



▲ Peter MacGill was a photographer before he started working in galleries.

A Pioneering Photo Dealer

Representing towering figures and those who were once upstarts, Peter MacGill has helped build the high end of the photography market **BY HILARIE M. SHEETS**

As a photography student at Ohio Wesleyan University, Peter MacGill spent the fall of 1973 interning at LIGHT Gallery in New York—one of only two galleries (the other was Witkin) devoted to fine-art photography. “At that time you couldn’t get anyone in the world to buy photography,” says MacGill, who is president since 1983 of Pace/MacGill, one of the world’s leading photography galleries. “I felt that I was joining a team, fighting for a cause, getting people to pay attention to photography.” At LIGHT he met Paul Strand, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, and Robert Frank, among others. “They are some of the greatest photographers who ever lived. I got to know all these people,

and then through dumb luck got to represent them over the years.”

MacGill, 58, has over the last four decades been a central player in the stewardship of photography and in elevating its recognition as a significant art form. In addition to representing artists including Nan Goldin, Joel-Peter Witkin, and William Christenberry when they were unknowns, the gallery effectively built the high end of the photography market. MacGill sold the first photograph to break the \$100,000 mark—Paul Strand’s *Wall Street* (1915)—from a 1984 show he organized of Strand prints that were first exhibited at Alfred Stieglitz’s Gallery 291 in 1916. He sold the first picture to achieve more than \$1 million, in 1999—Man Ray’s *Glass Tears* (1932–33)—and brokered the current

record for photography, \$3 million for Stieglitz’s image of Georgia O’Keeffe’s hands. MacGill has also been instrumental in placing major collections and photographers’ archives at institutions. He negotiated the sales of the Thomas Walther Collection to the Museum of Modern Art, in 2001, for \$27 million and the Manfred Heiting Collection to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2002, for \$54 million, and is currently in the process of selling the Paul Strand Archive to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

MacGill, whose father was an Episcopal priest, grew up in suburban New York in a family that valued culture. His mother made him take a bath and put on a suit before a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art when the Mona Lisa came to town. During dinners the kids took turns choosing classical music (Peter favored fiery stuff by Tchaikovsky and Mozart). MacGill fell under photography’s sway after acquiring a Brownie camera with his grandmother’s S&H Green Stamps. At boarding school in Connecticut, where he struggled in academics and sports, he received acclaim for his darkroom skills. MacGill describes discovering Robert Frank’s “The Americans” in a freshman photo class in college as a “transformative experience.” The next year, he convinced the department head to let him teach photography—largely to juniors and seniors. If he didn’t exactly have the qualifications, “I had the ambition,” says MacGill, tall and rangy, who today competes in triathlons and marathons.

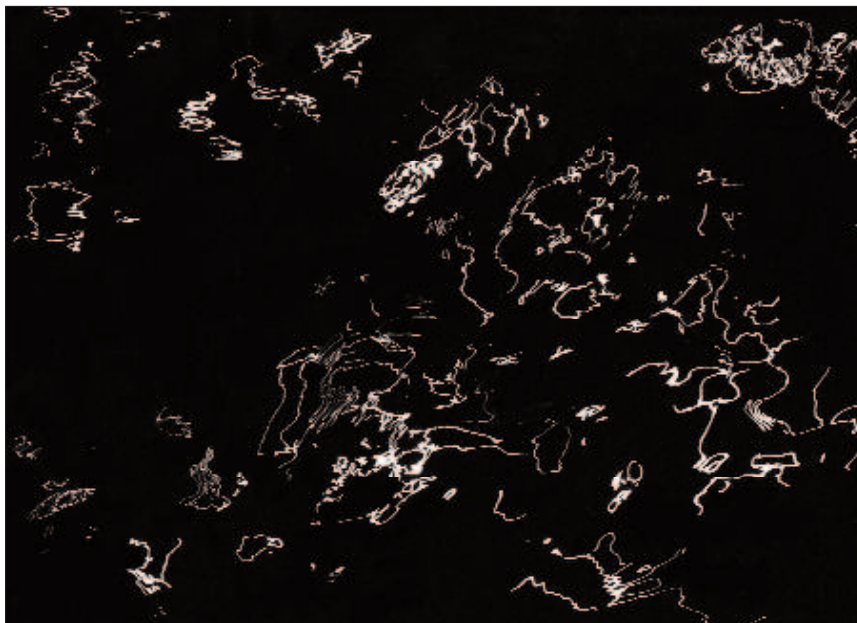
Harold Jones, MacGill’s boss at the LIGHT Gallery, left to start the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, and encouraged MacGill to enter the M.F.A. program there in 1976. Over the next year and a half, MacGill worked as a curator in the center by day and in his darkroom at night. He claims to have produced only one really good picture. “Harry Callahan made a really good picture every time he made an exposure,” says MacGill, who realized he didn’t have what it took to be a great photographer. But he had a profound love of the medium. He returned to LIGHT Gallery in 1978 as director, which

lasted two years, and then started a small publishing company for photography called QED Editions. In 1983, after Pace Gallery founder Arne Glimcher asked MacGill to organize an Edward Weston show—which Glimcher entirely presold—MacGill partnered with the gallerist and Richard Solomon, president of Pace Editions, to open his own gallery. “I look at my life as working for photographers, trying to support them financially and with exhibitions and publications,” says MacGill. “In my family, because my father was a minister, your job was to take care of people.”

MacGill recalls his four-hour lunches with Irving Penn, when the artist would give him a list of aspirations. One of those was to keep intact the series of portraits of tradespeople Penn made in the early 1950s, called “Small Trades.” MacGill facilitated its sale to the Getty Museum in 2008. The series “has been kept together, exhibited together, published together, and traveled,” he says.

He was incredulous when a renowned curator of photography at MoMA, long-time friend John Szarkowski, came to MacGill on the eve of his museum retirement, in 1991, and humbly asked if MacGill would represent him with his own photography. “I said, John, are you kidding me?” recalls MacGill, who could not have been more honored. But Szarkowski had some trouble letting go of the curatorial reins. While MacGill was laying out the first show, Szarkowski had the installer move things by fractions of inches. Szarkowski then asked about the wall text. “I had to write a wall label for one of the great writers of the 20th century,” says MacGill, with mock indignation, adding, “I made him sign off on it.”

These days, MacGill is very excited about the potential of digital photography to make new types of color images. “If I were a young photographer, I’d be looking at digital imaging from the get-go,” he says, noting that some of the materials used in modern analog printing are becoming obsolete. The advent of digital photography, in turn, has helped shift the perception of analog color prints from the 1970s, once looked at as second-class citizens to vintage prints.



“The book on analog photography has closed and there’s a limited supply of the great stuff, which has put tremendous pressure on that marketplace,” MacGill says. “The value is only going to go up more when people realize you can’t just make another print.” ■

Hilarie M. Sheets is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

▲ **Harry Callahan, *Sunlight on Water*, 1943 (top).** His work is paired with Jackson Pollock drawings in a current Pace/MacGill show. **John Szarkowski, *From Country Elevator, Red River Valley*, 1957 (bottom).**