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VILLAGER ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Star snaps painterly shots with phone, gets gallery show *Grey equally comfortable with Nikon camera, cell phone*

ART

1.3: NEW COLOR WORK BY JOEL GREY

May 27th through July 10th
Reception: May 27th, 6-8 p.m.
At the Steven Kasher Gallery (521 West 23rd St.)
For information, call 212-966-3978

BY JERRY TALLMER

Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome...
If the leering, sneering Master of Ceremonies of "Cabaret," the invisible little Mister Cellophane of "Chicago," and the wobbly Wizard of "Wicked" hadn't forgotten his trusty Nikon camera one fine day in 2007 down in St. Lucie, Florida, we wouldn't be here today at an art gallery in Chelsea — peering at walls full of tiny images of near-surreal scenes of people and objects.

Yes, folks, the brilliant Tony-, Oscar-, and Golden Globe-winning actor/singer/dancer Joel Grey is also the photographer Joel Grey — whose "1.3" (as in megapixels) is on exhibit through July 10th at Chelsea's Steven Kasher Gallery (in a parlay with his "1.3: Images from My Phone" — powerhouse Books, 2009).

"I guess I've been taking photos since my kids were born — the past 48 years or so," Grey said over the phone (but not the one he takes photographs with) from his hideaway in Venice, California. "The story of my family through pictures."

The kids, now adults, are son James and actress daughter Jennifer Grey (star of 1987's "Dirty Dancing"). Their mother, long divorced from Grey, is actress-singer Jo Wilder — and Jennifer is now the mother of 8-year-old Stella.

"Stella as in Stella Adler?" a journalist hazarded.

"Yes," said Jennifer's father... "Or Stella by Starlight. Or Marlon Brando. *Stel-lahhh!*"

All those years the family photos had been developed and printed — West coast, East coast — at the nearest available Wallgreens.

"Just fast drugstore photos," said Grey. "No lab or any of that stuff. But drugstore printing is like a cookie cutter — part of the picture is gone," cropped off.

"Well, I had this wonderful secretary who saved everything, all those photos" — and all those negatives — "for years. By the time Jennifer was ready to give birth to



Image courtesy of the artist

To fully appreciate "New Color Work," see the above image in person...and in color.

Stella, I had acquired a Nikon.

"Somebody said: 'You should take these to a lab,' so I took them to a lab—and suddenly I saw stuff I'd never seen before, colors I'd never seen before, things in the margins I'd never seen before. So...I got hooked.

"One day, there in New York, a friend came for dinner — the book designer Sam Shahid. He saw this pile of pictures, looked through them, and then said: 'These would make a book. Give me everything you've got.' Two weeks later he came back and handed me the mock-up of a book. A month later I had a book, 'Pictures I Had to Take' [powerhouse Books, 2003], and an exhibit at the Staley-Wise Gallery, upstairs over Dean & DeLuca in Soho.

"The show did very well, and people began to say: 'Here's an actor who takes pictures.'"

A second book, "Looking Hard at Unexamined Things" (Steidl, 2006), centered on ruined industrial landscapes and graffiti in New York, Los Angeles, and Berlin, Germany (Willkommen, Joel!). It was coupled with a big exhibit at 23rd Street's John Stevenson Gallery.

But the most surprising twist was yet to come.

"I went away for the weekend to Port St. Lucie, Florida — and was wandering around looking at things when I realized I had forgotten to take my Nikon. So I didn't have a camera."

But he did have...his cell phone!

"I'd never had any desire to take a picture with a cell phone. However, at the moment I had nothing else. So I shot about a dozen pictures with this 1.3 megapixels cell phone, the lowest form of camera you could get." No view finder, no stops, no focus, nothing. Just point and push the button.

"And then, when I looked at them, WOW!" More precisely, as he puts it in a brief note in the "1.3" book, "colors and dynamics with a mind of their own...These are different from anything I've ever photographed."

They are indeed. Each about the size of a large ceremonial postage stamp, these metaphysical megapixels run the gamut from spooky-close close-ups to distant landscapes in the muted colors of some centuries-old Hollandish palette.

"It's a new means of expression," says Joel Grey. "A new way of expressing myself. I think I always wanted to be a painter. And never could do it..." He pauses, lets that sink in, then, in a throwaway: "Some people have said these photographs are painterly."

Joel Grey, son of the late Catskills stand-up comedian Mickey Katz, has been acting, singing, dancing, choreographing, and directing for most of his now 78 years. Most recently — some 18 hours before this interview — there'd been a one-night benefit performance in Westwood, California, of Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart" directed by Joel Grey.

"Larry Kramer is a very intelligent man," says Grey.

A somewhat younger Joel Grey had, at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in this city in 1985, stepped into the role of Ned Weeks in that same angry AIDS-era Kramer play (when Brad Davis, the show's original Ned Weeks, had indeed died of AIDS).

"And now, 25 years later...and it went like gangbusters," Grey couldn't help adding.

What's next on the horizon for Joel Grey, actor?

"I don't know," he says. "Maybe I'll never work again. Don't all actors say that?"

He's one of the film and theater profession's bi-coastals, half New York, half California — "but because of family and television jobs, more usually nowadays out here in Venice. In a 650-square-foot wooden cottage."

With anyone? With no one?

"With my dog Mickelito, or little Mickey, for my dad, whose name was Mickey."

The exhibit at the Steven Kasher Gallery, of Grey's "1.3" photos, is paired with a display of "Autochromes: Early Color Masterpieces from National Geographic."

These were not taken with a telephone.