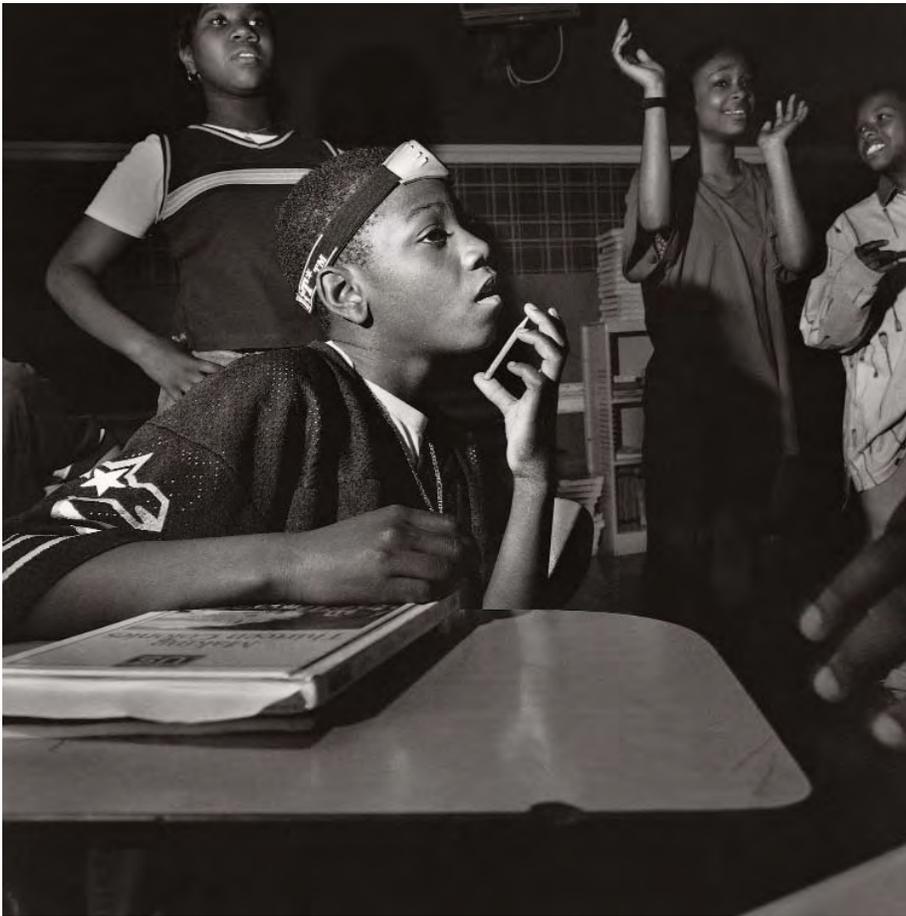


# THE PLAIN DEALER

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2002



Documentary-style photographer Larry Fink focused on kids at the Cleveland School of the Arts for his 1998 portfolio, candidly capturing the youthful vitality of the students.

## AN ART STUDY *Photos and our city*

DAN TRANBERG  
*Special to The Plain Dealer*

A city is never just one thing. It is many things to many people. The diversity of its population, neighborhoods and cultural institutions is analogous to the myriad ways in which a city can be perceived, interpreted, understood and celebrated.

Cleveland's own multifaceted nature is revealed brilliantly in the groundbreaking exhibition "A City Seen: Photographs From the George Gund Foundation Collection," opening today at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Featuring 148 exquisitely produced black-and-white images by 12 dis-

tinguished photographers, it offers a diverse assortment of artistic visions, each presenting Cleveland from a unique perspective.

Through the eyes of these artists, the city is not one, but many places, alternately filled with beauty and despair, opulence and poverty. It is a place haunted by the past and brimming with hope, a city rich with history, and one poised for growth.

Miraculously, all of this is accomplished through works that are relatively small in size (the largest is 13 by 18 inches) and understated in presentation.

Unlike the grand-scale and often brightly colored images of many prominent contemporary photographers (Andreas Gursky, Gregory

Crewdson and Thomas Struth, to name a few), the diminutive works in the Gund collection don't try to compete with popular forms of electronic media.

Rather, they rely on a quieter form of contemplation, making for a show that demands multiple viewings and warrants plenty of time for consideration.

### Portfolio of images

Each of the photographers represented was commissioned by the Cleveland-based George Gund Foundation to produce a portfolio of images for use in the nonprofit organization's annual report.

Started in 1952 by George Gund, a Cleveland businessman and president of the Cleveland Trust Company, the Gund Foundation has given more than \$380 million in grants over the past five decades to a wide range of organizations in education, human services, the environment, the arts, civic affairs and economic development.

Grants to arts organizations account for 14 percent of the foundation's funding programs.

More impressively, by commissioning photographers for its annual report, the foundation is able to do what few foundations ever seem to do: provide support for individual artists.

Beginning in 1990, curator and project manager Mark Schwartz (of the design firm Nesnadny + Schwartz) selected one artist each year, in what he called "an orderly unordered way."

"Quite frankly, we started with my best friend from graduate school, Michael Book," Schwartz said. From that point on, each photographer recommended others. "Michael recommended Lois Conner [for 1991], and Lois recommended Judith Joy Ross [for 1992], so there's a wonderful thread that goes through this work," he said.

According to Schwartz, the foundation never pressured him to use Cleveland photographers. But he didn't want to exclude them either. Two of the 12 photographers selected (Douglas Lucak and Linda Butler) live and work in the area.

### Through the years

Arranged chronologically, the show is beautifully designed with guideposts marking each year and dividing the work of each artist into discreet groups.

Book, who lives in Baton Rouge, La., creates a particularly quiet starting point, capturing Cleveland neighborhoods in the way you might

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see them while walking down the street in the middle of the day.

Strange juxtapositions, so common in any urban landscape, often catch his eye.

Among his most potent images is one of a standard wood-framed house, surrounded by asphalt and clad in aluminum siding, positioned next to a vintage McDonald's in Collinwood.

As in most of his images, Book forces questions concerning the history of the neighborhood, as well as the history of passing trends in America.

The work of New York City-based photographer Conner also considers the past, but focuses specifically on the Cuyahoga River and its relationship to industrial as well as rural elements in the landscape.

Her "Lower Level of Lorain-Carnegie Bridge" is remarkable for the way it presents the steel girders of the bridge as both an optical and metaphorical frame around the industrial environment, defining its functional essence while also presenting the scene as a play on visual contrasts.

All of Conner's images are platinum prints, a rarely used process invented in 1873 that once was favored for its soft, extended range of silvery tones but was widely abandoned because of the cost of its raw materials. Conner's use of the process feels entirely harmonious with her aesthetic, which feels both historical and reverently beautiful.

Similarly, the stunning work of Cleveland-based photographer Lucak presents a perfect marriage of process and idea. His images capture a dark, emotional side of the city that is felt rather than seen. Many seem to glow from their frames like images magically burned from memories.



Frank Gohlke's powerful 1997 image "Gwinn Estate, Bratenahl, View North," like many of his images, speaks of the ways that humanity intrudes upon and competes with the natural environment.

By rejecting the technologies now available to photographers, Lucak sidesteps the trappings of conventional photography and creates images that are as much his own inventions as they are visions we recognize. Ironically, they feel more realistic than anything else on view.

Even more ironic is that, at less than 4 inches square, Lucak's images are the smallest in the show, yet, in many ways, they are the most powerful.

That's not to say that the show isn't packed with compelling works. In fact, every artist's

work is worthy of praise.

Several photographers focused on the people of Cleveland as they inhabited particular environments. Strongest among these is Nicholas Nixon, who looked at patients at the Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland with a remarkable sense of humanity.

Nixon gained national recognition in the 1970s and since has enjoyed considerable fame. When you think about the challenge of walking into a clinic and asking sick patients if you could



New York City-based photographer Lois Conner used a 7-by-17-inch banquet camera, which produces an elongated negative, to create sweeping scenes of the Cuyahoga River and the industrial structures that flank its shores.

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take their picture, you can begin to understand the depth of Nixon's talent, which is as much about being able to communicate with people as it is about understanding art.

## Worthy catalog

A superb 180-page catalog has been published along with the exhibition, both of which celebrate the Gund Foundation's 50th anniversary. And it is of no small consequence that the catalog's essay is written by John Szarkowski, widely considered one of the world's leading historians of photography.

In 1962, Szarkowski became the director of the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Handpicked for the job by outgoing director Edward Steichen, Szarkowski, over the next 30 years, established or solidified the careers of many of the 20th century's

greatest photographers.

Noteworthy too is the fact that the entire collection of 148 photographs will be given to the museum as a gift following the close of the exhibition. According to Tom Hinson, the Cleveland Museum of Art's curator of photography, the gift significantly will expand the museum's holdings of Cleveland-specific photography. But Hinson said he also is thrilled about the gift "simply because it is all outstanding work."

On top of all the many wonderful aspects of the Gund project, the most important is also the one that easily could have fallen between that cracks, the photographs themselves. While it would have been far easier for the Gund Foundation to fill its annual reports with cliched views of the city, it chose instead to take a chance on artists. That is, above all else, the foundation's greatest gift to the city.

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## REVIEW

### Cleveland Museum of Art

**What:** The exhibition "A City Seen: Photographs from the George Gund Foundation Collection."

**Where:** 11150 East Blvd. in University Circle.

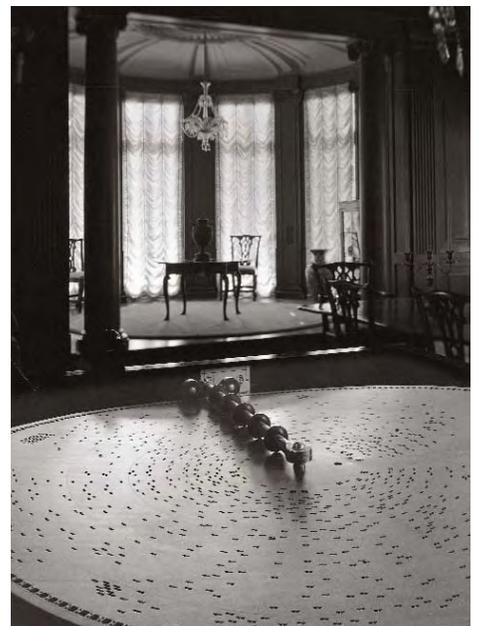
**When:** Runs through Jan. 26. Hours are 10 a.m.–5 p.m. Tuesday–Sunday, plus Wednesday and Friday evenings until 9 p.m. John Szarkowski, author of the show's catalog, will speak on "Photographing the City" in Gartner Auditorium at the museum at 3 p.m. today.

**Admission:** Free. Call 1-888-262-0033 or visit the museum online at [www.clevelandart.org](http://www.clevelandart.org).

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Douglas Lucak's 1999 image "Detroit Shoreway" was produced with a homemade pinhole camera. With its foreboding sky and distorted sense of perspective, it resembles an image from a dream as much as it also accurately depicts the feeling of some Cleveland neighborhoods.



Photographer Linda Butler lives in Gates Mills. Her 1994 photograph "The Western Reserve Historical Society" typifies the extraordinarily rich detail of her frequently opulent images.