



PHOTOGRAPHS OF PEOPLE

by

MORRIS ENGEL

AT

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PAUL STRAND

A Statement

Morris Engel's photographs are both important in themselves and as a part of a vital development in American photography. In the past four or five years the tradition, of which Lewis Hine is the outstanding pioneer, has received a strong new impulse that has brought fresh air into the stale atmosphere of a very empty photographic pictorialism. An ever growing number of photographers, many of them still young, have turned their cameras upon their environment and have begun to document both America and the time in which they themselves live. People, people on the land and in the cities, the vast social physiognomy of America, this has been the point of focus. Photographers have turned their eyes and the "eye of the camera" upon human suffering and need, upon human dignity and courage. The resulting photographs, for want of a better word, have been called "documentary." Their value does not lie in the word, but in the fact that they direct our attention, our thought and our understanding toward those urgent problems which America through the New Deal has only begun to face and to solve.

This group of photographers who have become magnetized to the pressing demands of their own world and of their own land, becomes ever larger. The use of the camera as an instrument of investigation, of record, and of communication, has already produced an invaluable body of work. Outstanding contributors have been Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn and other members of the staff of the Farm Security Administration; Margaret Bourke White's and Erskine Caldwell's, "You Have Seen Their Faces"; the work of the W.P.A. projects; and in New York the production by the Photo League, not only of photographs, but of photographers. For the Photo League, now numbering some seventy members, has been a center in which many young and talented photographers have received their training, where they have been able to get both technical knowledge as well as a contact with the whole historical development of photography as a medium of expression.

Morris Engel, after four years of work at the Photo League, comes forward with a group of photographs which are of the greatest interest. Here is a young man of twenty-one who sees people with compassionate understanding, as they move within the city's tumult or relax for a few hours at a nearby beach. Great particularity characterizes his most successful photographs. Inasmuch as generalization has been a characteristic weakness of documentary photography, this is a step forward. Engel sees his subjects very specifically and intensely. They are not types, but people in whom the quality of the life they live is vivid—unforgettable. And by the quickness of his vision not of his shutter, he has been able to seize this expressiveness of the person as he or she moves down an avenue or street, amid the welter of city movement. Sometimes it is not one person but several whom he photographs; a man glancing at a girl as he goes into a subway; a group of people on a park bench, or a family out for a walk. Here, too, the portraiture is held with the additional element of an attempt to photograph relationships between people. This last is perhaps the most vital and interesting quality which distinguishes Mr. Engel's work. It is one which has infinite possibilities for development. His unusual capacity not only to see keenly and quickly, but also to integrate plastically what he sees gives promise of an important contribution to photography. This, his first one man show, is in itself solid evidence of genuine talent.

PAUL STRAND AT WORK

VISUAL BEGINNINGS PHOTOGRAPHS, MOVIES, AND PAUL STRAND

History has rewarded the pioneering giants of photography, Niepce, Daguerre, Talbot, Brady, Hine and Stieglitz, with mounting monuments of print praising their achievements. Paul Strand (1890-1976) who leaves work of heroic dimension, will be acclaimed by voices more authoritative and stronger than mine. Yet I would add these words to the pictures of "Paul Strand at work", more for my needs than his.

From the moment an infant can open its eyes and focus on the infinite surroundings, images are visually recorded in the mind's memory bank. The recall process for these distant scenes is unknown, and pictures buried in my brain remain latent ones. However, as far back as I can remember, from the age of four and five, my visual beginnings were mainly influenced by the Hollywood movies, and later the Photo League, where I met Paul Strand.

The real-life continuous performances by our neighbors in the streets of Brooklyn's Williamsburg, wearing masks of love, hate, life and death, were free to watch. A ticket for the fictional fancies of Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Charlie Chaplin or Harold Lloyd, cost ten cents. Here in a setting designed by the architect of poverty, bursting with people, amid the tenements and pushcarts, shone the spot-lighted movie marquees, as bright as any lighthouse in the night. The Gem, The Echo and Loew's, were the common carrier of travel, escape and dreams. My second home. Seated in the comfortable darkness of a better world, nibbling on penny pretzels and twists, my eyes devoured the screen's dancing images of cowboys and Indians, kings and commoners, and all the good guys and the bad.

How or why one becomes a photographer is a question not always gainfully answered. Does chance play its hand through some small accident? Is it a carefully planned design, built picture brick upon brick, into a house for permanent residence? Or a mysterious mixture of quicksilver unknowns too fluid to grasp or define? In retrospect, wanting to learn photography seemed a natural act. Eventually it became a major force, with my eyes in perpetual pursuit of people to transpose into pictures. Discovering the Photo League at the age of eighteen, I found a magical camera called the Rolleiflex. The basic course was given by several people, including Berenice Abbott, and I also joined a production project Aaron Siskind created, called the Feature Group.

My first encounter with Paul Strand was at a Photo League lecture. I recall his generous offer to look at members' portfolios. Gathering a small number of photographs, spurred by the desperation of unemployment, I risked a phone call to him, reminding him of his invitation. I left the photographs at his office and met with him a week later. He liked my work, asked what I was doing. We talked about photography and movies as well, since he was working on his film "Native Land". Did I have any interest in motion pictures? Did I want to learn how to make movies with him? I said yes, unable to fully appreciate the opportunity presented.

At his Grove Street Village apartment, he showed his two cameras, an Akeley, and an Eyemo. The 35mm customized Eyemo, which I was to use, was particularly heavy despite its small 100 foot capacity. After loading the film, his entire instruction consisted of two suggestions. Don't shoot in short bursts, and don't move the camera quickly when panning. He advised practice shooting without film. Operating the heavy camera and tripod for two days made me impatient to expose film, and soon I was shooting scenes he needed to complete several sequences. They were mostly of men working in small groups. Viewing the rushes with him as he commented on some results as "good", was pure pleasure. Later, he incorporated a few seconds of my footage in the finished film with the photo credit reading "by Paul Strand". I considered this the ultimate compliment.

Toward the end of 1939, when I secured a one man show at the New School, he agreed to write something for the mailing piece. His statement expressing confidence in my ability both present and future, was beyond my dream. I gratefully thanked him and was surprised by his reply, "Morris, it wasn't just for you". He was not only relating his philosophy concerning the development of photography, but more than that, was also passing on the continuity of standards from an established artist to a beginner. Possibly the encouragement that Lewis Hine, one of his teachers, or Stieglitz, might have offered him was also a factor.

In the mid-forties, Strand twice invited me to spend short vacations with him. One was at Prospect Harbor, Maine, where he was shooting color for Eastman Kodak, and the other at his New Jersey summer place. While at the latter, I made a series of pictures of him at work. I remember the quiet confidence, the concentration, and the

extreme patience he displayed. The very long exposures required complete stillness of the plant, since the slightest movement would result in a blur. He explained his technique of opening and closing the shutter repeatedly during a single exposure. The remarkable fact was that after any wind movement ended, the plant would return to its exact position, providing a sharp image. He worked as if time was of no consequence, and he would take as much of it as needed to get what he wanted. Hours, days, weeks or even longer. His photographs would not be measured by the time span of other men.

Strand had been using part of his father's office on Canal Street as his darkroom. One day he phoned, asking if I would help pack and move the equipment. Driving down in his station wagon, we parked in front of number 261. On a top floor we entered a small room, which easily could be described as cramped, providing minimal space for one person. There were some trays, bottles, cartons and photographic paper boxes to be carted. After a few trips carrying these odds and ends, the dingy bare room, which many photographers would have rightly rejected as inadequate, offered small evidence that some of the world's finest photographs had recently been printed here.

From time to time during dinner evenings at his house, he would show his work if requested. He would rest a photograph on a chair in front of me for a minute or so, and repeat the process for twenty minutes or more, until a question would signal that he had shown enough. His printing was legendary and a prime example of an artist in total control of his medium. He fused his philosophy, a

concern for the basic dignity of the human being, and his technique, into a two dimensional flat surface which created a magical rainbow of perception in the finished photograph. He offered pictures affirming nature's endless beauty as well as memorable people he discovered throughout the world. A photographer of rare talent. This was the consensus of the critics and I fully concurred. However, regardless of the heights his photographs reached, of even greater importance, his personal quality of consideration and encouragement he shared with me transcended his work.

These visual beginnings eventually fused with growing photographic challenges as the years passed. Almost four were spent as a photographer in the U.S. Navy, during World War Two. Part of that time as a combat cameraman assigned to "D" Day activity in Europe. Several years as staff photographer for the newspaper "PM", and free-lancing for national magazines followed. After many experiments in motion pictures, I finally obtained a foothold in the field with the film, "Little Fugitive".

My last meeting with Strand was during his major retrospective show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art several years ago. There were traces of pleasure and triumph in his face. I will never see him again, but I will remember him well. For many and certainly for me, Paul Strand provided standards of artistry, inspiration and humanity of the highest order. I am deeply grateful to him for what I have received, and for passing through his orbit.

MORRIS ENGEL



PAUL STRAND AT WORK, 1947