

EXHIBITS

# Walter Rosenblum: Homage to the Subject

Now almost eighty, Walter Rosenblum is one of those few photographers who has spoken eloquently, poetically, not only of where we have been in our century, but of where we need to go in the next. Viewing his photographs can be overwhelming, and attempting to communicate that experience in print seems almost futile. Without a poetic command of the written language, like his of the visual, a reviewer might well think better of commenting on his work.

But it is too important, to not say anything.

Rosenblum's work was featured in May of this year at the Kathleen Ewing Gallery in Washington, D.C. I went with excitement, not having seen any of his original prints for about fifteen years, although I already knew his retrospective book well.<sup>1</sup> As a photographer anxious to glean what I could from close, technical inspection of his print values, I began my tour of the two gallery rooms by closely scrutinizing the prints as I went, probing to discover some refinement that I might put to use in my own darkroom printing. Yet, as I went along, I found myself increasingly drawn in by the cumulative artistic power of his compositions. My pace slowed, technical concerns quietly faded. Two-thirds of the way through the 39-photograph exhibit, I realized I was already beginning to feel emotionally overloaded, despite my close familiarity with the majority of the images.

There is no adequate name



Courtesy of Walter Rosenblum

"Woman Feeding Child," Haiti, 1958/59.

for photography such as Rosenblum's. "Documentary" sounds dry, "photo-journalism" is not right, "concerned" falls short. Rosenblum has been photographing people since he was a boy growing up in the poor Jewish immigrant neighborhood of New York's Lower East Side.

photographs begin, and from which they draw their strength; not mere portraits from sincere feeling, but passionately *truthful* ones.

### Above the Tide

In the quest for a new avenue of expression, many early Twentieth-century artists of talent, rejecting the empty appearance of the Classical tradition left by Romanticism, turned to Modernism, with its emphasis on abstract form. Increasingly shaped by the destructive pull of influences avowedly opposed to our Judeo-Christian culture,<sup>3</sup> this *avante garde* avenue long ago become an open playground for any attention-seeking poseur with



Courtesy of Walter Rosenblum

"Tree, Goats, Mother and Child," Haiti, 1958/59.

a paint can or scrap of rusty chicken wire. For Rosenblum, a student and friend of both Lewis Hine and Paul Strand, two of the century's finer photographers, such pseudo-intellectual artifice holds no sway. Nor do his images depend on gross impact—or visual assault—as is so much demanded by today's insatiate audiences. Some do have that impact, but it is never sensational. These are images that speak simply at first, but grow on you over time, revealing previously overlooked relationships, like a long-familiar song of Schubert. Each element of Rosenblum's compositions plays an integral role, a role which could not be served by a strictly formal or stylistic feature, because Rosenblum composes from ideas, not two-dimensional constructs.

In the finished print from the film negative, those ideas continue to dominate, so that one is never awed by the physical print characteristics before seeing the image itself. One can not speak of Rosenblum's work, however, without including his artistry in the dark-room as a photographic printer. As elaborated below, printing is as integral to the photographer's art as the

painter's use of his brush. Every bit of the technical mastery that enables Rosenblum to make you feel the baking heat of the Haitian sun, or the cool sea air of the Canadian coast, is utilized in refining the visual composition, to communicate its idea content. The path that your eye travels through the scene—where you enter, where you pause, what you don't see until last—has been painstakingly worked and reworked by the artist.

### The Fine Print

It is helpful to look at the role of photographic printing in the context of the photographer's purpose.

The distinction between categories

like “documentary photography” and “photo-journalism” is not always sharply defined, but in the case of work such as Rosenblum's, it clearly can not be considered in the same frame of reference as typical photo-journalism. Most photo-journalists work on short deadlines, striving to capture an image, or perhaps several, that will grab a reader's attention on a newsprint or magazine page. Competition for the reader's attention is the name of the game. But this imposes severe restrictions.

For example, the poor quality of reproduction rendered on newsprint paper, compounded by the typically

not from a deadline, but from an internal motivation to see through appearances and bring together elements that will reveal something universal. When possible, the artist observes and studies his subject long before he even takes his camera out to begin photographing, and a location may be revisited time and again, in anticipation of more suitable lighting or other conditions, or in the effort to refine the composition.<sup>4</sup>

The presentation will differ radically, as well. The photographer will craft what is referred to as a “fine print”—a framed, original photographic print, often between approximately 8×10 inches and 16×20 inches, painstakingly made by hand, taking into consideration all the variables the medium will allow. These variables, which allow far greater control over the image than most people are aware, include cropping, altering image contrast and overall brightness, and selectively lightening or darkening even small areas of the picture (a face, a hand, parts of the foreground or background), in order to produce a composition that attains the highest artistic level—an image in which

nothing is superfluous or disproportional to the artist's complete idea. It is not unusual, in this effort, to make half a dozen or more local alterations in printing, in addition to decisions affecting the image overall. This degree of refinement of the image is no different in principle, and no less demanding, than the care of an artist working in charcoal or paint. Although the photographer cannot move a mountain or tree as may the landscape artist, he can alternately suppress or draw attention to the visual elements of the picture as desired.

The photographer also has a wide range of photographic papers of varying tonal and surface characteristics from which to choose, which, in combination



Courtesy of Walter Rosenblum

“Beaching Boat,” Gaspé, 1949.

small image size, requires the photographer to eschew subtlety, complexity, and fine detail, in favor of simple and strong compositional contrasts. The reader will view the image for seconds, at best. Working fast and getting some useable image from each assignment, as defined by the relevant editor, day-in and day-out, supersede other considerations. And, of course, every image is subject to cropping (using only a part of the full image recorded on the film) and other decisions by editors.

Although a photographer such as Rosenblum may sometimes photograph events similar to those covered by news dailies and weeklies, the approach is entirely different. The pressure comes

with special toning baths, may extend the tonal scale, and produce any degree of variation from sepias or chocolatey browns, to neutral, to decidedly cool tones, from the subtlest tint to dramatic change. With all these factors, it should come as no surprise that the photographic artist will occasionally spend several days perfecting the printing of a single image.

Because we are today inundated by photographic images, it is useful to emphasize that fine-art photography, like great works of art in general, must be seen in the original to be fully appreciated. Even with the best printing technology, reproduction in inks falls short of original photographic printing, and when mass book production compromises are figured in (or when printing quality is uneven, as, unfortunately, in Rosenblum's monograph), the original and reproduction may look quite different. I urge you to go (physically, not virtually) to whatever museum or private collection may be accessible, to see works of art in the original—emphatically including works of fine photography.

### A Compelling Mirror

The photographs that the youthful Walter Rosenblum made of the Pitt Street neighborhood he knew so well, reveal an extraordinary ability to marry timing and composition. In the cited documentary film, he notes that even then, he began his study by observing, not by shooting first and asking questions later. This desire to get to know his subjects, distinguishes his work from that of countless photographers whose true hope—conscious or not—is to return from an unknown place with “great pictures,” as if with trophies of the hunt. It may be that Rosenblum's own childhood poverty put him at ease with those



Courtesy of Walter Rosenblum

“Brother and Sister,” Spanish refugee children, Toulouse, France, 1947.

in similar circumstances; indeed, he is as unassuming a person today as ever, despite his growing international recognition. But poverty itself makes us neither good nor wise.

Rosenblum's years in Haiti (1958-59) gave birth to some of his finest work, a group of strong images which, together, complete a greater composition. Isolating one or two (especially with the severe limitations of tonal reproduction here) can not do them justice. Yet, see the mother feeding her young child—the warmth of her gentle smile, the child's divided attention, the open innocence of the older son looking on from behind. It presents such a universally familiar scene, we are drawn in by something close to our own experience. Then, the painful irony of the circumstances compel us to think; they cannot be dismissed.

Like the picture of the two men beaching their boat in Canada's Gaspé,

the quiet surroundings of the other Haitian mother and child outdoors tell us that this is life every day. Each image in its own way brings together a counterpoint of essential elements to supersede the momentary nature of photographic exposure, with a lesson from life.

When you look at the picture of the Spanish refugee children, think to the recent years' genocide in the Balkans. Reflect, which has greater, more lasting power, the nightly TV news images of refugees streaming across the border, with news crews stuffing lenses into the faces of bitterly weeping men and women while reporter-personalities pester them with questions before turning their own best side to the camera; that, or this single, silent distillation of the horrors of war?

Through Rosenblum's eye, we see the Haitian, the refugee, the immigrant, in

ourselves. His unbounded portrayal of the enduring human spirit is optimistic, but not carefree. It urges us, each time we think of it, to be better persons.

—Philip Ulanowsky

1. *Walter Rosenblum, Photographer* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1990).
2. “Walter Rosenblum: In Search of Pitt Street,” Daedalus Productions, Inc., New York, 1999.
3. See Michael Minnicino, “The New Dark Age: The Frankfurt School and Political Correctness,” *Fidelio*, Winter 1992 (Vol. I, No. 1).
4. This was the preferred approach of such great photo-journalists as W. Eugene Smith, who was entrusted by *Life* magazine with months-long assignments and huge expense accounts, an opportunity that has all but disappeared from magazine publishing today.

*A selection of Walter Rosenblum's New York City photographs appears on the inside back cover of this issue.*