

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
July 1994

STILLS

July 14 - October 11, 1994

The first exhibition to present film stills as a distinct genre of photography is on view at The Museum of Modern Art from July 14 through October 11, 1994. Organized for the Museum's Department of Photography by Guest Curator Douglas Blau, **STILLS** includes more than 200 black-and-white photographs, drawn from the vast Film Stills Archive of the Department of Film and Video. The exhibition considers these works independently of the films they document, exploring instead the recurring compositional motifs and other conventions that photographers developed to evoke the drama of motion pictures in still images.

The four million pictures preserved in the Film Stills Archive constitute an extraordinarily rich body of imagery, which, states Mr. Blau, "might be said to rival both photojournalism and nineteenth-century genre and history painting for the variety of its subject matter and its range of pictorial invention." Fascinating in its own right, this unexamined branch of photography also has become an important resource for contemporary art, notably in the work of such artists as John Baldessari and Cindy Sherman.

Film stills, most commonly made by uncredited staff photographers, were produced by the studios' publicity departments to promote particular films in the popular press. Unlike frame enlargements, which are made from a single frame of a film, these publicity stills usually differ from the images that appear on the big screen. Working on the sound stages and sets before and after actual filmings, or between takes, the photographers often arranged

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their own lighting, repositioned characters and props, and shot scenes from viewpoints different from those used by the cinematographers.

The photographs included in the exhibition range in date from 1916 (*Intolerance*; *Oliver Twist*) to 1976 (*Fellini's Casanova*), with the majority drawn from the heyday of the film still, the period from the 1920s through the 1950s. They are installed three-pictures high in a continuous band spanning the entire gallery. This dense presentation of uniform, horizontal 8 x 10" prints is intended to suggest both the massive quantity of pictures produced within the genre and the range of their imagery.

STILLS is organized by pictorial convention and theme, without reference to chronology. The exhibition begins with photographs showing solitary, introspective characters, from such diverse films as *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and *Napoleon* (1926). It continues with stills depicting leading actors tête-à-tête, then in small groups, from a range of films including *La Bohème* (1926), *Joan of Arc* (1948), and *Julius Caesar* (1953), and progresses to ever more intricate compositions in which a large number of cast members are assembled. From card games to cocktail parties, from ancient Rome to New York in the 1920s, these scenes play seemingly infinite variations on standard compositional motifs. Thus the exhibition simultaneously explores the richness of the film-still tradition and the structure of its photographic conventions.

After its New York showing, a national tour of **STILLS** is planned.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact Alexandra Partow, Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.