

ART/ARCHITECTURE; At 90, Still In Pursuit Of Beauty

By ALICIA ANSTEAD JULY 29, 2001

IN the first half of the 20th century, when photographing celebrities was not the tightly controlled enterprise it is today, George Daniell picked up his Leica and headed for the stars. He made casual appointments with famous subjects he wanted to shoot, and bumped into others at restaurants or on travels. He had the photographer's most coveted gift: a knack for being in the right place at the right time.

Mr. Daniell, who was born in Yonkers and now lives in Maine, relied on charm and easy intelligence, rather than on social connections, for entree to the lives of the glamorous. He was not a celebrity chaser, however. He simply wanted to capture what was beautiful. As the painter John Marin said, he had "the eye of an artist."

Trained as a painter at Yale, Mr. Daniell began working as a freelance commercial photographer in New York in the 1930's. Smitten with wanderlust, he pursued images on trips across the country and around the world. It was during these excursions that he took striking black-and-white photographs of Sophia Loren at Cinecittà Studios in Rome, Audrey Hepburn on the set of "War and Peace," Tennessee Williams in Key West, W. H. Auden on the Italian island of Ischia and Georgia O'Keeffe in Abiquiu, N.M.

From the 1930's to the 1960's, Mr. Daniell's photos appeared in publications like Time and Life, and many have turned up in the last decade on greeting cards or in sporadic shows in Maine and New York. This summer his photographs and

celebrity photographs as well as oils and watercolors; and "George Daniell on Monhegan" at the Portland Museum of Art through Sept. 3, which includes 14 vintage photos and 14 drawings of fishermen and village life in the 1930's on the art colony of Monhegan Island.

Mr. Daniell, who is 90 and gay, does not consider the more popular celebrity photos to be his signature work. For him, pictures of dock workers in New Brunswick, crabbers on the Hudson, swimmers at Glen Island Beach and ballet dancers on Fire Island express a deeper interest: a tender, muscular celebration of the angular male figure.

That same sensuality is present in Mr. Daniell's paintings of naked frolickers at the beach or faceless figures expressing animated delight. While Mr. Daniell explored dark colors and intense portraiture in his early oils, the more recent seascapes, flowers, harbor views and still lifes are loosely abstract, boldly hued and uninhibitedly sunny. The free strokes of the later work occasionally suggest two other Maine painters, Marsden Hartley and Marin. But the spiritual center is pure Walt Whitman.

Though Mr. Daniell's photographs are included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery, a small coterie of artists, critics and collectors see him as neglected. "I've always loved his photographs," said the celebrated fashion photographer Bruce Weber, whose work has regarded the male form with a delicacy similar to Mr. Daniell's. "They have a spark and sense of humor that is very human. That humanness in his pictures -- that's the thing I really felt strongly about when I stumbled upon his work."

Mr. Weber first saw Mr. Daniell's photographs in a gallery in Santa Fe, N.M., where both photographers had gone, decades apart, to shoot Georgia O'Keeffe. Mr. Daniell met O'Keeffe in the 1940's at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery in New York, and the two became friends. It was Stieglitz who assigned Mr. Daniell to photograph Marin in Cliffside, N.J., beginning a relationship that would lead to several of Mr. Daniell's most renowned photographs, of Marin in his studios in Cape Split, Me., and Cliffside, N.J.

"Everybody who ever met him really loved him," Mr. Weber said. "I remember Miss O'Keeffe saying that besides Stieglitz, of course, George Daniell and Laura Gilpin were her two favorite photographers."

Leafing through boxes of vintage prints on a recent afternoon in the cluttered

wears around his neck. "When I take pictures, I am the camera," he said. This effortless collaboration between artist and machine is reflected in photographs that have a captivating illusion of agelessness (even when the subjects are elderly) and a graceful documentary aesthetic.

David Ziff and Alan Bell, who run a catering business in Manhattan and spend summers in Castine, Me., own 25 photos and one large painting by Mr. Daniell. "His works are a link to a wonderful gay past," said Mr. Ziff, who had never heard of Mr. Daniell before last year. "I'd call them joyful, erotic, theatrical. I think he enjoys everyday people even more than he enjoys famous people. The photos of Georgia O'Keeffe and Audrey Hepburn are great. But the picture of the sailor in Greece or a beautiful man standing in the Piazza Navona show more of that joyful romp that George took through the world."

Mr. Daniell's private journals reveal both the epicurean passions and underside of that romp. He was the only son of a hard-working, remote father who committed suicide and an adoring mother, whom Mr. Daniell adored in return. When he was 12, Mr. Daniell was transferred to a school an hour's trolley ride from Yonkers. The move intentionally deprived him of a close friendship with a neighborhood boy, an event he still recalls with a sense of loss.

After graduating from Yale, he studied at the Art Students League and began freelance work to supplement support from his family. He lived a double life: shooting advertisements and documenting art collections by day, cruising the bathhouses and gay bars of the city by night. After his mother's death and a taxing stint in the Army, Mr. Daniell fell in love with Stephen Dorland, an artist who became his companion for 40 years. In 1962, they moved to Trenton to paint and, as Mr. Daniell says, to start a "country life."

The two traveled and painted together until Mr. Dorland died in 1983. With his partner gone, Mr. Daniell plunged into a depression and ended up hospitalized; shortly after, he had a stroke that would limit his mobility, end his active photography career and mark a return to his first love: painting.

"As I've gotten older, I've realized I am really a painter," Mr. Daniell said. "When I was younger, I had no great preference one way or the other -- photography or painting. But I do now." Mr. Daniell uses a walker to totter into a studio at his weather-worn farmhouse and paints despite a partially paralyzed right arm, which he must bolster with his left, a daily feat that has given him a

permanently can be a tricky career move. "When people come to Maine and spend long periods here, they take themselves off the beaten path," said Aprile Gallant, curator of prints, drawing and photography at the Portland Museum. "That affects familiarity with their work. But I think the time has always been right to look at what George achieved. He's a great American photographer."

Mr. Weber, who owns several Daniell photographs, placed him in a larger context: "There are wonderful gems of photographic life hidden away in America. George Daniell is definitely one of them. He's proof that you don't have to be living in the center of things. You can do what Alfred Stieglitz said and photograph your own backyard. A person's photography is not so much about where the work has been printed but about desire."

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