

ENGAGED OBSERVERS

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY SINCE THE SIXTIES

June 29–November 14, 2010

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GETTY MUSEUM EXPLORES THE TRADITION OF SOCIALLY CONCERNED REPORTAGE

Engaged Observers: Documentary Photography since the Sixties

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Center
June 29–November 14, 2010

LOS ANGELES—In the decades following World War II, an independently minded and critically engaged form of photography began to gather momentum. Situated between journalism and art, its practitioners created extended photographic essays that delved deeply into topics of social concern and presented distinct personal visions of the world. On view at the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Center, June 29 – November 14, 2010, *Engaged Observers: Documentary Photography since the Sixties* looks in depth at projects by a selection of the most vital photographers who have contributed to the development of this documentary approach. Passionately committed to their subjects, these photographers have captured both meditative and searing images, from the deep south in the civil rights era to the war in Iraq in 2006. Their powerful visual reports, often published extensively as books, explore aspects of life that are sometimes difficult and troubling but are worthy of attention.

"This exhibition focuses on the tradition of socially engaged photographic essays since the 1960s," explains Brett Abbott, associate curator of photographs and curator of the exhibition. "Working beyond traditional media outlets, these photographers have authored evocative bodies of work that transcend the realm of traditional photojournalism."

Engaged Observers is structured around suites of photographs from the following projects: "Girl Culture" by Lauren Greenfield, "The Mennonites" by Larry Towell, "Streetwise" by Mary Ellen Mark, "Black in White America" by Leonard Freed, "Nicaragua, June 1978-July 1979" by Susan Meiselas, "Vietnam Inc." by Philip Jones Griffiths, "The Sacrifice" by James Nachtwey, "Migrations: Humanity in Transition" by Sebastião Salgado, and "Minamata" by W. Eugene and Aileen M. Smith.

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Although one does not always associate style with photojournalism, where objectivity and neutrality are traditionally valued, aesthetics have been an important consideration for all of the photographers represented in the exhibition. One of the strengths of this tradition has been its ability to harness artistic decisions in reporting on the world. Meiselas chose color film for her *Nicaragua* project because she felt it better conveyed the spirit of the revolution as she experienced it. Salgado noted that the solemn beauty so characteristic of his approach is important in conjuring a persistent grace among his migrant subjects, allowing him to present them in a dignified way while calling attention to their plight. Nachtwey used tight framing of messy conglomerations of tubes, instruments, and arms in *The Sacrifice* as a way of conjuring the atmosphere of controlled chaos that he experienced in trauma centers in Iraq. In this kind of work, subject and style, message and delivery, are deliberately intertwined.

All of the photographers in this exhibition use a series of images to address conceptual issues. For instance, Freed was concerned with bridging cultural divides to engender support of basic civil rights, while Griffiths denounced violent commercialization; Salgado pointed to the effects of globalization, while the Smiths addressed the related issue of industrial pollution; Meiselas engaged and countered the fragmented process by which we receive news and understand history, while Towell challenged the meaning of "newsworthy" and explored, as did Greenfield, how cultural values affect life; Nachtwey found the human toll of war unacceptable, and Mark, the idea of homeless street kids in one of the wealthiest nations in the world.

Many of the photographers have published books to further convey their socially engaged messages. Books allow for a greater depth of reporting than magazine articles since their length can be tailored to the needs of a particular project. And because they can be read in private, books are conducive to extended contemplation and the slow absorption of ideas, both of which are important to understanding projects that are broad in scope and have layers of meaning that, in many cases, were developed over the course of years. Moreover, they provide photographers authorial control over the presentation of their work. Each artist has the ability to decide how pictures are captioned and with what information.

A final section of the exhibition is devoted to tracing the origins of the documentary photography tradition, touching on American Civil War photographs by Alexander Gardner, turn-of-the-century activism by Lewis Hine, Depression-era photography, and photojournalism in pre-World War II picture magazines. This section also looks closely at the formation of Magnum Photos. Founded in 1947 by Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and several other

photographers, Magnum provided a new platform for an independent documentary approach to photojournalism and became one of the world's most prestigious photographic organizations. Magnum was structured to allow its members to pursue stories of their own choosing, spend as much time as they wanted on a particular topic, and be as involved as they desired in the editing, captioning, and publication of their work. The organization was meant to harness commercial assignments as a base from which to pursue independent work, and the concept has given rise to generations of independent photographers, including many of those in *Engaged Observers*.

Note to editors: Images available upon request.

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