

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Garry Winogrand, Made to Order

By WILLIAM MEYERS
April 1, 2014 5:51 p.m. ET



'Albuquerque' (1957) *The Museum of Modern Art/The Estate of Garry Winogrand/Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery*

Washington

Sarah Greenough, the head of the photography department at the National Gallery of Art, walked me through the Garry Winogrand exhibition and we talked of this and that until, when we came to the end, I asked her what she most wanted me to tell the readers of *The Wall Street Journal*. "This is the first major assessment of Winogrand's work since 1988," she said, "the first since the MoMA retrospective." That show, four years after Winogrand's sudden death at age 56, was organized by John Szarkowski, the director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art; Szarkowski's exhibitions had established Winogrand, and he considered him to be "perhaps the most influential photographer of his generation." It was unusual, Ms. Greenough said, for a quarter of a century to go by with so little attention—through exhibitions or books—being paid to so important a figure. The current show, curated by Ms. Greenough and Winogrand's friend Leo Rubinfien, and the 464-page catalog that accompanies it are intended to fill that gap.

Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander and Joel Meyerowitz were Winogrand's contemporaries and peers; he knew them, their careers overlapped and were similar in many particulars, but each has fared better than he in terms of public attention. A Bronx native, Winogrand began working in New York in 1951 as a photojournalist

selling pictures to Collier's, Harper's Bazaar, Pageant and other magazines; in the early 1960s, as the magazines declined, he briefly did advertising work. But at the same time he was assiduously photographing in Midtown Manhattan and in the city's parks, honing his idiosyncratic off-kilter style as a "street photographer." This produced some of his best work, and it was recognized in museum and gallery shows. In 1964, with Szarkowski's sponsorship, he won the first of several Guggenheim Fellowships, and in 1967 Szarkowski included Winogrand in MoMA's "New Documents" exhibition, an epic event in the history of art photography that made Arbus, Friedlander and Winogrand stars.

Around this time, Winogrand gave up commercial work and was eking out a living on grants, teaching and occasional print sales, but he did not stay in his darkroom as Arbus did, working indefatigably to produce exquisite exhibition prints. And unlike Frank, whose "The Americans" is considered a model of editing and sequencing, Winogrand was remarkably casual about his photo books; the pictures were largely selected and arranged by others. What Winogrand did—and did, and did—was take pictures.



Metropolitan Opera, New York City' (c. 1951).
The Estate of Garry Winogrand/Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery

Early in his career he would develop his film, make contact sheets, edit the contact sheets, make rough prints of the most promising negatives, and then a final print of those images he thought warranted it; that is what most professional photographers did before the digital age. But as his career progressed, he took more and more pictures with increasing indifference to the actual results. Toward the end of his life he was shooting 1,500 rolls a year. (There are 36 exposures on a roll of 35mm film.)

But when he died in 1984, Winogrand left 2,500 rolls of undeveloped film and 4,100 rolls developed but not contact printed. The 16,000 prints he had given to the Arizona's Center of Creative Photography in 1983 were

unorganized, as were the 19,000 contact sheets, 14,000 prints and 45,000 35mm color slides CCP acquired in 1992-93 from his widow. Many of the images in the current show were printed by others and are not necessarily ones he would have selected.

This exhibition includes great photographs. The street photography is a cacophony of women in full stride on city sidewalks—many attractive, but others hags—and suited businessmen in conversation as they hurry along. The visceral photojournalism from the '60s covers protests and confrontations, politicians great and small, celebrities, charity balls, accident victims and more. The grant money and teaching took Winogrand all over the U.S.: rodeos in Texas, space launches at Cape Kennedy, airports of many major cities, sports events, zoos. Everywhere there are people, a democracy of faces of people of all conditions, shown no better than they are, but no worse.

Winogrand's national coverage is frequently compared with that of Frank, but it has a different valence. Frank's pictures, like "Trolley—New Orleans" (1955), with the blacks seated at the rear, can be read as secular homilies; he knew what he thought about what he was shooting and he wants you to think likewise. Winogrand's best images are like koans, the Zen riddles asked not to elicit an answer but to prompt contemplation. In the foreground of "Albuquerque" (1957), a child's tricycle scooter lies on its side in the driveway of a ranch-style house; a young child in bright sunlight stands at the head of the driveway against the darkened entrance to a garage in which another figure can barely be made out; the right half of the picture is taken up with desert that extends to distant

mountains, and a canopy of clouds is over all. There is a tinge of menace, but of what? None of the suggestions I have seen is persuasive; to me it is an actualization of the ineffable.

"Wait!" Winogrand exclaimed in a 1977 interview. "You're talking about *meaning*. I want to talk about the *picture*."

Trying to understand the behavior that has kept Winogrand's work from getting the attention it might otherwise have had, I thought of Wallace Stevens's poem "The Idea of Order at Key West," in which a woman who walks along the beach singing is unaware that she is being observed. "She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang," the poet says. Similarly, the taking of pictures is a way of structuring the world and, for those who are good at it, it can be intense—an addictive—pleasure, irrespective of who sees the results. Like Stevens' singer, Winogrand was possessed of "the maker's rage to order," a rage Stevens pronounces "blessed."