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Gund photos of Cleveland at museum Photographers display view of city, its people in intriguing exhibition

By Dorothy Shinn

Beacon Journal art and architecture critic

What began at the Akron Art Museum two decades ago has now ripened into a Cleveland tradition.

The beginning was Lee Friedlander's 1982 exhibit, *Factory Valleys*, commissioned by the Akron Art Museum, then headed by Director John Coplans. It became a seminal exhibit, not only for Friedlander, but for countless photographers since.

Mark Schwartz worked with Friedlander on the exhibit, "and it was a very special experience."

Schwartz was teaching photography at the University of Akron at the time, filling in for a professor on sabbatical. Friedlander was wandering around Northeast Ohio looking for subjects. They forged a friendship that has been both inspirational and productive.

The idea of photographing people at work started with the *Factory Valleys* project, Schwartz said. Now it's come full circle for Schwartz and 12 photographers as the catalyst for *A City Seen: Photographs from the George Gund Foundation Collection*, on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art through Jan. 26.

"The really interesting thing," Schwartz added, "is that it's also come full circle for Friedlander," who reprises some of the ideas from that first show.

Schwartz didn't stay in teaching per se, but went on to teach and inspire in a broader sense as the founder, president and creative director of Nesnadny + Schwartz, a design firm and then some, based in Cleveland with offices in New York and Toronto.

The firm creates acclaimed electronic and print communications materials for corporate and nonprofit organizations. Its work is represented in the permanent collections of museums throughout the world and has won more than 1,250 national and international awards.

One of the organizations they represent is the Gund Foundation, which Schwartz convinced about 12 years ago to do something different with its annual report.

He suggested the foundation commission a nationally known photographer to come to Cleveland and take photographs of some aspect of the city, then print the resulting portfolio in its annual report.

The first photographer was Schwartz' friend Michael Book, who did a series based on Cleveland neighborhoods that was published in the George Gund Foundation Annual Report 1990. The series was so well received that the foundation asked Schwartz to keep it going.

So he did. He commissioned 11 other photographers: Lois Conner (1991); Judith Joy

Ross (1992); Dawoud Bey (1993); Linda Butler (1994); Lee Friedlander (1995); Gregory Conniff (1996); Frank Gohlke (1997); Larry Fink (1998); Douglas Lucak (1999); Nicholas Nixon (2000); and Barbara Bosworth (2001).

Their 148 black-and-white photographs, plus a selection of the foundation's annual reports, explore neighborhoods, the Cuyahoga River, Lake Erie, public school children, patients at the Cleveland Free Clinic and workers.

The exhibit, annual reports and related catalog were curated and organized by Schwartz, who served as project manager.



A Lincoln Electric worker, photographed by Lee Friedlander, '95.

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A City Seen: Photos from The George Gund Foundation

Needless to say, it's a gorgeously designed show and has drawn near-record crowds during the holidays.

The catalog features an essay by acclaimed photo historian John Szarkowski to celebrate the foundation's 50th anniversary. The collection will be given to the CMA following the exhibit.

Each of the photographers brings a different approach to their understanding of Cleveland.

Book's views of Cleveland neighborhoods are so quiet you could swear they were all taken on Sunday mornings.

"As I worked, the city was quiet, as though whispering secrets, with none of the noise or frantic activity I had expected," Book wrote.

Beginning with his own neighborhood, Little Italy, Book searched out the city's signature districts, from Hough to Collinwood, Ohio City and Tremont, finding little gems, like the historic McDonald's at East 152nd and Yorick, now dismantled and stored, waiting to be brought back to life at Cleveland's Crawford Museum of Transportation.

Conner focused on the interaction of downtown Cleveland with the Cuyahoga River, which she found to be truly crooked.

Twisting and turning "abruptly and often," so much so that it takes 20 bridges to cross it, she found this part of the river an agreeable challenge for her lens. To her the many bridges seemed "like Erector sets for giants."

CMA Curator of Photography Tom Hinson said of Conner, "She uses a 7x17 banquet camera and prints the full negative. So there are these wonderful, subtly toned platinum prints that retain lots of information."

Conner also ventured out into the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, which she captures with haunting, sweeping vistas.

Ross took on the students of Cleveland's public schools, an experience she found the total opposite from the one she'd had photographing

the students in her hometown of Hazleton, Pa.

"Many students actively pursued being photographed," she wrote. "Kids would pass me notes in the hall as classes changed, telling me where I could find them to make their picture.

"In the Hazleton public schools, where I worked for three years, not a single student ever asked in any way for me to make their picture.

"I have no idea why they were so enthusiastic, but it was wonderful."

One of the most striking images Ross captured was that of Yusra Kazmi, whose image is not only in the catalog and on the wall of the show, but in the November CMA Magazine.

The photograph records a beautiful young girl on the brink of womanhood, full of wistfulness and promise, caught, apparently in mid-thought, as she turns toward Ross's camera. (She is now a student at Cleveland State University.)

Bey used his innovative method of combining multiple images, revealing the changing moods and reactions of his subjects during the photography session.

Butler produced loving portraits of the interiors of Cleveland's arts institutions, including Severance Hall, the State Theatre at Playhouse Square and the Western Reserve Historical Society.

Conniff focused on urban gardens; Gohlke trained his lens on views of Lake Erie, including one remarkable image of an ice-covered gazebo at a Bratenahl estate.

Fink featured students at the Cleveland School of the Arts; Lucak used a pinhole camera to make his luminous, dreamlike photographs of the city's urban landscape; Nixon took on the often tired and suffering patients of the Free Clinic, while Bosworth captured the Metroparks system in stunning panoramic views.

Friedlander revisited the worker theme in his photographs, this time concentrating on

Cleveland workers at LTV Steel, Orlando Baking Company, NASA Lewis Research Center and Lincoln Electric.

"His compositions are just chock-a-block full of visual information, patterns, repetitions and energy," Hinson said admiringly.

We are indeed reminded strongly of the Factory Valley images in the rhythms of these new photographs, for Friedlander capitalizes wholeheartedly on his unerring eye for gesture, movement, and the concentrated intensity of people doing a job well.

"One could spend a lifetime in Cleveland photographing people working," Friedlander wrote. "It has such a vast industry with endless different jobs and workplaces. Cleveland, like most of the middle of our country, makes what we all need."

There is what Schwartz calls a "nice balance" of local and out-of-town photographers. Most of them stayed at Schwartz' home, and he went along on some of the shoots—"Some of them wanted a guide, a hand-holder, a door opener or a friend. Others didn't.

"With Lee, he wanted someone along to answer questions because he doesn't like to do that."

He added, "Lee is one of the most important photographers in the history of the medium, watching him work, it was a pleasure, a gift. I felt like I had one of the best jobs in the world."

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Photograph by Michael Book, '90.



Photograph by Nicholas Nixon, '00.