

**A COMPREHENSIVE RETROSPECTIVE OF LEE FRIEDLANDER'S PROLIFIC CAREER  
CHARTS HALF A CENTURY OF WORK IN PHOTOGRAPHY**

**Exhibition Features Nearly 500 Photographs in Rigorous Groupings**

***Friedlander***

**The International Council Gallery on the sixth floor**

**June 5–August 29, 2005**

**NEW YORK, May 31, 2005**—The Museum of Modern Art presents the most comprehensive survey to date of the photography of Lee Friedlander (American, b. 1934), from June 5 to August 29, 2005. Comprised of six early color portraits, 477 black-and-white gelatin silver prints, and 25 examples of Friedlander's books, special editions, and portfolios, *Friedlander* traces a prolific career that continues to thrive after half a century. Supplemented by a modest number of loans from the artist, the retrospective is largely drawn from MoMA's extensive collection of Friedlander's work. Organized by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography, the exhibition is accompanied by a major book that includes 764 plates, the first in-depth account of Friedlander's work to date, and a section featuring his many artist's books. Its debut in The International Council Gallery on the Museum's sixth floor is followed by a European tour beginning at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, this fall, and continuing through the summer of 2007. The exhibition then travels to American venues to be announced.

Mr. Galassi says, "Full of wit and pleasure, Lee Friedlander's photography is also full of challenges. Fact and fiction, beauty and comedy—he has embraced all of these at once, scrambling our notions of what a photograph can be. And his disciplined extravagance has brought new amplitude to the old idea of 'a body of work.' A draconian selection of Friedlander's best individual pictures would be stunning, but it would brutally amputate what it purports to explore. The exhibition and book address these challenges by assembling closely related pictures in discrete groups, which follow the splendid unfolding of Friedlander's art." There are some 60 groups of photographs, each narrowly tailored by date, theme, and style. Groups that present distilled versions of Friedlander's books are identified as such. Completing the exhibition are seven vitrines displaying Friedlander's portfolios and special editions. A reading room midway through the exhibition enables visitors to study copies of in-print Friedlander titles, as well as the book the Museum has published to accompany the exhibition.

## **Early Years**

Born in 1934 in Aberdeen, Washington, Friedlander fell in love with photography as a teenager. He studied briefly at the Art Center School in Los Angeles in 1952, and in 1955 he moved to the New York City area, where he still lives. For the next fifteen years he worked steadily as a freelance photographer for many magazines, including *Sports Illustrated*, *Holiday*, and *Seventeen*. His other line of work—portraits of musicians for their album covers—grew out of his lifelong love of jazz and other music. Color portraits of John Coltrane, Aretha Franklin, and Miles Davis are among the few examples of Friedlander's commercial work on display in the exhibition.

Friedlander's professional work honed his craft, made him a traveler, and introduced him to a widening circle of friends. One friend was Walker Evans, whose work had shown that ordinary America was full of messages from the people. Another was Robert Frank, whose book *The Americans*, published at the end of the 1950s, extended the robust artistic tradition that Evans had initiated in the 1930s. The book proved that a photographer could step aside from the demands of commercial work to make a fiercely independent, fully realized work of art. The examples of Evans and Frank helped Friedlander to see that photography's creative potential was not exhausted by the utilitarian aesthetic of magazines.

## **The 1960s**

Friedlander's personal work burst into maturity in 1962. Like Evans and Frank, he was probing what he called "the American social landscape"—shop fronts, ads, TVs, cars, the whole panoply of the city street. What was new about Friedlander's work was its playfulness—his talent for turning familiar photographic errors into beguiling puns and puzzles. In his pictures a pole often gets in the way; the frame cuts off something important; a plate-glass window confuses inside and outside; the photographer's own shadow or reflection intrudes. Friedlander's eager pursuit of these complications recaptured the creative verve of photographic modernism.

For another photographer, those pesky shadows and reflections might have been a problem, but Friedlander treated them as a gift, coaxing his surrogate self into a chameleon protagonist. Like his friend Garry Winogrand, Friedlander reveled in his medium's duplicity, simultaneously embracing the ungovernable energy of the city street and gleefully insisting on photography's power to transform what it describes.

In 1967, the recent work of Friedlander, Winogrand, and Diane Arbus was presented at MoMA in the exhibition *New Documents*. Curator John Szarkowski recognized the three as leaders of a new generation, who had outgrown the earnest humanism of mainstream photography in the heyday of the magazines. "Their aim has not been to reform life, but to know it," he wrote.

## **The 1970s and 1980s**

The Pop-inspired wit, offhand wisecracks, and formal innovations that mark Friedlander's first maturity would never disappear from his work. Beginning in the early 1970s, however, his

sensibility and style broadened considerably, yielding a fluid stream of observation, ever more graceful and sensuous. One agent of this remarkable sea change was the evolution of Friedlander's craft. At first hard-nosed and urban, his pictures became richly descriptive, alert to subtle variations of texture and light. Another factor was his growing affection for tradition, notably for the work of Eugène Atget. Atget's keen eye for the vernacular had inspired Evans; now Atget's more lyrical vision helped to open new doors for Friedlander.

In 1976, the unfolding of Friedlander's work gave birth to *The American Monument*, an ambitious book selected from more than 1,000 photographs that delight in the variety of the country's public monuments, from the noble to the ridiculous. The nimbleness of Friedlander's style matched the variety of his prey, spawning an outpouring of pictures that are by turns blunt and complex, matter-of-fact, funny, ironic, affectionate, and grave. Together they capture America as richly as Atget had evoked the identity of France half a century earlier.

The vast scope and effortless beauty of Atget's work became a touchstone for the capacious new reach of Friedlander's art. Henceforth quantity would be part of quality; the best pictures are better still in the company of their cousins. And the sprawling record of photography's past would continue to spark fresh observations, as if homage to tradition and wide-eyed wonder at the world were one and the same thing.

As Mr. Galassi remarks, Friedlander was now "adept at turning any scrap of junk into a lavish puzzle," and his disciplined mastery of craft yielded an increasingly extravagant output. The exhibition tracks the growth of his work in groups both small and large. Some measure the evolution of perennial themes; others are devoted to personal projects—flowers and trees, Japan at cherry-blossom time, nudes—or to the commissions that began to come Friedlander's way in the late 1970s. *Factory Valleys: Ohio and Pennsylvania* (1982), an exhibition and book commissioned by the Akron Art Institute, is a collection of views of the industrial Midwest complimented by eloquent pictures of people at work—a new and fruitful theme.

When it comes to people, Friedlander is essentially an observer of individuals. (His many affectionate portraits of family and friends—a major aspect of his work and a barometer of his evolving style—are grouped by decade in the exhibition.) His studies of workers in the factories of Ohio and Pennsylvania are admiring, even intimate, but they don't pretend to be portraits. Instead, they are tributes to the skill and steady concentration of people "making things we all use," as Friedlander later put it. Over the next two decades, five further commissions would enable him to extend the theme further, from office workers at their computers to telemarketers on the phone.

### **The 1990s and After**

The survey of Friedlander's work of the 1980s concludes with two major projects—*Nudes* (completed in 1991) and *Letters from the People* (1993)—each of which took more than a decade to compile. The 1990s are introduced with four pairs of photographs. In each pair, one picture was made with a 35mm Leica, the camera Friedlander adopted for his personal work in

1955. The other was made with the square-format Hasselblad Superwide, whose negative (nearly four times as large as the Leica's) greatly enhances the richness and precision of the image. Perhaps still more important is the Hasselblad's unusually sharp and wide lens.

In the early 1990s, Friedlander's growing desire to photograph the landscape of the American West prompted him to try out the Hasselblad. Soon he adopted it for the full range of his work and, as the Leica-Hasselblad pairs make clear, all of his old problems were new again. Already seductively tactile, his crowded pictures became downright voluptuous, as the expansive lens invited the eye to explore under, over, and around his elaborate foregrounds and probe far into the distance. He has deployed the new style in a diversity of projects, including a suite of self-portraits. Most impressive among the completed projects is *Sticks & Stones: Architectural America* (published in 2004), the latest chapter in Friedlander's uniquely vivid and far-reaching exploration of contemporary America.

Presented in depth for the first time in this exhibition are the results of the photographer's ongoing preoccupation with the grand natural landscape of the American West. These convoluted scenes, at once magisterial and bizarre, testify to the undiminished intensity of Friedlander's passion for looking and to the capacity of his art to infect others with that passion.

### **Making Books**

Books are ideal vehicles for the art of photography. The pictures generally are small in the first place, and the fixed sequence of pages allows the photographer to give lasting shape to a body of work.

At first, Friedlander had trouble interesting publishers in his work, but income from a 1969 portfolio that paired his photographs with etchings by Jim Dine gave him the chance to make his first book, *Self Portrait*, in 1970. He sought advice from friends, and the book was printed professionally, but he and his wife did everything else. Eventually, trade publishers relieved them of their cottage industry, but in every sense that matters Friedlander has remained the author of his books. So far he has made two dozen, which beautifully embody the full range of his work. Copies of titles that are currently in print are available for study in the exhibition's reading room.

From the beginning, Friedlander has enjoyed transforming his books into deluxe editions, some of them quite lavish, and producing other special publications and portfolios. Much of his enthusiasm has derived from the pleasure of collaborating with others, notably photomechanical experts Richard Benson and Thomas Palmer, binder George Wieck, and designer Katy Homans. Examples of these creations are displayed in vitrines throughout the exhibition.

### **Friedlander at MoMA**

The Museum of Modern Art began to collect and exhibit Friedlander's work in 1964. Since *New Documents*, MoMA has presented four solo Friedlander exhibitions—*Gatherings* (1972); *Lee*

*Friedlander* (organized in 1974 for an extended tour that introduced Friedlander to a broad international audience); *Nudes* (1991); and *Letters from the People* (1994)—and has included his photographs in numerous group exhibitions and collection installations. MoMA's Friedlander collection numbered more than 200 prints in 2000, when a major acquisition brought to the Museum an additional 868 prints spanning the photographer's career and the right to choose 132 further prints of current and recent work. That acquisition is now complete, and 327 prints selected from it are now on view in *Friedlander*.

#### **PUBLICATIONS**

The exhibition is accompanied by the major publication *Friedlander*, by Peter Galassi with an essay by Richard Benson. *Friedlander* contains 764 plates, arranged as an unfolding series of family groups. Galassi's essay offers the most extensive account so far of Friedlander's abundantly productive career; Benson tells the story of his role in Friedlander's books—a key chapter in the history of photographic bookmaking. *Friedlander* is the most comprehensive source of the photographer's work published to date. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Distributed in the U.S. and Canada by D.A.P. and internationally by Thames & Hudson. 12.75 x 11.75 inches; 480 pages; 860 illustrations. Hardcover: \$75. Paperback (available exclusively through MoMA Stores): \$55.

Lee Friedlander's *Self Portrait* is the photographer's famous first book, originally published in 1970 by Friedlander's own Haywire Press, in which his shadow or reflection or other form of his surrogate self playfully performs a variety of improbable roles. This new edition restores the original design in a larger format and includes an afterword by John Szarkowski. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Distributed in the U.S. and Canada by D.A.P. and internationally by Thames & Hudson. 10 x 9.5 inches; 104 pages; 48 illustrations. Hardcover: \$34.95.

#### **TRAVEL:**

An extended European tour through the summer of 2007 begins with a showing at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, from November 12, 2005, through February 12, 2006. Other dates and venues to be announced.

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