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RIOT MATERIAL

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REVIEW: FRED W. MCDARRAH: NEW YORK SCENES

By Phoebe Hoban – November 1, 2018



The Village Voice is, sadly, now a hallowed memory of the past, but many of its iconic images live vividly on through the work of Fred W. McDarrah, the publication's first picture editor and its sole staff photographer for decades.

McDarrah, who died in 2007, aimed a powerful lens at some of the most creative and turbulent times in New York City's history. Eighty of his vintage black and white photographs are on display at the Steven Kasher gallery, in a show that coincides with the publication of the comprehensive Abrams book, Fred W. McDarrah: New York Scenes.

Spanning nearly two decades, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, the exhibit is a poignant countercultural time capsule—actually more like a time machine—guaranteed to rocket viewers back to a colorful political and cultural heyday, nostalgically oh-so-distant from the Instagram present, and yet all the more resonant because of parallel trends.

Arranged more or less chronologically, McDarrah's photographs, shot in a spontaneous cinema verite style, dramatically capture the icons of the moment: the AbEx painters and Beat poets and writers of the 1950s, the Pop artists and folk singers of the 1960s, the activists and politicians of the 1960s and 70s: a virtual who's who of visual, literary and sociopolitical giants. Their relatively modest size—the largest are 16 by 20 inches—belies their potent punch. Thanks to his 24/7 work habits, McDarrah always managed to be in the right place at the right time.

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Here is a ravaged-looking Jack Kerouac leaving a New Year's party at the legendary Artist's Club in 1959. (Thronged by most of the Beats, the party also feted the release of Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's cult film "Pull My Daisy," which featured Kerouac's improvised narration.) There is Allen Ginsberg with his long-time partner Peter Orlovsky, lounging with Orlovsky's brother in their Village apartment circa 1960. Here are artists Robert Rauschenberg and his partner at the time, Jasper Johns, at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in December, 1958, at the start of each of their storied careers. Willem de Kooning stands on the stoop of his building at 88 East 10th Street in 1959, speaking with novelist Noel Clad.

LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) and poet Diane di Prima occupy a cozy booth at the mythic Cedar Tavern in 1960. Artists Jim Dine performs Car Crash at Judson Memorial Church, 1960. Franz Kline poses in his studio in 1961. That same year, Lee Krasner stands in front of her huge AbEx painting; she acquired the photograph, now at the Pollock Krasner House. Alice Neel is shown in her Spanish Harlem studio in 1961 with one of her young neighborhood models and the finished portrait of the model and her sister; her double portrait of Milton Resnick and Pat Pasloff appears behind her. Andy Warhol stands among a stack of Brillo Boxes at the Stable gallery, 1964.

Bob Dylan strikes a classic pose—is he saluting or shading his eyes—on a Christopher Street bench in 1965. The Velvet Underground (Lou Reed, John Cale, Sterling Morrison and Maureen Tucker), appear with Nico at Filmmakers' Cinematique in 1966. Jimi Hendrix performs at Madison Square Garden, in January, 1970; he died that September at age 27.

Urban historian Jane Jacobs protests in Washington Square Park in 1963: a young Grace Paley marches in an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in 1965, carrying a McNamara sign (as in Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, one of the architects of the war). Allen Ginsberg again, as an anti-war Poster boy wearing his "Uncle Sam" hat, in 1966. Susan Sontag, framed by police, as she is arrested during a 1967 draft protest. A searingly haunting image of Robert F. Kennedy descending a tenement staircase in 1967: on the wall above him, hanging askew, a picture of Christ in his crown of thorns.

The RFK Jr. photograph is perhaps the strongest testament to the eerie perspicacity of McDarrah's eagle eye. But there is scarcely a single shot in the show that isn't worth mentioning. Take the lineup of primo Pop artists Tom Wesselmann, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg at the Factory, circa 1967; Charlotte Moorman, topless, playing her cello in 1967; a contact sheet of a 1967 Yayoi Kusama performance piece, the repetition of the image echoing Kusama's famously obsessive later work. And, of course: two of the Village Voice's co-founders, Dan Wolf and Norman Mailer (a typewriter between them) at the Village Voice's offices in 1964, a decade after editor Dan Wolf and the paper's third co-founder, Ed Fancher, offered McDarrah the job of the newborn publication's staff photographer.

The old adage, one picture is worth a thousand words, scarcely does justice to McDarrah's classic work, a panoply of historically-loaded imagery.

Phoebe Hoban has written about culture and the arts for a variety of publications, including The New York Times, New York Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, Vogue, Vanity Fair, GQ, Harper's Bazaar, ARTnews, and The New York Observer, among others. She is the author of three artist biographies: Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art (1998), Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty (2010) and Lucian Freud: Eyes Wide Open (2014).