

CityBeat

Selfie Queen Vivian Maier: A Quiet Pursuit of Personal Reflections

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Vivian Maier, Self-Portrait, 1959

Vivian Maier is the art world's current mystery artist du jour. And the serendipitous "discovery" of her work coupled with the circumstances of her very private life has made the quality of her photography even more mysterious (and attractive) to collectors and curators alike.

The American-born Maier spent most of her early life in France but moved back to America in 1951. As oft quipped in many Maier headlines referencing Mary Poppins, the photographer worked for a majority of her adult life as a nanny in the suburbs of Chicago.

The paradoxical woman, whose lifework included photographing others and herself on the street, had hoarder tendencies, an intense sense of personal privacy and little family to speak of. In 2007, John Maloof — historian and now de facto Maier collector, curator and archivist — came to purchase a large set of Maier's negatives from a storage unit she had defaulted on at a Chicago auction house. What he found was something he thought deserved further investigation, and he set off to piece together her story, which he chronicles in his 2013 documentary, *Finding Vivian Maier*.

The FotoFocus exhibition *Vivian Maier: A Quiet Pursuit*, curated by Artistic Director Kevin Moore, is a look at 45 prints of Maier's negatives — all of which are from the Maloof collection, something *The Independent* enthusiastically calls, "one of the greatest photographic collections of the 20th century."

Although she was still living in obscurity when Maloof began putting Maier's work online, it wasn't until shortly after her death in 2009 that he was able to obtain any information about the photographer, and by that point it was too late. But the romantic tragedy of an artist whose work is only recognized posthumously has captured the public's imagination, from Van Gogh to Francesca Woodman, so the story of Maier's life adds layers of meaning for those interested in her work.

Most of the 45 photographs in *A Quiet Pursuit* are black and white gelatin silver prints, with only two chromogenic color prints in the front gallery at 1400 Elm St. — one of FotoFocus' pop-up exhibition spaces around Washington Park.

Maier often used a compact Rolleiflex camera: a high-end device marketed to professional photographers with a bright viewfinder at the top, which allowed her to look down while shooting at waist-level. And the resulting images are quite candid photographs of people she encountered in close range on the street.

But a whopping 33 of the aforementioned images in *Pursuit* are self-portraits, which — due to their abundance in her oeuvre — we might conclude Maier was quite fond of taking.

Despite a lot of mythmaking by cultural critics and collectors around the life of the artist, Maier's photographs are indeed worthy of comparisons to photography's accomplished masters like Walker Evans, Lisette Model and Helen Levitt.

She uses light and reflective surfaces to frame, obscure and quite literally mirror her subjects. Often the photographer's own body can be seen within the frame in close proximity to unwitting strangers.

One such example in *Pursuit* is "Self-portrait, Chicago" (1970). The image features Maier's silhouette extending from the bottom left quarter of the frame and overlapping the crossed left foot of the otherwise symmetrically composed portrait of two women sitting on a granite bench.

In many of her portraits — listed as self or otherwise — Maier implicates herself in subjectivity. So even though the composition in the aforementioned photograph is focused squarely on her two female subjects, Maier's presence is palpable; she was taking selfies long before they became so ubiquitous that we needed a new word for them.

A Quiet Pursuit gives us a glimpse into the artist's viewfinder to search for the woman behind the camera. And her daring approach, unwavering eye and interest in the human condition appeal to our contemporary sense of self-reflection and tap into our voyeuristic tendencies.

But the images in *A Quiet Pursuit* are decidedly female-focused. Many of the photos included illustrate the female gaze — perhaps one of the characteristics that make Maier's work seem so *au courant* — whether her camera was focused on other women, a reflection of herself or a combination thereof.

It is tempting to want to fill in the narrative of what Maier might wish for her work — she is the subject of so many of her own images.

Since that is an impossible task, let us hope that Maloof and other Maier collectors continue to allow the work to be shown in galleries and museums alike. In doing so, we may just discover more about ourselves.

VIVIAN MAIER: A QUIET PURSUIT continues as part of FotoFocus through Nov. 1.
More info at fotofocusbiennial.org.