

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Josef Koudelka's Photos Turn Life Into Fable

"Josef Koudelka: Nationality Doubtful" at the Art Institute of Chicago contains 170 photos by the Czech photographer.

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June 6, 2014 4:47 p.m. ET



'Romania,' from the series 'Gypsies,' 1968, printed 1980s. Romania, from the series Gypsies, 1968, printed 1980s. The first American retrospective look at the Czech photographer's career in more than 25 years opens Saturday at the Art Institute of Chicago. *The Art Institute of Chicago, promised gift of Robin and Sandy Stuart.* © Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos/Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

Whether capturing images of Slovakian Gypsies, invading Soviet tanks or strange peopleless landscapes, Josef Koudelka has pursued a timeless, mythic truth. Matthew Witkovsky, curator of the first American retrospective look at the Czech photographer's career in more than 25 years, calls him a recorder of visual fables at the intersection of tradition and modernity.

"A fable has to feel deeply true, even though it's not real in the sense that it happened last Tuesday," Mr. Witkovsky said. "It's real in some eternal sense, and that's an incredible thing to try and achieve in photography."

"Josef Koudelka: Nationality Doubtful" opens Saturday and runs through Sept. 14 at the Art Institute of Chicago. It contains 170 photos, from the onetime engineer's early experiments in the medium to 30 views of the Czech invasion to 8½-foot-wide panoramic photos of archaeological ruins and industrial sites from as recently as 2012. Setting the exhibition apart from other surveys of the 76-year-old photographer's

work is its focus on rare vintage prints and its inclusion of contextual preparatory materials and period magazines and newspapers featuring Mr. Koudelka's images.

A highlight: 22 early prints from the photographer's 1960s "Gypsies" series, an up-close immersion in Roma culture that many experts consider to be his most important body of work. Mr. Koudelka, an extreme self-critic, has devoted much time to ruthlessly winnowing down his thousands of images to a limited number that he considers the best. "I think to get one good picture is a miracle, and miracles are not happening very often," he said in an interview. "If you get good pictures, you have to deal with them well."

After closing at the Art Institute, the exhibition will travel to the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, starting Nov. 11, and later to the Fundación MAPFRE in Madrid. As for Mr. Koudelka, he has no plans to slow down his travels or set down his camera. "Most important for me," he said, "is to wake up in the morning and go to take photographs—to look at what exists."