

Album

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEROME LIEBLING



Ordinary People, Extraordinary Detail



Clockwise from top: "Butterfly Boy," New York, 1949; "Boys Playing at Abandoned Building," New York, 1949; "Snow, Clothes, Roof," Brooklyn, 1948; "Union Square," New York, 1947; "May Day, Union Square Park," New York, 1948.

WE KNOW YOU'RE BUSY, but try to slow down for a moment. The city captured on this page by Jerome Liebling, who died in 2011, doesn't reveal itself right away. Mr. Liebling, who became known as a member of the Photo League, a group of socially minded photographers that disbanded in 1951, dug deeply into his subjects, using still photography almost like film, to explore a condition rather than an instant. "He and his subjects are looking at each other," said Rachel Liebling, who curated an exhibition of her father's work, which is to run at the Steven Kasher Gallery from March 13 to April 19. "They're looking at him and he's looking at them. He felt the regular people were the superstars. Those portraits are about that."

Look at the eyes of the boy in the 1949 portrait "Butterfly Boy" (above), his best-known picture. Now consider the time and empathy it takes to get a child to reveal himself like that to a strange man with a camera. Now see how the car's wheel well encircles the boy's head in a shield or halo. Now look some more.

"They should be visualized in time," said Mason Klein, curator of fine arts at the Jewish Museum, which mounted a landmark Photo League exhibition in 2011. "Even though they're still pictures, there's so much material or detail that in a way they were like writing poetry for him. He looked for new ways to say something that was deceptively simple."

Mr. Liebling once said his impulse was to "figure out where the pain was" and capture that on film. Much of this drive came from his experiences in World War II, where many of the men in his unit were killed, his daughter said. "I think he was really changed by that experience," she said. "He was looking really closely at the people around him and trying to figure out what was life, what was important, after seeing the horror that tormented him all his life." *JOHN LELAND*



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