Lee Friedlander

B 1934 Aberdeen, Washington, USA

Throughout the later 1960s, Lee Friedlander produced a series of idiosyncratic self-portraits in which he adopted common gaffes of amateur photography, such as cropped body parts and conspicuous shadows and reflections, to create sly and often spatially complex compositions that combine a snapshot aesthetic with a modernist commitment to formal experimentation. Frequently showing unassuming public spaces containing featureless surfaces and reflective facades that could catch the photographer's shadow or mirror image, these pictures present a vision of the self immersed in—even constituted by—a banal and largely commercialized contemporary urban landscape. If their ostensibly droll engagement with everyday subjects and vernacular techniques aligns Friedlander's self-portraits with certain tendencies associated with the Pop art of the 1960s, the works' impassive and apparently incidental portrayal of the postwar American environment signals their allegiance, however ironic, to a much older tradition of socially conscious documentary reportage.

Like many of the images that appeared in Friedlander's first book, *Self Portrait* (1970), *Madison, Wisconsin* registered current political concerns through the dual and seemingly antagonistic prisms of mass culture and the photographer's subjective perspective. In it the artist's body appears as two separate and fragmented entities: the translucent reflection of a torso holding a camera, caught in the glass of a storefront window, and a silhouetted head in the form of a shadow cast upon a portrait of a young black woman. Wearing a fashionable hairstyle and a neat dress, the subject of the portrait meets the viewer's gaze with a confident if guarded expression, producing a striking instance of directness within the otherwise ambiguous pictorial space interpenetrated by various reflective surfaces. One of at least four photographs contained within the window display of what was likely the studio of a commercial portrait photographer (a small price tag appears in its upper left-hand corner), the portrait dominates Friedlander's image through the large white mat that sets it apart from the overall composition's shadowy vortices of planes, as well as because it is the locus where the ostensible self-portrait of Friedlander resides.

This conjunction of a white male photographer's shadow upon the portrait of a black female serves as a potent allegory of race relations in the charged era of the Civil Rights Movement, at once suggesting a degree of empathy between the two subjects treated in the image as well as the way in which identity is typically construed according to difference and social hierarchy. Friedlander was certainly sensitive to these political valences and in particular to photography's role in the larger political struggle, having traveled to Washington, D.C., in May of 1957 to document the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, a crucial moment in the movement's history. Focusing his camera—and aligning his shadow—on a photograph presumably made for a private, domestic context yet displayed in a public storefront, Friedlander underscores the ways in which such commercial and nonartistic images could provide a powerful counterexample to the often stereotyped and caricaturized portrayal of blacks in the predominantly white mass culture. With its invocation of various modes of self-representation and portraiture, *Madison, Wisconsin* indicates both the challenges and the possibilities that photography presented for a more perfect union between the races (and perhaps the sexes).

Robert Slifkin

Madison, Wisconsin 1966

Gelatin silver print
6 × 9 in. (15.2 × 22.9 cm)
Purchase. 2000

