

Aesthetica

Blog



Artistic Director of FotoFocus Biennial, Kevin Moore, Discusses Vivian Maier

In the second edition of the FotoFocus Biennial, a month-long celebration of photography and lens-based art in Cincinnati, Ohio, Artistic Director Kevin Moore has taken the modernist definition of photography and put it under the microscope. The exhibition that examines this definition the most is that of Vivian Maier, the American amateur street photographer of the 1950s-1970s whose work caused a sensation when it was discovered posthumously. In this complex oeuvre, curated by Moore to emphasise self-portraits and portraits of other women, we see not only a playful dialogue with urban life, but a deep dialogue with the self that presages the contemporary selfie, a fact that makes it less than objective. Kevin Moore speaks to *Aesthetica* about how Maier impacts our understanding of photo art in the context of history, and how poetic photography can point to visions of the future self.

A: Vivian Maier has been the darling of the photo world ever since her archive was discovered in 2009. Why did you choose to show her work now?

KM: I was skeptical about Vivian Maier at first because the publicity buzz around the story of her discovery was so distracting. When I looked at the pictures myself I found that they were very interesting and very compelling in the way they tell her personal story. This went beyond the discovery of the work or any market driven interest, for me. In my selection for the show, which are the first interpretative selections of her work, I chose to focus on her self-portraits. These are often rendered with other women, where often she is obscured while other women are more prominent as subjects. Why include other people in self-portraits, why not just photograph the self? This is a very intriguing phenomenon in her work. She also photographs women in the street caught from behind or the side, like she was a timid photographer with a longing and an admiration for other women, which she captures in a way that was unusual for her time. In this sense of the simultaneous exhibitionism and shyness around the documentation of the self, she seems to have been doing what we are doing now – she was presaging the digital age. Things like *The Sartorial*, women's street fashion photography and the documentation of stylish women. Things like selfies, and acknowledging the complexity of identities in public space. Selfies are a rage right now. Even I am following a kid on Instagram.

A: Do you think she had an advantage in this vision of photography and the self by being both amateur and female in an age of heroic reportage photography?

KM: If there ever is to be a big comprehensive treatment of Vivian Maier's work, the curator will need to have access to the entire archive. It is enormous. The full range of what we're seeing now is only what the managers of the estate have preselected. We are already seeing an edit. I made edit from this edit – based on my instincts in her interest in seeing herself in relation to other people and as part of a relationship with other women. I have no thesis of lesbianism here. Who knows what her private life was about. She's referencing women for many reasons; she admires their fashions, their beauty.

A: There is a saying that women dress for other women. Do you think that applies here?

KM: Yes, that is true. Women artists tend to approach things in more subtle ways. I like to look and think about art in this way, not via the macho careerist gaze. It's intricate and puzzling, looking from the woman's perspective, where complexities and shadows appear. This whole way of framing is counter-traditional. I consider Maier's an incredibly feminist body of work. I see it as feminist in that it was a challenge to the mainstream art-making of that moment, where capturing great succinct social statements was the fashion. The street photography of Maier's time was looking for truth-telling moments with socially relevant commentaries. She herself was doing this, and also doing far more than this. Her work is subversive for being so subjective and complex. Only Lee Freeland was doing something similar. No one else was doing this.

A: Maier and Freeland were both American. The reportage tradition in photography is more French – do you think Americanism allowed for this subversive self-insertion?

KM: Henri Cartier-Bresson was a formalist, the taker of the perfect picture in the flux of life – the social condition in India and Asia and the American South – compositions that were so striking. In the USA this period was one of American existentialism, the sense of alienation in big cities coupled with the American sense of rescuing the self within the capitalist environment. Early 20th Century German Modernism also looked at this. What the machine age does to human beings, what to ride a subway does to people. People's relationship to machines in the factory or the kitchen, or by way of the telephone – these were anxieties of a potentially dehumanising force. These photographers were trying to reconcile the idea that the world was becoming cold and rational, with: how does the human being co-exist with these kinds of environments? This same anxiety is what we see in American photography of the same period.

A: What do you think is exciting about her work?

KM: What is exciting to us about the work of Vivian Maier is that it comes from an idiosyncratic place within this dialogue. The early photo programme of Chicago would have impressed her but what is happening in her work is coming from her amateur self: what she sees in typical [Paul] Strand social photography with social message becomes her following her own interest, which spans social documentary to fashion and movie stars. She camped out with the paparazzi to get pictures of Audrey Hepburn. You wouldn't expect her to do that; she had that naive admiration of celebrity. This gives her work an interesting fusion of calling attention to social inequalities in the street photography tradition combined with the bloggers street photography style, which is much more about urban celebrity and mode. If you look at any other photographer of that time, they might have been doing one of these things but she doing all of them, at once. Good art is more open ended than it is about something. The complexities of our sense of identity, who we desire, who we admire, what captures our attention, are mysterious statements that ask more questions than they answer. My judge of a good artist is how far they can take a new thought. Everyone talks about the Vivian Maier puzzle – not knowing who she was, and having all these different threads of what she was doing that don't conform to a tradition. She and her work don't fall into a single box, which makes it very new.

A: The part of her that shies away from the bombastic self-promotion of the selfie seems to be longing to do what we do with selfies today. There is a lot of longing in her work for the permission, maybe, for narcissism, don't you feel?

KM: Yes I really do feel that too. Vivian Maier grew up in a time when narcissistic displays were totally inappropriate, especially as a woman. It was inappropriate to take pictures of yourself at all. There was something psychological about her wanting to be seen and not be seen. Apparently she had a French accent, and she felt superior to people but also alienated from people. She may have been acting out the idea of herself by taking pictures of herself in proximity, and also apart, from others. This is very much what social media is doing today. If the longing to connect to other people through technology is one of the things Vivian Maier innovated, it's interesting to consider how we see the history of art. How did we get to the selfie? Contemplating these evolutions, how the past is relevant to the present, is one of the reasons we look at art. In the spirit of this, there is an Instagram exhibition at FotoFocus this year that follows Maier. It's an experiment at self-curating. There will be an Instagram panel discussion with a live feed on opening weekend, where hopefully we'll see more of where Maier's contribution has come to, and where it may lead us.

FotoFocus Biennial, 8 October – 1 November, Cincinnati, Ohio. *Vivian Maier: A Quiet Pursuit*, 1400 Elm Street, Washington Park, Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati.

Words: Caia Hagel

Credits

1. Vivian Maier self-portrait Chicago July 27 1971.