

PHOTOGRAPHY

Material and information about photography exhibits and events should be sent to ARTWEEK Photography Editor Joan Murray, 120 Blair Avenue, Piedmont, CA 94611.

Robert Frank Retrospective

Long Beach / Hunter Drohojowska

On March 23, the first American retrospective of Swiss-born Robert Frank's photographs opened at the Long Beach Museum of Art. One would scarcely suspect that within this converted seaside mansion of prim ladies' luncheon ambience would reside such high voltage, dynamic work. The effect is jolting, refreshing as a faucet of champagne.

But Frank's unexamined vision is what we're speaking of here, a lifetime of captured essences, pellucid meanings pulled from ambiguity. From the outset, Frank's photographs lent themselves to multiple interpretation, but while he was still working in Europe, or South America, the prints had a certain sweetness. The incongruous image of children timorously approaching a horse, with Paris huddling as a gray mass in the background, and a disembodied hand on the shoulder of a Peruvian man in a crowd — these are intriguing and disturbing, but not yet threatening. They are the work of a man still secure in his surroundings.

When Frank settled in New York City in 1955, he was the first non-American to receive the Guggenheim Fellowship. For the next two years, he traveled every corner of the U.S. working as cartographer of our national idiosyncrasies. The resulting publication, *The Americans*, was published in 1958. Born of the same candid toughness as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, these photographs relentlessly cut to the bone of the 1950's social malaise. They fascinate and nauseate, making one squeamish with the recognition of such a soulless, drifting homeland. Other artists had hunted such greuling imagery, but Frank has had the advantage of "watching from the wings." As a visitor, he makes images that have a critical aura of truth rather than simple bitchiness.

Perhaps he grew fond of movement itself then, for his next project was shot from the window of a N.Y. municipal bus. And by seemingly limiting his perspectives, he actually expanded the boundaries of what he could see. One focuses on the margins and corners of the print; scenes are infused with an element of voyeurism. They are energetic grab shots, but they always seem structured by his subconscious sense of Swiss design. The *Bus Series* — N.Y. reflects his growing interest in movement and the passage of time. Still photography might have seemed static and slow, for shortly thereafter he packed his camera in the closet and devoted the next dozen years to making films.

Pull My Daisy, 1956, is a gritty "spontaneous documentary" made with friends Larry Rivers, Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky and Alfred Leslie as the "actors." Kerouac later added his own narrations, so *Daisy* really has a different, more literal feeling from the rest of Frank's films. If through photography, he had been exploring, revealing and preserving the outside world, through film he developed a personal and esthetic iconography. His focus was the constant movement and chaos in his life, brought about by time. *Conversations in Vermont*, completed in 1969, documents the uncomfortable alienation from his wife and children. Much of his life's energy had been spent photographing his family, and then only the prints of that relationship remained. Perhaps like some isolated children, he believed that people's souls could be captured and preserved by the magic box. But the past is finally reduced to a



ROBERT FRANK: BUS SERIES, NEW YORK, SUMMER, 1956, photograph, 13-3/8" x 16-3/8", at the Long Beach Museum of Art.

stack of souvenir snapshots, embarrassing reminders of faded emotions.

About Me — A Musical is more theatrical and angry, an attempt to sever from his past completely. It was originally commissioned by the American Film Institute as a study of music in America, but Frank turned the camera on himself. He used a young actress, Lynn Rainier, to deliver his autobiographical soliloquies, defining himself as an outsider at bay against a group of interrogators. The music serves as punctuation and helps pull the film full circle. We finally stand back from the agonizing self-analysis and return to the streets and to the people. There, an old man, tooting a silly flute-like instrument, is asked what he would make a movie about. He becomes the artist when he answers, "Me!" And Frank, the man in the street, and the audience suddenly become one. Everyone's primary interests and motives are revealed to be the same: all pitiful struggles to help the ego survive.

In 1972, Frank moved to Mabou, Nova Scotia, with his new wife, June Leaf, and slowly returned to still photography. But he left the repressed ideal of the perfect print in the closet. Using the freedoms he'd taught himself through film, he now mixes scribbles, handcoloring and Lure snapshots to create photo-objects. He and the medium have grown together, laying waste to rules and accepted norms. These handbuilt landscapes and collages seem torn from a scrapbook of stored, favorite images, like the anecdotes of a rich, layered life. They've regained some of the understated sweetness of his earliest work. Just as his films take detours and wrong turns yet always seem to finish where they began, so too the entire body of his work seems to have come full circle. Once again he is working as a man secure in his surroundings.

The show is extensive, knowledgeably curated by Philip Brookman of Santa Cruz. It's worth several trips to Long Beach just to see more than one of the Frank films. Not too surprisingly, the exhibit is a remarkable tribute to a remarkable man. □

SOCIAL DOCUMENTATION

San Francisco / Hal Fischer

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's current photographic show is the third in a series of exhibits devoted to contemporary photography. Pleased when the museum initiated this program last August, I have since been disappointed by the generally lackluster work selected for display.

The decision to mount a series of photographic exhibitions, primarily of emerging photographers, seemed the perfect opportunity to explore systematically how photography has developed in this region during the 1970s. In both quantity and direction, this decade has probably been the most productive period in local history since the 164 era. There has been not only a continuation of this region's landscape tradition, with some interesting variations in the formalist aesthetic, but also the development of a photolinguist movement and some of the finest color work in the country. The energy manifested by all this photography is visible in the vitality of the support structures — Camerawork's growing strength, the dialogue that has occurred on these pages in the last seven years and the steady stream of locally published monographs. Last I be accused of regional narcissism or nepotism, I should mention that professionals from other areas — critics, curators and photographers — continually express interest in what is happening here.

Given the activity centered in this region and its high visibility, why is it that SFMA seems invariably to miss the boat? Part of the problem, and one that will hopefully be rectified by Van Daren Coke's appointment as curator of photography, is that no individual has taken charge. The museum's photography shows have literally been stabs in the dark — a couple of solo exhibitions here, a few group shows there, but no program with any meaningful direction.

The three exhibits mounted in this series have offered work that is competent but neither innovative nor indicative of a contemporary sensibility. Almost without exception, the viewpoints of the featured photographers have been grounded in an esthetic circa 1971. Furthermore, while these shows provide ample opportunity to expand the critical literature on photography, the museum has published diminutive brochures with biographies, truncated statements and only a handful of photographs. Had these exhibits evidenced a discernible exploration, the museum could have published either one major catalog or a series of brochures (on the order of the Berkeley University Art Museum's Matrix sheets) which in total would have provided some substantial discourse.

The current show, although untitled, has been referred to as the "documentary show." It includes

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ROBERT FRANK: WORDS, MABOU, NOVA SCOTIA, 1977, photograph, 13" x 19".