

GEORGE DANIELL, PHOTOGRAPHER 1911-2002

SENSUAL BEAUTY, CELEBRITY, AND DEMOCRATIC VISION

BY JAMES J. SHIELDS



George Daniell,
*Ludlow Boys, Hudson
River, Yonkers, NY, 1936*,
B/W photograph,
9" x 13",
Collection
James J. Shields, NYC

"I think the time has always been right to look at what George Daniell has achieved. He is a great American photographer."

—April Gallant, Curator of Photography,
Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine,
New York Times, 1991

"I have always loved George Daniell's photographs. They have a spark and a sense of humor that is very human. That is what I felt strongly when I stumbled on his wonderful gems of photography."

—Bruce Weber, fashion photographer
and master of sensual male portraiture,
New York Times, 1991

Bruce Weber (1946) featured 16 of Daniell's historic 1930s Yonkers Hudson River portraits of angular, young males at play and in repose in his book, *All American Stories* in 1992. Photographed in the years just after his graduation from Yale in 1934, these exquisite works represent the period when Daniell's fascination with water and figures on the beach began as he said, "...when I found plenty of fishermen and skinny dippers along the Hudson willing to pose." The photographs isolate and celebrate fleeting moments of sensuality, beauty, and muscularity.

Further south along the Hudson, Paul Cadmus (1904-1995) created much more aggressive and overtly erotic scenes of young males at

play. His 1934 painting, *The Fleet's In*, for example, depicts a group of sailors carousing mostly with women near a wall bordering Riverside Park. In the mix, one sailor is shown flirting with another man. Another landmark work from the 1930s, even more taboo breaking in its depiction of males, also in a setting on the edge of civil society, with river and sea motifs, is Charles Demuth's (1882-1935) intense watercolor, *Three Sailors Urinating*, which was not available for public viewing in his lifetime.

Daniell's Hudson River work focuses more on male sensuality and muscularity than on overt sexual passion. Though less direct and confrontational than Cadmus's and Demuth's works, for many, across



George Daniell,
Changing Clothes,
Ludlow, NY, 1936,
B/W photograph,
8" x 12",
Collection
James J. Shields, NYC

the gender divide, Daniell's images are more alluring.

This past year, some of Daniell's Hudson River photos were given to the Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation's permanent collection. Additionally, some of his portrait work, done in Italy and elsewhere in the 1950s, and some of his erotic watercolors, completed in ill health in his last years and not intended for publication in his lifetime, were donated.

There continues to be an enduring interest in Daniell's Hudson River photographs. Most recently, in 2007, ClampArt Gallery in Chelsea, New York City held a retrospective, *George Daniell, Vintage Photographs*, from 1930s-1950s, and the Yonkers Historical Society sponsored an exhibition in 2008, *From the Hudson River to the World, Photographic Portraits, and George Daniell*.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Daniell also did a large body of celebrity photographs of artists, writers, and people in the theater. Robert Newman describes them "as sometimes starkly dramatic, and at other times, mistily reflective, and disarmingly nostalgic and melodic." His subjects include: Gian Carlo Menotti, Italian-born American composer and librettist; Thomas Shippers, 25 year old Metropolitan Opera conductor; members of the New York City Ballet; ten year old Robert De Niro on Fire Island; W. H. Auden on the Italian island of Ischia; Tennessee Williams in Key West; Berenice Abbott, Lena Horn,

and Edith Hamilton; and D. H. Lawrence's three women—Mabel Dodge Luhen, Lady Dorothy Britt and Frieda Lawrence.

Some of his most extraordinary photographs are those taken in Italy of Audrey Hepburn and Sophia Loren at Cinecittia Studios. At the same time, he was photographing ordinary people, often young men, on the streets and in the countryside of devastated postwar Italy.

Interest in his celebrity portraits continues. In 2007-2008, his early 1940s portraits of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) were featured in two exhibitions and in the published catalogues of the Portland Museum of Art, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Camera: the Art of Identity*, and *Both Sides of the Camera: Photographs from the Collection of Judith Ellis Glickman*.

Daniell met O'Keeffe at Alfred Stieglitz's (1864-1946) 291 Gallery in New York and visited her Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico. He also met John Marin (1883-1935), one of America's premier landscape painters of his time and another member of the Stieglitz circle. Sixty years later, in 1991, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. exhibited many of Daniell's portraits of Marin in a retrospective of Marin's work. Aesthetically, both O'Keeffe and Marin held Daniell's work in high regard. As O'Keeffe said, "Besides Stieglitz, of course, George Daniell is one of my favorite photographers." Marin described Daniell as having "that rare quality, the true eye of the artist."

Along with aesthetic dimensions, it is critical to explore what a photograph tells us both about the photographer, and the subject portrayed. Bruce Weber believes that basically a person's photography is about desire. Annie Leibovitz (b.1949), in a recent book, *At Work*, suggests that "the camera really does love some people more than others." Even so, she cautions, "We must be aware what pictures capture is but a tiny slice of the subject portrayed."

What do Daniell's photographs tell us about him? What do they tell us about his subjects? In a memoir he started to write in his late years, he describes an early life of deep blacks and whites that very likely drew him to cinematic black and white portraiture which sometimes has the feel of movie stills.

Daniell was born as a twin with a brother who died at birth. "All his life," he said, "I have spent looking with pen, brush, and, camera for the 'other' to love, or to kick." In a letter he wrote to the family of his partner of 40 years after his death in 1983, he said, "Steve Dorland and I loved each other very much. Many looked at us as deep brothers, which is really what we were. Steve was my twin. We also loved our Maine neighbors who never asked questions."

The value he placed on discretion about his life style, mentioned in this 1983 letter, shifted in his last years. In effect, he came "out" in a 1991 *New York Times* interview, the year before he died. He described another never forgotten loss at age 12 when he was transferred to a school



THE LESLIE/LOHMAN GAY ART FOUNDATION

is a non-profit foundation which was established in 1990 to provide an outlet for art work that is unambiguously gay and that is frequently denied access to mainstream venues. The Foundation's gallery mounts exhibitions of work in all media by gay and lesbian artists with an emphasis on subject matter that speaks directly to gay and lesbian sensibilities, including erotic, political, romantic, and social imagery and providing special support for emerging and under-represented artists. Its programs include regularly scheduled exhibitions, artists' and curators' talks, panel discussions, a membership program, a quarterly journal, an archive of artists' data, and a permanent collection of art.

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Please submit articles for consideration for *The Archive* to the editor, Tom Saettel, POB 7785 New York, NY 10116, or tomsaettelnyc@yahoo.com.

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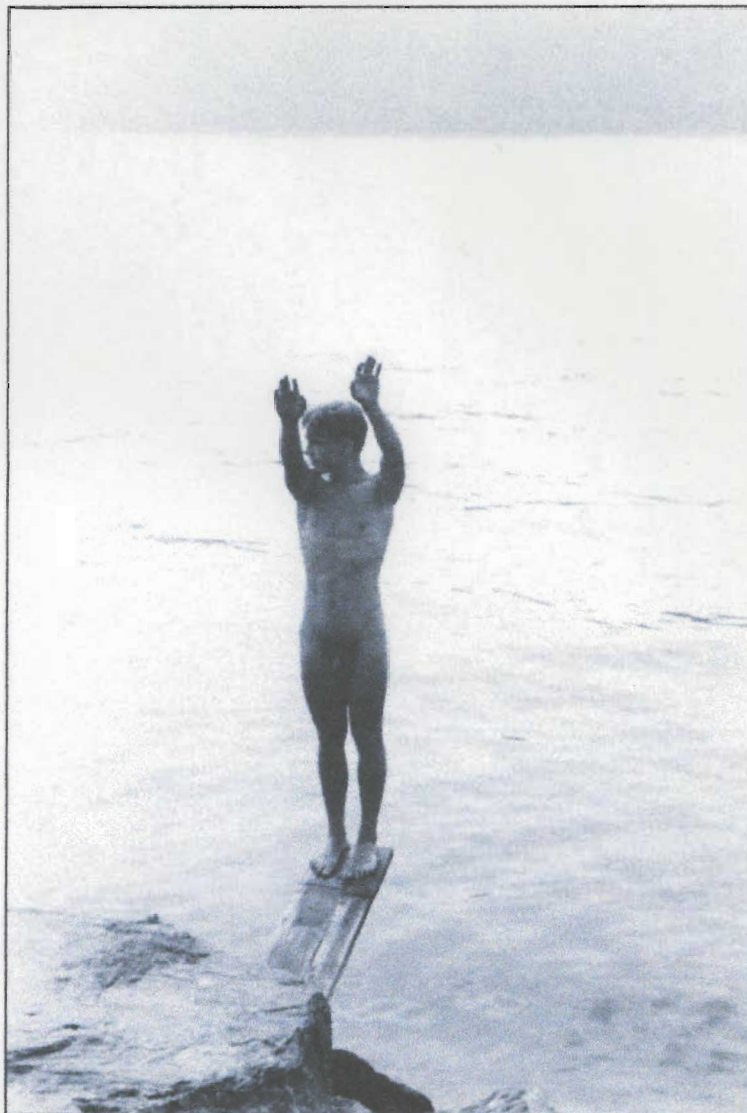
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George Daniell,
Diver on the Hudson River,
Yonkers, NY, 1936,
B/W photograph,
12" x 8"

~~Collection of the LESLIE/LOHMAN GAY ART FOUNDATION~~

an hour away, a move which intentionally deprived him of his close relationship with a neighborhood boy.

There were other tragedies, including the suicide of his father dramatically before the entire family at a Sunday lunch, and his disinheritance by an uncle after his mother's death because of his gay lifestyle. These losses and others, coupled with his gay longings, riddled him with a sense of distance, separation, restlessness, and loneliness. In sum, they are the tragedies which hover around and color the shapely beauty of Daniell's photographic vision.

Beyond the dynamics of his personal psychology, George Daniell's photographs reflect a noble vision which integrates his attraction to beauty, especially male beauty, and the culture of artistic creativity and

celebrity with a powerful humane and democratic vision. Daniell considered his signature work the 1938 photos he took of herring fishermen on Grand Manan Island off the coast of New Brunswick in Canada. Both his Hudson River and Grand Manan photographs were taken in the depth of the Great Depression. Yet, as art critic Carl Little points out, these photographs reflect a healthy, happy, lively quality, and the drive to portray people at their best. Even though the subjects were living in difficult circumstances, Daniell conveyed their dignity and hope. He managed to achieve the same sense of nobility Marsden Hartley (1877-1943) realized in his masterful portrait series of a Nova Scotia fishing family he painted in the same period,

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