

The Museum of Modern Art

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HARRY CALLAHAN

HARRY CALLAHAN, a retrospective of more than 200 prints by one of the central figures in the evolution of photography during the past 35 years, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from December 2, 1976 through February 8, 1977. The exhibition is directed by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography. It was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and will begin a national tour after it closes in New York.

The exhibition traces Callahan's career from his first successes of the early 1940s through the increasingly complex works of the past ten years, and documents his unique role in reconciling the pictorial and structural photographic traditions of the earlier twentieth century. The exhibition includes many works, early and recent, that have not been previously exhibited or published.

Callahan did not begin photographing until 1938, when he was twenty-six. At that time, photography's most conspicuous recent success was the work of the photographers of the Farm Security Administration, who were primarily concerned with social documentation. Other socially committed photographers were just beginning to find a large market for their work in such picture magazines as Life. But although it seemed new, important, and adventurous, and there was a market for it, such activist photography held no interest for Callahan. As John Szarkowski writes in the monograph which accompanies the exhibition,* "Callahan arrived quickly at the sure knowledge that the function of his own work was to describe not the public issues of the great world, but

*HARRY CALLAHAN, edited and with an introduction by John Szarkowski. 192 pages, 130 plates, 40 text illustrations. Cloth \$30.00. Published by Aperture, Millerton, New York. Special Museum edition, hardbound, \$20.00.

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the interior shape of his private experience." For Callahan, the problem of photography has always been "located at the point where the potentials of photography and his own private experience intersected."

Callahan himself says, "I'm interested in revealing a subject in a new way to intensify it. A photo is able to capture a moment that people can't always see. Wanting to see more makes you grow as a person and growing makes you want to show more of life around you....I do believe strongly in photography and hope by following it intuitively that when the photographs are looked at they will touch the spirit in people."

The photographs in the exhibition are arranged to suggest the constant formal and conceptual concerns that have given unity to Callahan's treatment of his favorite subjects: the intimate landscape, including views of fields, leaves, and weeds; vernacular architecture, such as his series of Chicago row houses, made in the late 1940s and 1950s, the Providence houses series begun in 1963, and recent photographs taken in Cuzco, Peru; numerous studies of his wife Eleanor; the passer-by on the street, including the famous series of large close-up views of heads made on Chicago's State Street in 1950; and technical experimentation in thematic synthesis, including multiple exposure, which Callahan makes directly in the camera. These include the double exposure nudes on the fields of Provence of 1958.

Callahan's precise and rigorous investigation of these subjects shows his commitment to the goal of discovering new formal potentials in the photographic medium. But, as John Szarkowski writes, "In spite of the fact that Callahan has worked with a wide range of techniques and equipment, and has pursued his favorite motifs in several countries, his work is informed by a rare integrity, a coherence created by the intensity and logic of his search for pictorial clarity."

"The cool and distanced eloquence of Callahan's work is presumably not only a formal matter. His pictures do not describe, but embody a world of

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moral value, a world aspiring to perfect order."

"The formal purity of Callahan's pictures expunges the idiosyncratic local color of real life, to give us something better but cooler. His nudes do not propose lust; his forests are free of insects; the pedestrians on his city sidewalks suffer not as you and I, but as the saints and warriors that are seen in old museums."

Although this is the largest and most complete retrospective of Callahan's work to date, John Szarkowski stresses that it is only an interim report.

"Photographers continue to develop while their concentration holds. Callahan's shows no sign of breaking. At sixty-four, after thirty-five years of work, he continues to change and grow, and would seem today to photograph with a greater fluency and confidence than ever."

The most important early influence on Callahan was Ansel Adams, who addressed Callahan's photography club in Detroit in 1941. "Ansel is what freed me," Callahan has written. His work was first shown at The Museum of Modern Art in the exhibition "New Photographers" directed by Beaumont and Nancy Newhall in 1946. The same year he joined the faculty of Chicago's Institute of Design where he formed friendships with three men who were to become important influences on him: the Swiss-born painter and sculptor Hugo Weber, architect Mies van der Rohe, and photographer Aaron Siskind. In 1948 Callahan met Edward Steichen, then Director of The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography, who encouraged him and told him he had an extraordinary gift. Steichen showed Callahan's work in many Museum exhibitions, including "Photographs of Harry Callahan and Robert Frank" in 1962.

Callahan has also been an important influence on photography through his teaching, first at the Institute and later at the Rhode Island School of Design, which he joined in 1961 and where he instituted the now famous program of photography education.

Photographs and additional information available from Michael Boodro, Assistant, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019. Tel. 956-7504; 7501.
