

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

The New York Times

Kudos From the Art World He Shunned



By John Leland, December 1, 2012

Leon Levinstein never fully settled into the art world. He preferred roaming the Lower East Side or Times Square with his camera.

“It’s a very lonely occupation,” he once said of his work, “if you want to call it that.”

His solitude was no accident. He scuttled a planned exhibition of his work at the Howard Greenberg Gallery, and another at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Supporters helped him get assignments for Life or Look magazines.

“Leon wouldn’t show up,” his nephew, Stuart Karu, said.

So in his lifetime, Mr. Levinstein’s raw, documentary portraits were little known outside a small circle — in part, it seems, by his own choice. “He was extremely difficult,” Mr. Karu, 65, said. “He didn’t trust anybody.”

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

Recently Mr. Karu, Mr. Greenberg and others have worked to raise Mr. Levinstein's low profile. He finally got his big Met show in 2010, and now more than 50 of his black-and-white prints are on exhibition at the Steven Kasher Gallery. A massive book of his works, drawn from Mr. Greenberg's collection, is due next spring.

Mr. Levinstein — who died in 1988 — had few friends and dressed like the ragged street people he photographed. But with camera in hand, he became intimately engaged with humanity. Mr. Karu remembered accompanying his uncle on the Lower East Side — “I was thinking, we're going to die down here” — and watching Mr. Levinstein hold his camera sideways, which allowed him to shoot people at close range without their being aware of it. “He would follow people until he got the picture he wanted,” Mr. Karu said, “and then he'd talk about the people like they were his friends.”

But Mr. Levinstein remained uneasy about sharing these friends with others. Of the portraits' newfound visibility, Mr. Karu said, “I wonder whether Leon would be happy about what we did for him.

“I think he wouldn't.”