONE

Saul Leiter (1923-2013) moved to New York in his early twenties to pursue a career as a painter. Today, however, Leiter is regarded as one of the pioneers of color photography. Throughout his life, he combined both artistic interests, but his real breakthrough came later in life, as a photographer. But perhaps Leiter owed that success precisely to his painter's eye.

Like his contemporaries, Leiter took to the streets, but both in terms of content and style, the differences between their work and his are striking. When we think of Diane Arbus, we think of her portraits. When we think of William Klein, we think of his rebellious black-and-white images. The dynamism and focus on people that we see in the work of his contemporaries is much less evident in Leiter's work.

Leiter's color photography is characterized by bright colors, thoughtful compositions, and stylization. People are often unrecognizable, especially in his color work. For Leiter, they are purely elements in a composition that provide color accents and details, without their story really mattering. And in contrast to the highly influential work of Cartier-Bresson, certainly at that time, there is also no tension or drama in his images, no play of glances or 'decisive moments'. Leiter seeks moments of unexpected beauty and simply captures them. "Seeing is a neglected enterprise," he says himself.

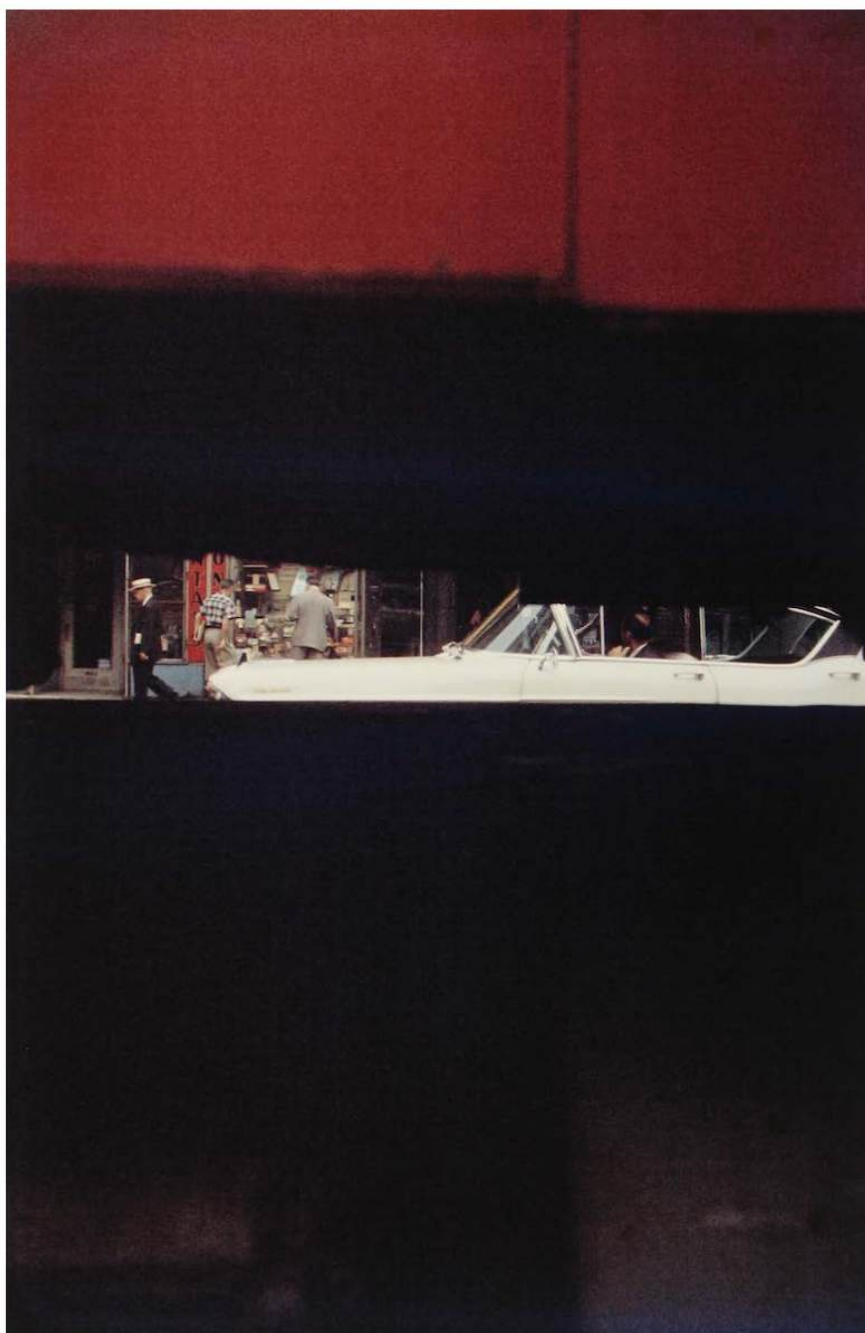
## Texture and composition

To better understand Saul Leiter, it is worth taking a step back to his love of painting. That fresh, post-war wind also breathed life into abstract expressionism in New York, a movement in painting that encompassed both fiercely driven expressionism and abstract art. Jackson Pollock's action painting and Mark Rothko's stylized color fields are probably the best-known examples of this. Within this movement, artists sought ways to break away from the figurative

and express themselves purely visually, through color, form, and texture.

Although photographing reality almost automatically becomes figurative, Saul Leiter's color photography reveals the same kind of visual quest as that of his abstract expressionist contemporaries. It does not take much imagination to think

of Rothko's color fields when looking at a work such as 'Through Boards' (1957). And with the title 'Mondrian Worker', Leiter himself makes a direct link to the work of this Dutch abstract painter. These references themselves are not really important; they are mainly examples that illustrate how Leiter himself views the world.



'Through boards' (1957) © Saul Leiter Foundation | Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE

When we look at Leiter's work with an abstract expressionist eye, we notice how important frames and textures are. Silhouettes behind fogged-up or rained-on windows, for example, are a recurring element in his work, not so much because of symbolism or the story of the people themselves, but because of the play of light shades and texture created by the droplets. The same can be said about his snow images, textures of peeling paint, light reflections in windows, cut-off shapes, and the many frames within frames.

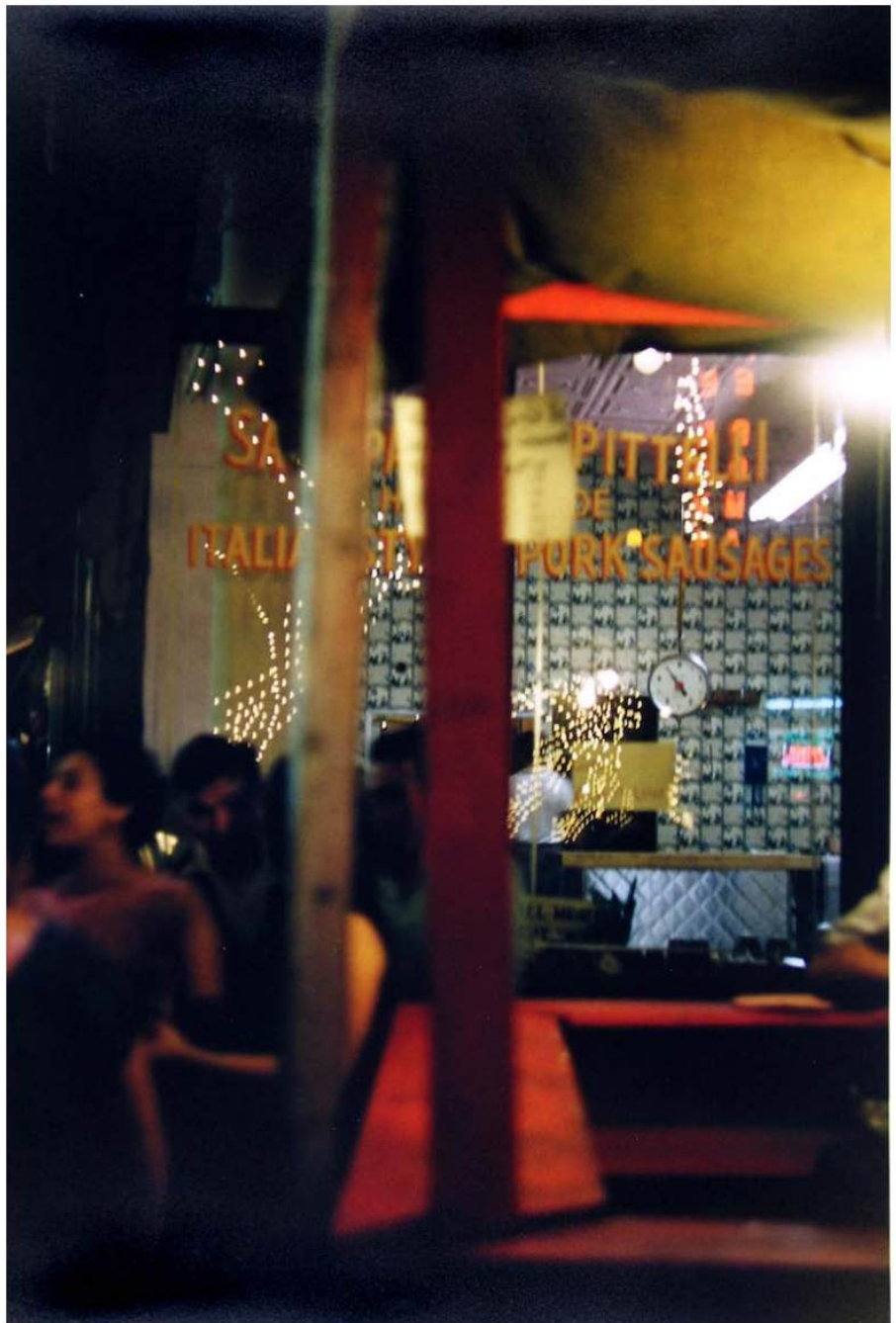
It is also striking that color is such a crucial, structuring element in Leiter's work. In a work such as 'Blue Skirt', the blue skirt is actually a tiny detail that nevertheless becomes the focus of the photo due to the composition and use of color. Leiter's black-and-white photography, for example, is strikingly more traditional and more in line with the street photography of the time, with a more prominent role for people and faces. When you compare the two, it seems as if Leiter thinks differently in color.

The rather reclusive Leiter kept his color photography hidden from the general public for a long time. At that time, color photography was mainly associated with advertising and was often looked down



'Untitled' (s.d.) © Saul Leiter Foundation | Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE

“Leiter seems to be able to switch off his connection with reality in order to view the world in a purely formal way.”



'San Gennaro' (1958) © Saul Leiter Foundation | Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE

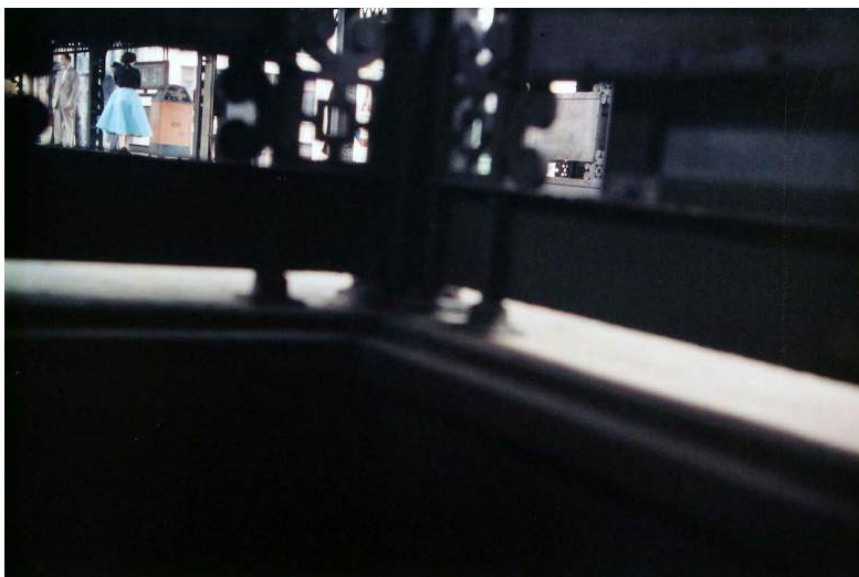
upon artistically. Leiter eventually took a different path and worked in fashion photography for many years. It was not until 2006, with the publication of his photo book 'Early Color', that he was "discovered" by the world as one of the pioneers of artistic color photography.

## Photography is not painting

However, photography is not painting. "Photography is about finding things, while painting is different: it's about making something," Leiter himself said when his work was compared to painting. And yet, one could argue that Leiter does indeed make something very different from the scenes he "finds." Every photographer casts reality in their own form, some more uniquely than others, but Leiter seems to be able to switch off from reality in order to look at the world in a purely formal way. As if reality becomes an abstract composition.

The photograph 'San Gennaro' is a good example of this. It shows the interior of an Italian restaurant. We see people, light, and a display case, but what do we really see? The people in the restaurant are little more than vague, dark shadows. What stands out most are two pillars in the center of the image, a red glow on the bar, and a yellow one on the roof. The letters on the window are just sharp enough to read, but the words are lost due to the many obstacles in front of them and the small lights dancing across the window that draw our attention. Moreover, not a single point in the photo seems to be truly sharp. In fact, the photo is not about where we are or what is actually happening in the image. As with abstract expressionist paintings, this image is purely about the impression it leaves behind.

When you look at Leiter's work as a painter, you immediately notice how it radiates the same way of seeing. The colors may be different, but you see the same structure in the image with areas of color and shapes, supplemented with small focal points with more details.



'Blue skirt' (1950s) © Saul Leiter Foundation | Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE

**“When you look at Leiter's work as a painter, you immediately notice how it radiates the same way of seeing.”**

Sometimes Leiter also painted over his photos, which made the compositions even more abstract.

## A malleable gaze

Throughout history, there have been many photographers with roots in painting, from Henri Cartier-Bresson to Dirk Braeckman. Saul Leiter is certainly no exception in that regard. Each of them takes something different from their past as a painter, and that's what makes it interesting. If everyone looked up to the same photographers, everyone would eventually go in the same direction. What made Leiter's work so atypical in the 1950s was probably what made it so popular in 2006.

Drawing a parallel between his vision as a photographer and the painting of that

time illustrates above all how your vision as a photographer can be guided by what appeals to you or what you are working on, and how inspiration can sometimes come from unexpected places. That is, if you allow it to. Leiter's story argues that as a photographer, you should "feed" your vision broadly and dare to let it guide and even distract you. It keeps you fresh and ensures that as a photographer you explore and refine new things, even if they may go against the tide of the times. And hopefully it won't take fifty years for it to catch on. ■

