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Exhibit unearths long-long photos by Vivian Maier



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"A Quiet Pursuit" is an appropriate title for the new exhibit displaying almost 100,000 negatives from an American photographer's work, which spanned over 50 years and waited silently in storage facilities for years until they were discovered and developed.

As a part of the FotoFocus 2014 Biennial event, Vivian Maier's long-lost photography is being displayed at 1400 Elm Street at Washington Park from Sept. 26 to Nov. 1. In 2007, historian John Maloof brought Maier's photos out from the files and into galleries.

Maier, who died in 2009 at the age of 83, was an American photographer of French and Austrian descent. She lived in New York City then Chicago and worked as a nanny in both cities, but also briefly traveled around the world. Her first camera was a Kodak Brownie box camera that had only one shutter speed and no focus control or aperture dial. Maier eventually graduated to a Rolleiflex camera, in square-medium format, then to a Leica IIIc and various German SLR cameras.

For most of her adult life, Maier did not have a dark room or even money to expose her pictures. She would shoot photos that captured herself in reflections, but also captured the people who passed by her. Most of Maier's work is directed to street scenes and portraits of people she never met. Later in her career, Vivian switched to color film and also changed her subject matter.

The street people were replaced with objects, newspapers and graffiti — her photos became more abstract.

In the early '90s, due to financial stress, Maier was not able to keep up with her hobby of photography. She was homeless for a short period of time and then moved into a small studio apartment, paid for by the grown-adult children she cared for as a nanny.

This caused her to store all of her images and equipment away from the world. Since the majority of Maier's photographs were still negatives when discovered, curators have had to guess how Maier would have exposed her images. The process of printing her images consists of learning the styles she favored in her work based off the prints that Maier herself had already printed early in her career.

The photography in "A Quiet Pursuit" is extremely thought provoking. The majority of the photos displayed are self-portraits. Maier is known for her mirrored self-portraits, like "Self-Portrait, 1954" where she takes a darkly lit photo of herself reflected in a window. In the outline of her coat two women inside the building are seen clear as day.

Maier's reflection self-portraits feel trippy and spontaneous, yet exact. She uses anything from hubcaps and mirrors, to windows to construction workers moving a mirror into a building, which is the case in "Self-Portrait, New York, February 3, 1955."

Maier is also acclaimed for her ability to capture such powerful photographs of the street scenes in the cities of New York City and Chicago. The photographer captured all realms of the streets, like actor Kirk Douglas in the "Kirk Douglas at the premiere of the movie Spartacus in Chicago, IL. October 13, 1960" and also a homeless man eating a sandwich in "September 24, 1959. New York, NY." Since Maier used a medium-format Rolleiflex, she captured more detail in her street scene photographs and portraits. The detail is what made her photos unique and all her own.

Maier's work has been compared to other well-known photographers such as Helen Levitt, Robert Frank, Lisette Model, and Diane Arbus. The exhibit as a whole can be seen as one big selfie. The quantity and quality of the self-portraits of Maier in this exhibit gives you a slight look into her mind on how she perceives herself — the only physical evidence we have of who she might have been.

There should have been more prints of her street images and color images in the exhibit. Maier took a lot of photos of historical value in the '50s and '60s, and it's a shame we only had a couple to view in the exhibit. Overall, visitors will leave with inspiration and in wonder of what kind of photographer and person Maier really was.