

Through a photographer's eye

Photos, from C1

life. He talked about growing up in Yonkers, N.Y., about his father's long-term illness and how George often accompanied his mother to festive events. They even went on a cruise together before she died. George talked about high times in New York City, his love for Italy, a new show of his work that recently opened at O'Connor Gallery in Manhattan, and how, at 84, he is now an armchair traveler. He reads extensively, and his imagination takes him to worlds his feet can no longer traverse.

When we finally arrived at the museum, I helped George out of the car and into a wheelchair. At home, he gets around well enough, but we had agreed that a wheelchair would be suitable given George's ailing foot. I also stuffed his camera into my backpack. We were greeted at the door by Michael York and his camera. The three of us set off to look at and talk about photography.

George immediately said he isn't sure photography is as creative an art as painting. He knows the struggle of producing a painting, he said. It can knock you out. But with photography, you can get a great shot in seconds. It's mechanics, he said. You can have an artistic eye, but essentially photography is dependent on manipulating a machine or being in the right place at the right time.

The show is divided into six themes — landscapes, urban sites, image world, expressionism-surrealism, abstraction and typology — that span the history of photography. The pioneers in the field are represented by Julia Margaret Cameron and Carleton Watkins. Contemporary photographers, such as Andy Warhol and Cindy Sherman, showed where photography has moved to in the second half of this century. We cruised by many of the landscapes and old photos, though we agreed that it was amazing to see how sophisticated photography was in the mid-1800s. We lingered in front of Horst P. Horst's portrait of Marlene Dietrich and Margaret

Bourke-White's "The Living Dead of Buchenwald."

Our first major stop was before a self-portrait by controversial American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. In it, he wears black leather and holds a gun. He is at once beautiful and threatening.

"He was like so many people who go all to hell," said George. "He was angelic to start with."

Near the Mapplethorpe was Irving Penn's photo called "Lisa with Roses on Arm," a print of Penn's elegant wife, Lisa Fonsagrives, in a pleated chiffon dress.

"The superior smirk of the rich and famous," said George with a laugh. "I wouldn't want to be in the room with her for long. She'd make you feel inferior."

It was as if he were pointing out friends in a crowd

George recognized works by the great or famous photographers: Weegee, Alfred Stieglitz, Berenice Abbott, Jean-Eugene-Auguste Atget, Man Ray, Imogen Cunningham, Paul Strand and Ansel Adams. It was as if he were pointing out friends in a crowd. And, indeed, George had met several of them. Abbott, who lived many years in Maine, was a friend of his. And Stieglitz greeted him once at the gallery "291" in New York City.

There were works George dismissed — modern pieces that pushed technique and content into the realm of the surreal or post-modern. With the photos that took up several feet of space, Michael explained how the large formats were made. George listened and was amazed at the clarity of such mammoth reproductions. But, in general, George's responses indicated that he felt time hadn't really done much to move photography any closer to art.

In one Cibachrome print that measured approximately 5 feet by 3 feet, the image of a statue bent pensively in thought was emblazoned by a throbbing yellow light.

What do you think of that? I asked George.

"It's Rodin's 'The Thinker,' but it's fuzzy thinking," he said dryly. I wrapped my arm around his shoulder, and he and I laughed as Michael snapped away on his camera.

Of the photo called "Woman Breastfeeding an Eel," George admitted that he doesn't care for surrealism.

We stopped to admire Richard Avedon's portrait of Truman Capote, and George reminded me that the book, which he had given me earlier, would be an interesting read for a writer.

In another room of stark portraits, George gazed with amazement at a head shot that took up the space of one wall.

"This is so damn lifelike," he said of the face that gleamed off the wall. About a set of smaller head shots, he simply said, "Those are good passport photos."

Then he amended his comments.

"Those big color pictures are good," he added. "They're arresting. But you wonder how creative they are."

After an hour spent rolling through the two floors of photos, we packed ourselves back into my car and headed north. Miraculously, the sun was out, and the ride passed quickly. Again, George filled the time with stories about life on the road, how his chocolatier cousin in Florida named a candy bar BY GEORGE after him, and how his motto is "Count your blessings."

Several days later, when George and I spoke on the phone, he told me he had been thinking about the show.

"I got confused because it wasn't chronological," he said. "But once I got used to it, I saw that some of those were stunning photographs."

Galleries 1995

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