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Harry Callahan – “Women Lost in Thought”
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Danziger Projects, in association with Pace/MacGill, is pleased to present the first exhibition in 20 years devoted exclusively to the Harry Callahan photographs - “Women Lost in Thought”.

This series of tight head shots photographed surreptitiously with a long lens on the streets of Chicago in 1950 stands as a landmark both in the context of street photography and in the continuum of conceptually based photographic work. In relation to Callahan’s own work the pictures provide a case study in the way concept and craft interrelate.

Born in 1912 in Detroit, Michigan, Harry Callahan traced his interest in photography to a 1941 lecture given by Ansel Adams. From being a member of the Chrysler Camera Club, Callahan went on to become one of the most respected, prolific, and original masters of American photography. He worked mostly in series, the most famous of which are of his wife Eleanor, and his minimal black and white abstractions of nature, but his curiosity led him down many experimental paths.

“Women Lost in Thought” combines Callahan’s exploration of the human condition with the highly rigid conceptual framework of photographing people in repetitive tight close-up, unaware of being observed, and isolated against an unfocused dark background. Influenced by Walker Evans’ “Subway” series of 1938 –1941 and certainly referenced by P.L. DiCorcia in his recent “Heads” work, Callahan’s photographs deal with the capability of photography to explore the human condition from an unobserved viewpoint. The medium is so often a complicit one that even after 50 years, there is a shock to seeing people’s inner emotions so nakedly exposed.

Recalling this work in 1962, Callahan wrote: “I had an urge to photograph people on the streets, and to do it freely. First I shot recognizable action, people talking to each other, laughing together, etc.. This had a literal value which has never been satisfying to me. While shooting this way I found that people were lost in thought and this is what I wanted...”

In 1976 John Szarkowski wrote of Callahan’s working method:

“The technical problems were formidable. To stop the motion of the subjects at such close range required a much faster shutter speed than the film of the day allowed in the shadowed city street. Furthermore, the problem of focusing accurately on a close-up moving subject would be almost impossibly difficult. To further

complicate the issue, Callahan would also be a pedestrian, photographing as he walked, in order to avoid drawing attention to himself.

Callahan approached the problem by defining a procedure that would give the greatest effective film speed and eliminate the need for focusing, and then worked within the limits established by this procedure. He exposed his film as though it were eight times faster than the manufacturer and severely overdeveloped it to achieve maximum effective density, which produced a negative with little detail in the shadows and a rough abbreviated tonal scale. This required that the picture succeed in graphic terms, not through the illusion of continuous plastic relief that identifies classical photographic technique. To finesse the problem of selective focusing, he pre-focused his camera for the distance at which an average head, from chin to hairline, would fill the horizontal negative. Then he walked the streets, camera to his eye, firing on instinct when the right head filled the frame in the right way."

Sarah Greenough, Director of Photographs at the National Gallery, focused more on the psychological aspects of the work. In her introduction to Callahan's 1996 monograph she wrote:

"By separating the women from their background, and by focusing only on their faces, Callahan entered the psychological realm and addressed the introspection, loneliness, and isolation of the individual in modern urban life. Moreover, his refusal to project any kind of narrative or literary interpretation, his respect for his subjects, and his recognition of their need for privacy and reflection in a crowded city also elicits a sense of empathy and kinship. He was at once removed and detached, a dispassionate observer of this modern spectacle, and also one of them."

Callahan's legacy as a photographer and educator earned him many honors. His work was the subject of a retrospective at the MoMA in 1976 and at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in 1996. In 1977 he was selected to represent the U.S. at the Venice Biennale, the first photographer to be so honored, and in 1996 Callahan received the National Medal of Arts. Harry Callahan died in 1999.

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