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ARTS IN AMERICA

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A City's Many Faces Reflect Photographers' Visions

CLEVELAND—The original architects of this city ignored Lake Erie and the sinuous Cuyahoga River and chose a town-square architecture suited to the middle of nowhere. Factories appropriated the view and shaped the city's image as an industrial city built on a river that became so polluted that it once caught fire.

Now an exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art offers a new take on this identity. The show, "A City Seen: Photographs From the George Gund Foundation Collection," on display until Jan. 26, includes works of 12 photographers, each commissioned since 1990 to portray Cleveland in black-and-white from an artist's point of view. In their eyes, the familiar city becomes strange, and strange places seem oddly familiar.

Douglas Lucak used a pinhole camera with a long exposure for lyrical, sometimes brooding photographs in which nature seems to be struggling to reclaim space: one old frame house is dwarfed by evergreens, another is overwhelmed by a lilac bush in full bloom.

Lois Connor chose the river. "The 20 bridges that punctuate the landscape in the downtown flats gave me the most pause," she wrote in the show's catalog. "Like Erector sets for giants."

The George Gund Foundation, which supports Cleveland organizations working in the arts, human services, education, the environment, civic affairs and economic development, has used these photographs to illustrate its annual reports and has now given the collection to the museum.

The idea for the pictures came from David Bergholz, an amateur photographer, who became executive director of the foundation in 1989. He asked Mark Schwartz of the design firm of Nesnadny + Schwartz to find an alternative to the "happy grantee" photography that had traditionally illustrated these publications.

Mr. Schwartz commissioned one fine-art photographer each year to compile a portrait of the city on a given subject. These have included the city's public schools, neighborhoods, families, arts institutions, free clinic, gardens, Lake Erie, parks and people working.



"Gwinn Estate" by Frank Gohlke in the exhibition "A City Seen," varied photographs of Cleveland.

Frank Gohlke/George Gund Foundation Collection, 1997

John Szarkowski, director emeritus of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, wrote in an introductory essay to the exhibition that "the principal difference between the Gund project and earlier serious attempts to photograph a city may reside in the fact that the people in charge of the Gund effort were willing to be surprised."

The experience surprised the photographers as well. Looking back at his images of some of the city's poor neighborhoods, Michael Book wrote, "I am struck by how quiet they are."

He photographed the remains of Hough, a neighborhood that had a population of 65,000 in 1950 and then, during weeklong riots in 1966, endured 240 fires. By 1980 the population had shrunk to 25,000. Ten years later, when Mr. Book visited, the silence was profound. His photograph taken at East 75th Street and Lexington Avenue shows the streetlight and fire hydrant still in place, but most houses and gardens gone.

Linda Butler, asked to photograph this city's art institutions, was told to have no people in her pictures, while others, like Judith Joy Ross, who went into the public schools, were asked to examine the human face of the city.

Ms. Ross photographed the elementary

school students Laquida Watkins, China Smith and Taria Sanders standing side by side on Martin Luther King Day 1992, with Laquida and China wearing ribbons that say, "Keeping the Dream Alive."

Gregory Conniff's love of gardening was part of his vision of the city. "Every garden is different," he said, "but all gardeners share an enthusiasm for showing off what they have made."

"One gardener will refer you to another, and before long someone will invite you to eat out of the garden," he continued. "At that point, you, the stranger, are inside the fence, part way home, backing into Eden."

Dawoud Bey used a large-format camera to photograph families, zeroing in on images like a hand draped on a father's shoulder or a child's shy kiss. Nicholas Nixon turned his camera on people who had come to the Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland. They sit in the waiting room with wriggling children, tired and ill, hoping to get well.

Larry Fink, who photographed the Cleveland School of the Arts, shows its liberating qualities, the flash and dazzle, the clapping hands, the stretches, the girls crowding up to primp in a mirror.

Lee Friedlander shot people at work. A cook at the Orlando Baking Company, for instance, proffers a tray of two dozen loaves

of bread, each as big as his face, while behind him sit racks of trays the same size.

A less familiar face of Cleveland comes from Barbara Bosworth, who used a view camera to piece together panoramas of the Metroparks system, in which there is only an occasional hint of city life. "My work centers on the idea that we are not separate and removed from the land and nature," she said. "We are shaped by our landscape as we also shape the land."

One of the most striking photographs of the exhibition illustrates the clash between natural forces and human amenities. Frank Gohlke, whose assignment was Lake Erie, photographed a gazebo on the Gwinn Estate, facing north to the lake, its columns and roof encased in icicles hung there by the fist of winter.

"A great city," Mr. Szarkowski wrote, "is in its natural condition more like a work of art in progress than like a museum. It is in a constant state of revision; decay and rejuvenation stand tooth by jowl; and improvisation and contingency trump theory."

Tom Hinson, photography curator at the museum, said these photographers "saw the city in ways many of our audience wouldn't think of, because that's why you look at art."

"The artist makes you look at things in a new way," he said.

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