

ENGAGED OBSERVERS

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY SINCE THE SIXTIES

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PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAYS

LEONARD FREED

BLACK IN WHITE AMERICA

Photography shows the connection between things, how they relate. Photography is not entertaining, this is not decoration, this is not advertising. Photographing is an emotional thing, a graceful thing. Photography allows me to wander with a purpose.

—Leonard Freed (American, 1923–2006), interview in *Worldview*, 2007

While working in Germany in 1962, photographer Leonard Freed happened to notice a black American soldier guarding the divide between East and West as the Berlin Wall was being erected. It was not the partition between the forces of Communism and Capitalism that captured Freed's imagination, however. Instead, he was haunted by the idea of a man standing in defense of a country in which his own rights were in question. The experience ignited the young photographer's interest in the American civil rights movement raging on the other side of the globe. In June 1963 Freed headed back to the United States to embark on a multiyear documentary project, published in about 1968 as *Black in White America*, that would become the signature work of his career.

The *Black in White America* series is a kind of visual diary with a moralizing purpose. It is highly personal and socially engaged with an implicit goal of effecting change through communication. While Freed made pictures of important events in the civil rights struggle, including the 1963 March on Washington, he quickly found that his interests lay not in recording the progress of the civil rights movement per se but in exploring the diverse, everyday lives of a community that had been marginalized for so long. Penetrating the fabric of daily existence, his work portrays the common humanity of a people persevering in unjust circumstances. His sensitive and empathetic approach sought not to stimulate outrage but to foster understanding and bridge cultural divides as a means of transcending racial antipathy.

LAUREN GREENFIELD

FAST FORWARD AND GIRL CULTURE

Girl Culture has been my journey as a photographer, as an observer of culture, as part of the media, as a media critic, as a woman, as a girl. . . . I was . . . thinking about my chronic teenage dieting, my gravitation toward good-looking and thin friends for as long as I can remember, and the importance of clothes and status symbols in the highly materialistic, image-oriented Los Angeles milieu in which I grew up.

—Lauren Greenfield (American, born 1966), *Girl Culture*, 2002

Photographer and documentary filmmaker Lauren Greenfield has built her reputation as a chronicler of mainstream American culture. In 2002 she published a photographic project, *Girl Culture*, that delves into the ways consumer society affects the lives of women in America. Of central concern to Greenfield was the exhibitionist tendencies of contemporary American femininity. Visiting girls of all ages at home, in doctors' offices, and out with friends, Greenfield examined personal issues of public consequence, providing an intense and intimate exploration of girls' relationships to their bodies and the effects of popular culture on self-image.



Many of her pictures and accompanying interviews focus on what she refers to as "body projects," the daily grooming rituals undertaken in an effort to express identity through appearance. Others look at the social and consumerist influences from which these young women take their cues as well as the difficulty of living up to such expectations.

Girl Culture grew out of an earlier study, *Fast Forward*, that critically surveyed what life is like for children growing up in Los Angeles. The work revolves around her perception of an early loss of innocence among her young subjects and traces Hollywood's role as a homogenizing force in their lives.

Greenfield's lens becomes a mirror in which to reflect upon ourselves. Together *Fast Forward* and *Girl Culture* sensitively explore how culture leaves its imprint on individuals.

PHILIP JONES GRIFFITHS

VIETNAM INC.

The "bang-bang" aspect of any war is the least likely to offer any explanation of the underlying causes. My task is to discover the why, so it's the actions surrounding the battlefields that present the best clues.

— Philip Jones Griffiths (Welsh, 1936–2008), *Aperture*, spring 2008

A lifelong desire to leave the world a better place drove Philip Jones Griffiths, whose work is marked by a fiercely independent approach, deep engagement with his subjects, and a skeptical view of authority. *Vietnam Inc.*, the photographer's critical 1971 account of America's armed intervention in Southeast Asia, is one of the most detailed photographic stories of a war published by a single photographer. The project's exploration of the why, and not just the what, behind the war's failures made it a particularly engaging and ambitious work of advocacy journalism and a model to which many photographers still aspire.

Griffiths's independent approach is remarkable because of its sensitivity to the people of Vietnam and its eschewing of a Western point of view. In *Vietnam Inc.* there are few photographs documenting American troops and the might of their military prowess. Instead, his primary focus was on Vietnamese civilians and a culture in crisis. His book put the conflict in the context of Vietnam's history and culture, showing the ways in which the Capitalist values that America promoted in its efforts to contain the spread of Communism were out of sync with Vietnam's predominantly communal and agrarian way of life.

Vietnam, for Griffiths, became a "goldfish bowl where the values of Americans and Vietnamese can be observed, studied, and, because of their contrasting nature, more easily appraised." And in Griffiths's appraisal, it was America's "misplaced confidence in the universal goodness" of its own values that would ultimately lead to an imperialist failure and, more importantly, the unjust devastation of a people.

MARY ELLEN MARK

STREETWISE

One of the reasons we chose Seattle was because it is known as "America's most livable city." Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York were well known for their street kids. By choosing America's ideal city we were making the point "If street kids exist in a city like Seattle then they can be found everywhere in America, and we are therefore facing a major social problem of runaways in this country."

— Mary Ellen Mark (American, born 1940), *Streetwise*, 1988

Mary Ellen Mark has reported on the state of our social environment for more than four decades. Far removed from the immediacy of war and conflict, her work plumbs the basic commonality of human experience.

In 1983 Mark traveled to Seattle to do an article for *Life* magazine on runaway children. Focusing on a set of streets in the city's downtown area, she began building a sense of trust with the community of runaways and learning about their survival methods. Her pictures showed teenagers who managed to survive on the tough streets through petty crime, prostitution, foraging in dumpsters, and panhandling. She presented the abandoned buildings and underpasses they inhabited and the bonds they built with one another in the absence of family. Mark's compositions are striking and uncomfortable, emphasizing her subjects' youth while capturing them engaged in activities beyond their years.

Following publication of an article in *Life*, she continued to develop the story as both a documentary film and still photographic project with her husband, filmmaker Martin Bell, and reporter Cheryl McCall. The film, titled *Streetwise*, was released the following year and was nominated for an Academy Award. Mark published her still photographs from the project in a book of the same title in 1988.

The *Streetwise* project provided dimension to an important issue of its day. In giving specific shape, individuality, and visibility to the problem of runaway children, it called for greater social and political commitment to addressing America's epidemic of broken families.

SUSAN MEISELAS

NICARAGUA, JUNE 1978–JULY 1979

We all cross histories, and the ones that we cross shape us as much as we shape them.

—Susan Meiselas (American, born 1948), in conversation with the curator, 2010

In 1978 Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas traveled to Nicaragua. Tensions were high following the assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the editor of an opposition newspaper critical of the repressive, hard-line government. Meiselas witnessed the eruption of a full-scale revolution in August of that year. Aware that a momentous process was taking place, she stayed to record its unfolding, including the celebration of the revolutionaries' victory in the central plaza of Managua in July 1979.

Meiselas was taken by the bravery of those who were willing to risk their lives against the dictatorship for the promise of a better future, and she took pains to photograph the action from the perspective of those involved in it. The record of her movements around the country formed a narrative about the progress of their insurrection. She made a decision, which at the time was still considered somewhat unusual in serious war reportage, to record the revolution on color film, seeing it as a more appropriate medium for capturing the vibrancy and optimism of the resistance.

The photographer's compelling pictures were picked up by major newspapers and magazines around the world, giving individual images a public life, but one that was beyond her immediate control with regard to captioning and that was fragmented from the context of her larger body of pictures. In collecting seventy-one of her photo-graphs into a book, first published in 1981 as *Nicaragua, June 1978–July 1979*, Meiselas reasserted the narrative of the revolution as she experienced it and gave greater permanence and coherence to her documentary endeavor.

JAMES NACHTWEY
THE SACRIFICE

For me, the strength of photography lies in its ability to evoke a sense of humanity. If war is an attempt to negate humanity, then photography can be perceived as the opposite of war. And if it is used well, it can be a powerful ingredient in the antidote to war.

—James Nachtwey (American, born 1948), from the film *The War Photographer*, 2001

For nearly thirty years James Nachtwey has dedicated himself to delivering an antiwar message by documenting those around the world affected by conflict. Traveling with emergency medical units in Iraq in 2006, the photographer began a photo essay, *The Sacrifice*, that documents the struggle to save and rebuild lives. The series depicts the helicopter transfers from battle sites to treatment centers, the emergency rooms where lives hang in the balance, and the difficult process of recovery.

In anticipation of showing the work, Nachtwey created a monumental installation print, consisting of sixty individual trauma-center images, tightly framed and digitally collaged into a grid. The work stands as a grim reminder of the human costs of war. The object's sheer size, in which one picture gives way to the next in a seemingly endless stream of torn flesh, metal instruments, snaking tubes, and bloodied hands, effectively conveys a sense of the controlled chaos that permeates these medical centers as well as the overwhelming volume of casualties flowing through the medics' hands on a daily basis.

While it may be easy to contemplate and even support war in abstract, strategic terms, it is difficult to face Nachtwey's portrayal of its inevitable results. In its aggressive scale, his intentionally unsettling work demands that we reconcile the goals and achievements of armed conflict with its human costs, that we be prepared to acknowledge in particular visual terms the sacrifice it entails and the valiant work of those who do their best to mend its path of destruction.

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO
MIGRATIONS: HUMANITY IN TRANSITION

My hope is that, as individuals, as groups, as societies, we can pause and reflect on the human condition at the turn of the millennium. Can we claim "compassion fatigue" when we show no sign of consumption fatigue?

—Sebastião Salgado (Brazilian, born 1944), *Migrations*, 2000

Trained in economics before taking up photography, Sebastião Salgado has used his camera to raise awareness of the world's economic disparities and provoke discussion about the state of our international social environment. Between 1994 and 1999 Salgado pursued an enormous project to document migrant populations around the world. Published in 2000 as *Migrations: Humanity in Transition*, this epic work of twentieth-century photojournalism documents people across forty-three countries who have been uprooted by globalization, persecution, or war. The pictures in this exhibition represent several themes in Salgado's study, including the effects of population surges in cities of developing countries, the conditions of refugees fleeing war in Africa, and the process of migration from Latin America to the United States.

Salgado's work is marked by a heightened attention to aesthetic grace that attempts to endow his subjects with dignity even as it communicates the discomfort of their circumstances. His photographs are constructed with careful attention to dramatic lighting, elegant contours,

and striking visual impact. Ultimately, Salgado sees himself as a storyteller and a communicator, a bridge between the fortunate and the unfortunate, the developed and the undeveloped, the stable and the uprooted. Portrayed lyrically and sensitively, his subjects are transformed into metaphors for complex inequities that exist in the world—problems that must be recognized and acknowledged before they can be addressed.

W. EUGENE AND AILEEN M. SMITH
MINAMATA

[Pollution] is closing more tightly upon us each day. . . . After reflecting on the rights and wrongs of the situation in Minamata, we hope through this book to raise our small voices of words and photographs in a warning to the world. To cause awareness is our only strength.

—W. Eugene Smith (American, 1918–1978) and Aileen M. Smith (American, born 1950),
Minamata, 1975

In 1971 W. Eugene Smith, a major figure in the history of socially concerned photography, and his wife, Aileen M. Smith, were told of a controversy over industrial pollution taking place in the small Japanese fishing village of Minamata. Beginning in the 1950s, thousands of people in the area were severely affected by mercury poisoning, brought about by eating fish contaminated with chemical waste dumped in the bay by the Chisso Corporation. Victims were afflicted with brain damage, paralysis, and convulsions. The ailment, which came to be known as Minamata Disease, is not reversible.

When the Smiths arrived in Minamata, lawsuits had already begun, and the couple set out to document the progress of the claims. They spent three years on the project, calling attention to the victims' cause. Aileen acted as an equal collaborator, making pictures and writing texts with W. Eugene. The work resulted in numerous magazine publications, exhibitions, and a coauthored book, *Minamata*, published in 1975.

The Smiths' study records the course of the trial through the court's ruling in favor of the plaintiffs in 1973. The essay relates the importance of the sea and fishing to the town's culture, reports on the company's drainage pipes into the sea, chronicles the lives transformed by the disease, and depicts the demonstrations that took place in opposition to Chisso. As a tale of the dangers of industrial pollution, the project gained traction within the political atmosphere of the 1970s, when the environmental movement was taking off.

LARRY TOWELL
THE MENNONITES

When a Mennonite loses his land, a bit of his human dignity is forfeited; so is his financial solvency. He becomes a migrant worker, an exile who will spend the rest of his life drifting among fruit trees and vegetable vines, dreaming of owning his own farm some day. But for these who struggle with God at the end of a hoe, the refuge of land, Church, and community may be at least a generation away.

—Larry Towell (Canadian, born 1953), *The Mennonites*, 2000

Wary of the media's commitment to speed, photographer Larry Towell insists on the integrity of extended-coverage reporting. In 1989 he came into contact with members of a Mennonite community near his home in Canada. The Old Colony Mennonites are a nonconformist Protestant sect related to the Amish that originated in Europe in the 1500s.

Over the centuries, they have migrated between countries to preserve their way of life, living in colonies where faith and tradition are intertwined and modern amenities, such as cars, rubber tires, and electricity, are not welcome.

The Mennonites Towell befriended had migrated to Canada from colonies in Mexico in search of seasonal work. Due to shrinking water tables in Mexico, the effects of international trade, and a rising population in the colonies, many Mennonites have found themselves landless and economically marginalized, forced to compromise their beliefs in order to survive. Towell was eventually invited to join them in their treks back to Mexico for the winter. With his unique and intimate access, he spent the next ten years photographing their activities, capturing their struggle to preserve a lifestyle incongruent with the larger world on which they have become interdependent.

Towell's work documented the Mennonites' way of life for the historical record and inspires greater understanding today for a group whose attempts to embrace life could be easily overlooked. In spending a decade on a subject that would be of only passing interest to mainstream media, he asserts a form of visual reporting in which reflection takes precedence over profitability and immediacy.