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PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW; Josef Koudelka's Melancholy Visions of Gypsy Life

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It was the music, plaintive and dark, that in 1962 led Josef Koudelka to begin photographing the Gypsies of his native Czechoslovakia. "I was playing Gypsy music myself," he explained recently. Then a 24-year-old aeronautical engineer in Prague, Mr. Koudelka eventually became a photojournalist in exile, famous for enigmatic and evocative images of cultures on the margins of industrial society. "I just began to photograph them. And once I started I couldn't stop."

Mr. Koudelka's pictures of Gypsies, most of them made during the 60's, brought him worldwide attention. They are at the heart of a 42-print retrospective at the Pace-MacGill Gallery on East 57th Street through June 12, along with examples of his work as a theater photographer in Prague. Also on view are the riveting photographs he made in 1968 of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops, two years before he fled to the West, first to London, then to Paris, where he now lives.

But it is the Gypsy pictures that most clearly define Mr. Koudelka's darkly romantic view of the world. Replete with narrative suggestions, they belong to the rich photographic tradition pioneered by Andre Kertesz, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank. In one image, a Gypsy crouches beside a white horse, as if talking to it, while the horse nods in apparent understanding. In another, the body of a woman is seen laid out in a coffin inside a cramped cottage, with her family and fellow villagers crowded around; the body and the faces of the mourners are etched with dingy sunlight from the room's only window.

Mr. Koudelka's stark images depict the poverty and clannishness of Gypsy life, but unlike many documentary photographers, he does not present their situation as a social problem that can somehow be fixed. Instead, he shows the Gypsies as perpetual outsiders, and their life as a primal mix of glee and wonder, sorrow and mystery.

"If a picture is good, it tells many different stories," Mr. Koudelka said in an interview at the gallery. One of his best-known images, taken in 1963, has plot lines enough for a Hollywood story conference: a young Gypsy, under arrest for murdering his wife, is shown in handcuffs, isolated in the foreground, his face a stunned mask and his shoulders hunched into himself; he seems to be in a different world from that of the villagers and policemen in the distance.

Some critics have written that the man was being led off to his execution, but Mr. Koudelka reports that he was only sent to prison for his crime. The man himself insisted that his wife had died from an accidental fall. Whatever the truth, today the man is proud to have been the subject of this emotionally harrowing photograph. This year, on a trip to Prague, where he has taken a small apartment, Mr. Koudelka looked up the man, who is now out of prison. When he showed him his picture, the man called his friends around: "Look! That's me!"

Taking the photographs of Gypsies was fraught with difficulties. Mr. Koudelka, now 55, had to take time off from his job to visit the Gypsy camps and villages. Not only were his subjects mistrustful, but the Communist Government was less than thrilled. Officials were suspicious of his efforts to record the life of these outcasts, who are looked at askance by many Eastern Europeans.

The Gypsy photographs first brought Mr. Koudelka attention in the West, but it was his images of the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia that cemented his reputation as an important documentary photographer. When Soviet-led tanks rolled into Prague, Mr. Koudelka was in the thick of the action, photographing mass demonstrations and the confrontations between protesters and invading soldiers. Among the moments Mr. Koudelka recorded are one of a man draped in a Czechoslovak flag falling on his knees in front of a tank, and of a woman sobbing as she clutches the edge of a bloody flag.

Smuggled out of Czechoslovakia soon after the invasion, the stunning black-and-white images were widely published in the West. With no film or video records made of the events, Mr. Koudelka's blurry, intense photographs provided powerful evidence of the brutality of the crackdown. But because Mr. Koudelka was still in Czechoslovakia and subject to reprisals, the pictures were published with the credit line "P. P." -- Prague photographer. In 1969 the Overseas Press Club in Europe awarded him the Robert Capa Gold Medal anonymously for his graphic account of the terrible events.

These chapters in Mr. Koudelka's life and work are well represented at Pace-MacGill, as are his lesser-known theater photographs, made during the same period as the Gypsy pictures. Working with two theater groups in Prague -- one of which, Theater on the Balustrade, had Vaclav Havel as dramaturge -- Mr. Koudelka developed a distinctive and charged style of recording productions, focusing on intensely emotional moments between characters, seen in close-up and printed in high contrast.

After Mr. Koudelka fled to the West in 1970, he joined Magnum, the photojournalists' cooperative, and began to record popular religious festivals and Gypsy life throughout Western Europe.

But his reputation as a loner and an unconventional photographer grew apace. For 17 years he refused to take magazine assignments, preferring to live on an astonishing succession of grants and prizes from arts agencies in France, Britain and the United States. "I was never paid for anything in Czechoslovakia," he said, "so it was easy to accept not being paid in the West. Also, I was used to a lower living standard."

He has followed his own stylistic path as well. While he still uses the 35-millimeter cameras that are standard equipment for photojournalists today, many of the pictures he has taken over the past seven years have been made with panoramic cameras. Using the elongated format of these cameras, he has photographed what he describes as "things about to be lost, to be finished," including heavy industry in northern France, the destruction of the Berlin wall and bombed-out buildings in Beirut.

The present show does not include any of Mr. Koudelka's recent work, but stops in 1968, with his pictures of the crushing of the Prague Spring. He is now working on various book projects, including a collection of his panoramic photographs, and continues to travel widely, photographing as he goes. Like many great photojournalists, he has become himself an outsider, a Gypsy.

Photos: A 1963 Koudelka photograph of a handcuffed young Gypsy under arrest for the murder of his wife -- Emotionally harrowing. (Josef Koudelka/Pace-MacGill Gallery); A 1989 self-portrait of the artist. (Josef Koudelka/Magnum)