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The New York Times

THE RADICAL EMPATHY OF DAN WEINER

His photographs of mid-20th-century New Yorkers capture a moment in the city, but more than that, they preserve the people who lived those moments.

By David Gonzalez, August 2, 2018



The New York that Dan Weiner photographed is gone. The Upper East Side, where he lived in the mid-20th century, went from gritty to glam. Hot spots like El Morocco vanished. Yet it would be a mistake to say his images are about nostalgia. If anything, they have a certain quiet urgency, drawn out through faces, lines and tones, that still offer lessons on how to see the world around us.

“In all his pictures, people did not look uncomfortable,” said John Broderick, his son-in-law, who is in charge of the archive. “You get drawn in. You can tell, besides the empathy, you can tell he had a

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tremendous respect for the people he photographed, no matter what they did or who they were. He would take a picture of someone, and you, by looking at that, you become that person. You feel that person.”

By the time he died in a plane crash in 1959, at the age of 39, he had amassed a huge archive of work, mentored Garry Winogrand and earned praise from the likes of Walker Evans. An exhibition at the Steven Kasher Gallery of his New York images, as well as those by his wife, Sandra, offers a chance to appreciate his vision.

Mr. Weiner was raised in an immigrant, blue-collar family in East Harlem. When he told his parents he wanted to be a painter, the declaration did not go well.

“His father, Isidore, who was a Romanian immigrant, thought that was not an acceptable profession and threw him out of the house,” Mr. Broderick said. Undeterred, he studied painting at the Art Students League, where he started taking portraits to pay for art supplies. He switched to photography in the early 1940s, worked as an assistant and joined the Photo League, where he studied under such influential photographers as Paul Strand and Sid Grossman. He met his wife, Sandra, at the League, and later opened his own studio. She collaborated with him on many assignments.

He worked here and abroad for magazines, which he felt failed to place world events and social movements in greater context. As a result, much of his later work was self-assigned.

“Photography is too often used for its decorative and entertainment qualities,” he said during an interview with Louis Lyons for WGBH television in Boston in the late 1950s. “My generation is probably the first in history to become conscious of the great forces that are at work in our society, through the visual media rather than the written word. And this I can never forget.”

The New York photos on exhibit show private moments in public settings, where the viewer feels part of the scene. “In these pictures, you see the personality of that person,” Mr. Broderick said. “He didn’t use long lenses. He’s up against them but seems invisible. He must have had some gift to make people completely comfortable around him.”

Though Mr. Weiner photographed for only about 15 years, Mr. Broderick said, he did “lifetimes of work” in that brief span. Among his notable works were a book he did in South Africa with Alan Paton, the author of “Cry, the Beloved Country,” and his coverage of the Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama. Of that second assignment, he bemoaned how the images were published in a way that failed to place this critical social movement in a greater, more powerful context.

“I believe the photographic interpretation of the world around us has too often avoided the central issues of our times,” he said in his conversation with Mr. Lyons (which also included W. Eugene Smith).

With the centennial of Mr. Weiner’s birth next year, Mr. Broderick intends to put the photographer in historical context, too. “My goal is to really put Dan into the pantheon where he belongs,” Mr. Broderick said. “He is one of the masters. People who see these photos ask ‘Why don’t I know about him?’ Many collectors and museums know Dan Weiner. He’s in their collections. As for the rest of the world, there’s so much of the work they haven’t seen.”