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# George Daniell's beautiful people

GEORGE DANIELL is one of Maine's overlooked art treasures. A first-rate and much traveled photographer, Daniell has been living in Trenton since the 1950s, but his art is still not widely known, or perhaps I should say no longer widely known.

During his full and active career, Daniell free-lanced his way twice around the world and contributed photographs to *Time*, *Life*, *Esquire* and *Down East*. In 1960, he was included in Edward Steichen's *Then and Now* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. In recent years, however, Daniell has been, in his own words, "out of circulation."

From time to time, Daniell's photographs have surfaced in small numbers — portraits of painter John Marin at Cape Split Place, celebrity portraits at Judith Leighton's gallery, but it was not until this year that a significant body of his work was presented in local exhibition. Having missed his earlier show at the West Side Gallery in Southwest Harbor, I was pleased to learn that George Daniell is being featured at the Evans Gallery in Portland (through December 1).

George Daniell, who was born in Yonkers, N.Y., in 1913, has been recording life with a camera since his boyhood in the 1920s. The 35 black and white prints in the Evans show span a period of 40 years from a 1935 self-portrait to a 1975 portrait of Berenice Abbott, but most are vintage prints from the late 1930s and early 1950s, an era we are accustomed to seeing primarily in black and white. There is much more than nostalgia at work in these photographs, however.

Daniell first came to Maine in 1936 to visit the Monhegan art colony, and among the earliest photographs in the show are a pair of 1938 prints from a syndicated newspaper photo-essay Daniell did about herring fishing further up the coast on Grand Manan island. The images of fishermen entering the strange, watery pen of the weir are documentary in nature, but they also contain the three key elements of Daniell's aesthetic — an off-balance sense of composition, an attraction to beautiful people and a certain air of worldliness.

To refer to raw-boned Canadian fishermen as "beautiful people" may seem inappropriate, but Daniell's fishermen are

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*Inside the Weir, Grand Manan, 1938* by George Daniell

as elegant in their landscape as his celebrities are in theirs. One expects movie stars like Sophia Loren, Audrey Hepburn and Ramon Novarro to be beautiful, and no one ever took a bad picture of Georgia O'Keeffe, but George Daniell has an eye for natural nobility such that, for instance, the Bar Harbor lobsterman in a 1965 print exudes all the handsome vulnerability of a Montgomery Clift.

Several images from a 1950 trip to Rome (where he was dispatched to document the filming of *War and Peace*) epitomize Daniell's eye for masculine beauty. In one he seems to invest a sweaty workman with dignity and importance simply by looking at him. In another he finds the classic beauty of a Roman god in the face of a young man on the street. And in one of my favorite

shots in the show, Daniell captures a little off-hand, anonymous drama at a street cafe as a sidewalk cowboy, who looks for all the world like James Dean, lights up while an old lady passing by gives him the evil eye.

Elsewhere in the world Daniell is drawn to the public carnality of the beach and to the transient society of the dock. In one of the show's more history laden images, for instance, an elegant lady clutching an envelope stands beneath the thrusting prow of a passenger liner. A funny little man in a fedora approaches. Two women in cloth coats hurry by. All of the people in this forgotten, 40 year old vignette are perfectly composed in their own purposes. Only the final four letters of the ship's name are visible, but they are enough to let us know that this is the

ill-fated *Andrea Doria* in happier times.

Perhaps the best photograph in the show, however, is a 1937 image engagingly entitled *Pre-war Gaiety, Cocktail Bar 21, Front Street, Bermuda*. In the foreground, the beautiful people indulge themselves on the dockside veranda of a bar. In the middle ground, horse-drawn carriages crowd the waterfront. And in the background the ocean liner *Queen of Bermuda* steams greatly out of port. Here George Daniell has chiseled a moment of life's fleeting pleasure into a photograph as stratified as bedrock.

The *George Daniell* show at Evans Gallery is itself a distinct and unexpected pleasure, storied glimpses of a roving eye.

— by Edgar Allen Beem

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