

DANZIGER

On Madison

Evelyn Hofer in 3 parts:
Portraits, Landscapes, Still Lives.
April 6 – May 18.

For this, our second exhibition of Evelyn Hofer's photographs, we look at the three distinct genres that Hofer mastered - portraits, landscapes, and still lives. Working exclusively with a 4 x 5 inch viewfinder camera, Hofer took her time to set up her camera composing each picture carefully and creating images that have a timeless aura regardless of the subject.

Over a career spanning more than 40 years, Hofer created a body of work that both looked back to the tradition of August Sander and forward to anticipate the color work of William Eggleston. A photographers' photographer, Hofer was both respected and influential within photographic circles but considerably less known to the public causing her to be called "the most famous unknown photographer in America" by New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer – a devout supporter of her work.

Almost in counterpoint to much of the on-the-fly work of her contemporaries, Hofer used extraordinary patience to slow the world down, examine its conditions, and capture the exact image that she envisioned, searching for an "inside value, some interior respect" in the people, places, or objects that she photographed. Although frequently commissioned by magazines and publishers to make portraits and land or cityscapes, her goal was to go beyond documentary photography to create a subjective interpretation of the world.

Evelyn Hofer was born in Marburg, Germany in 1922 and died in Mexico City in 2009. When Hofer was eleven her family fled Nazi Germany for Switzerland where she decided she wanted to be a photographer. She began with an apprenticeship with Robert Spreng a noted studio photographer, and took private lessons with Hans Finsler, both pioneers of the "New Objectivity" movement.

Hofer's studies covered everything from photographic technique to art theory. She didn't just learn composition and the underlying theories of aesthetics, she also learned the chemistry involved in producing prints. Beginning in the early 1960s she became one of the first fine art photographers to adopt the use of color film and the complicated dye transfer printing process as a regular practice. Throughout her long career, Hofer continued to shoot in both color and black and white – determining which was the more apt for the picture at hand.

DANZIGER

On Madison

In the middle 1950s Hofer's career took an important turn when the writer Mary McCarthy asked her to provide photographs for "The Stones of Florence", a literary exploration of the history and culture of that city. Over the next forty years Hofer collaborated with writers including V.S. Pritchett and Jan (James) Morris to produce books on Spain, Dublin, New York City, London, Paris, and Washington, D.C. in which she mixed portraits and cityscapes.

For most of her career, Hofer alternated between the genres of portraiture and landscape but in her seventies she turned to still life inspired by the paintings of the 17th century Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán. In these photographs, the everyday objects portrayed take on an almost spiritual dimension. Depicted with focus and skill they are later life work on many levels.

Hofer died in 2009. When asked for her thoughts on being called "the most famous unknown photographer in America." she said she liked it. She understood that what mattered was the work, not personal fame.

Hofer's work has influenced such photographers as Thomas Struth, Joel Sternfeld, Adam Bartos, Rineke Dijkstra, Judith Joy Ross, and Alex Soth. There have been retrospectives of her work at the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne (1994); the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Switzerland (2004); the Villa Stuck in Munich (2005); and the Fotomuseum The Hague (2006). The exhibition *Evelyn Hofer - Encounters* opened last month at the Museum Kurhaus Kleve, and will go to Museum Moderner Kunst Wörlen in Passau and the Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur in Feb. 2020. A major American museum show is currently being organized.

EVELYN HOFER

Naming the Unknown

BY CAROL McCUSKER



DUBLIN SKY—1966

Is it possible in this age of publicity for a photographer to be both famous and obscure at the same time? This was the question posed by New York critic Hilton Kramer, speaking about German-born photographer Evelyn Hofer (pronounced HOE-fer). Though he asked this question more than thirty years ago, Hofer has remained until recently largely unknown, due most likely to the Fifties' and Sixties' love affair with photojournalism and the emerging popularity of the spontaneous black-and-white street photography of Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, Bruce Davidson, and others.

Yet, the passage of time and the ferocity of the art market

have led to re-evaluating or discovering many photographers previously overlooked. "One could call her 'the Unknown,'" said noted photo publisher Gerhard Steidl, "but she belongs among the great photographers of the 20th century. To develop her work into a book was one of the most important discoveries in my working life." Just as this wider recognition of her work was being fully relished, Hofer died in 2009 (the same year as Helen Levitt, whose photographic sensibilities and career parallel Hofer's in many ways). Sadly, such attention often comes to artists at this moment in their careers. That said, it is time for Evelyn Hofer to enter the canon of photographic history.



GIRL WITH BICYCLE, DUBLIN—1966



ARTERIES, PORT AUTHORITY, NEW YORK—1964

Evelyn Elvira Hofer was born in Marburg, Germany, in 1922. Her father worked in the pharmaceutical business, providing her family with a measure of culture and comfort. When Hitler came to power in 1933, the Hofer family left Germany for Geneva, then, Madrid just as the Spanish Civil War began. During the family's brief years in Switzerland, Evelyn aspired to become a concert pianist (not unlike a few other photographers, most notably Ansel Adams, Paul Caponigro, and William Eggleston). She applied to the Paris Conservatory but was not accepted. Abandoning her musical aspirations, she then studied photography with Hans Finsler in Zurich, who, in the New Objectivity style, combined Modernist graphic design with the ordered documentary Bauhaus style. Its sharp focus and formal, clean lines—reductive and sometimes abstract—would serve Hofer in the years to come. With Franco's victory in Spain, and WWII engulfing Europe, the Hofer family packed their

belongings once again, and left for Mexico, where Evelyn began her career as a professional photographer.

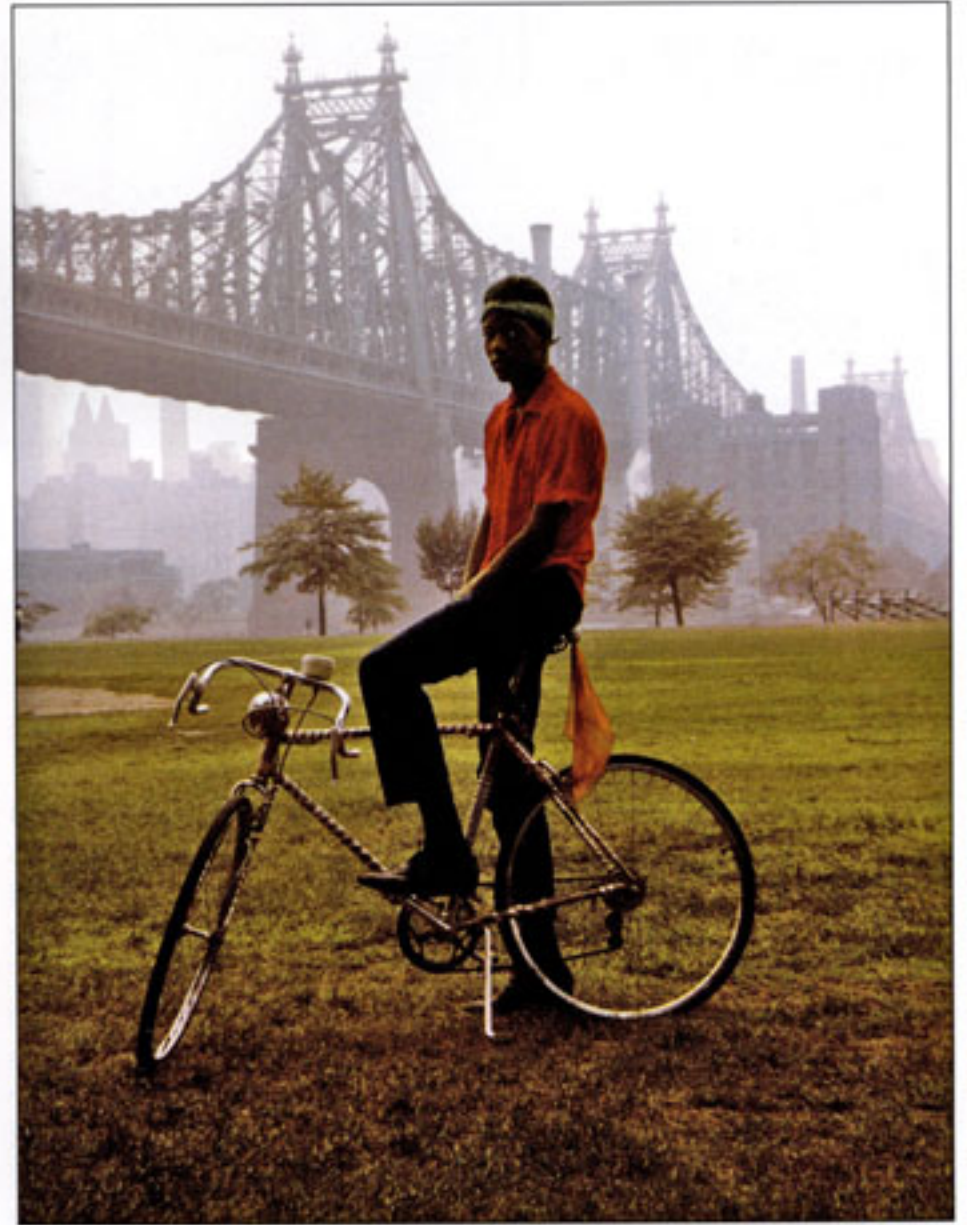
Immediately following the war, Hofer moved to New York. Harper's Bazaar director, Alexey Brodovitch, hired her. She also worked for Alexander Liberman at Vogue, and, over the years, contributed to Vanity Fair, Life, and the London and New York Times, among other publications. "I worked for Harper's and Brodovitch," Hofer said in an interview, "but he very soon gave up any attempt to make me into a fashion photographer. He didn't think I had any talent for it and I agreed." She had, instead, a talent for "conveying the essential character of real people and real places, a gift of careful observation," wrote critic Edgar Allan Beem. Andreas Pauly, Hofer's assistant for 20 years, concurred, "She is after the essence of things, whether it's a chair or a human being. She was never trying to do what was in fashion or trendy. She always intended to find her own way of doing things."



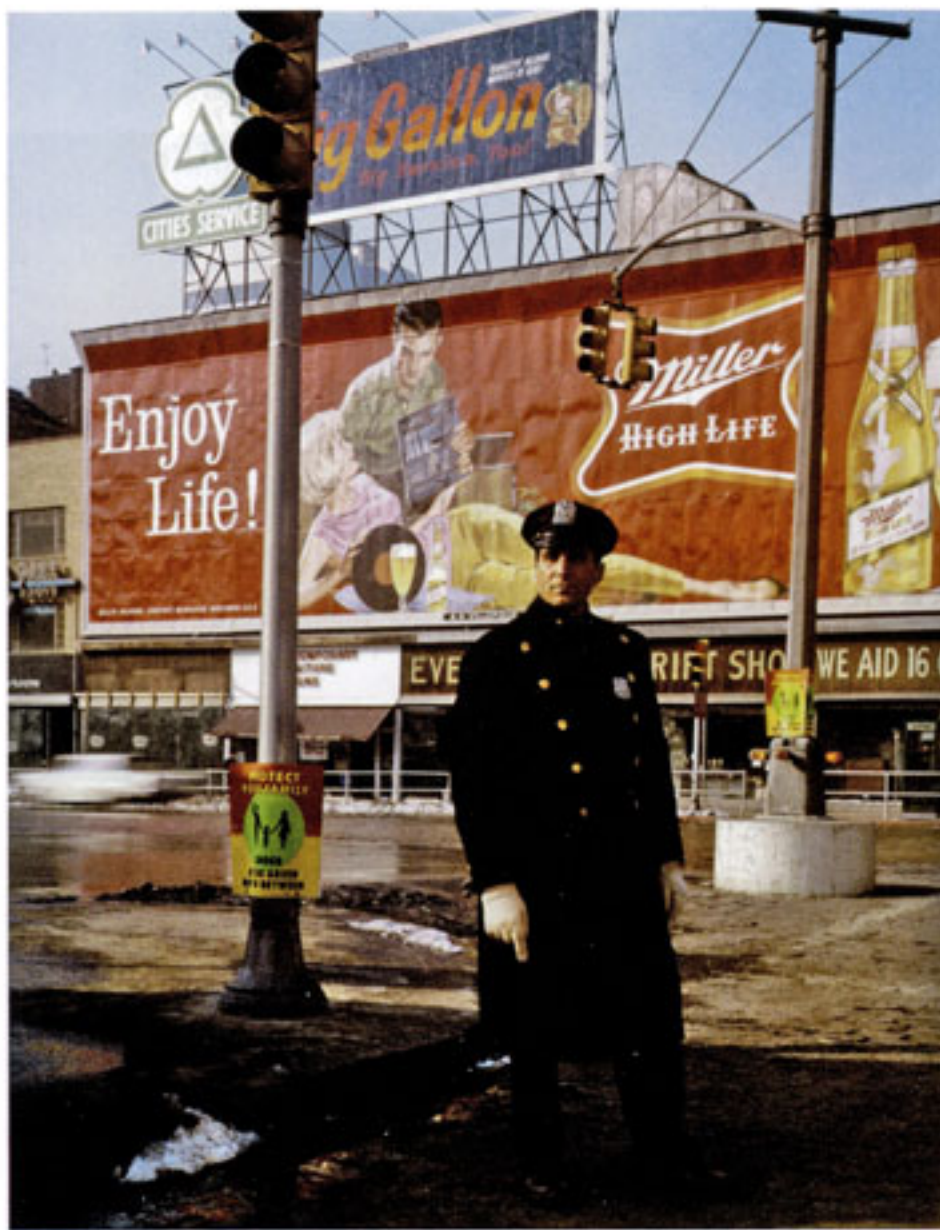
FOUR YOUNG MEN, WASHINGTON—1975



HARLEM CHURCH, NEW YORK—1964



QUEENSBORO BRIDGE, NEW YORK—1964



POLICEMAN, 59TH ST., NEW YORK—1964



SPRINGTIME, WASHINGTON—1965

In time, her reputation for technically precise, classical compositions gave her entrée to publications beyond commercial magazines. She was asked to illustrate Mary McCarthy's celebrated *The Stones of Florence* (1959), V.S. Pritchett's trilogy, *London Perceived* (1962), *New York Proclaimed* (1965), and *Dublin: A Portrait* (1967). She worked with James Morris on *The Presence of Spain* (1964) and *The Evidence of Washington* (1966) by William Walton. She retraced the steps of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1833 trip to Italy, creating, with Evelyn Barish, *Emerson in Italy* (1989). She objected to calling these projects "travel books." Still, for many Americans, the 1950s and 1960s were years of expanding confidence and curiosity about the world, with airlines promoting tourism as never before, and travel books beckoning the reader through word and image. Whether by necessity or for pleasure, Hofer was no stranger to travel. Her camera acted as a passport. Her linguistic versatility (she spoke several languages) translated into a fluid visual range that included historic architecture, portraits, city neighborhoods and the way people lived in them. Her scrutiny of these subjects was, as with many European photographers, discrete yet direct. Hofer paid attention to the way people dressed and carried themselves as a way of knowing something of their character. She was drawn to them during off hours (playing soccer, talking in doorways, going to church) and the stuff of their lives (cars, bikes, barroom murals, makeshift window memorials). As a citizen-of-the-world, she missed little and was enchanted by much.

Her portrait style is indebted to the German portraitists who came before her, primarily August Sander along with Bill Brandt (Brandt disowned his German heritage for a British one). Centrally framing her mostly working class subjects, with their solemn gaze, Hofer said she looked for an "inside value, some interior respect" from the faces and postures of the people she placed squarely in her viewfinder. She cited the influence of Rembrandt for his use of light to "fathom the souls of his subjects." The black-and-white portraits made in the first two decades of her career define the revelatory, yet slightly held-back formality that she brought to the color work she began in the 1960s. Rarely cropped, her subjects exist on their own in a space airy and equally defined on all four sides, a respectful distance from where she stands. As has been said of several German photographers from Sander to Bernd and Hilla Becher to Thomas Struth who photographed in a similar fashion, a taxonomy unfolds—a clean registration of a face, body, clothing, pose, and environment that begin to describe the fascinating diversity of the human race. (It is no wonder the Nazi Party destroyed many of August Sander's glass plate negatives.)

Adding to her stylistic approach was the equipment Hofer used. As she walked the city, on assignment or not, she carried a 4x5 camera and tripod, which forces a certain patience in the pace of walking, in the time it takes to set up the camera and in waiting for the right light. Hence, the result-



PHOENIX PARK ON A SUNDAY, DUBLIN—1966

ing photographs are physical by the very mechanics of her camera and the exactness of what it records. With a view camera, every blade of grass or word on a billboard can be read, offering detailed information that seduces a viewer. By contrast, a 35mm camera records quickly, oftentimes without the subject even knowing. But with a 4x5, Hofer's rapport with the people she was photographing, as well as their awareness of her, dramatically slowed down the picture-making process. The amount of time that elapsed between when she asked a person to pose and when she snapped the shutter affected how they responded to her, and she to them, with conversation undoubtedly part of the exchange. Who she photographed, and where, also reveals an attraction to male public image, not, perhaps, without some irony.

An active collaboration resulted, and it shows. For instance, in *Policeman, 59th Street, NY*, the proud officer strikes a stoic pose. Hofer aligns him in front of a billboard. It shows a relaxed, reclining couple listening to LPs, a "Miller High Life" moment, the policeman's authoritative presence striking either a reassuring or disturbing counterpoint. Similarly, in *Springtime, Washington*, a policeman sits on his motorcycle engulfed in cherry blossom trees. For a woman who knew Hitler's and Franco's special squads, one can't help but think a series of incongruities struck her, of nature/man, organic/industrial, openness/surveillance. Bemusement also infuses her line up of four soccer players in *Phoenix Park on Sunday, Dublin*, their white shorts indicating fierce play. Yet, through her viewfinder, they become childlike and vulnerable, their heads and bodies oddly incompatible.



MARIANNE MOORE'S GLOVES—1983



BAR, MERCER STREET,
NEW YORK 1967



MARIANNE MOORE'S COAT,
PHILADELPHIA—1983

What makes Hofer's color images particularly unique is the use of dye transfer, a rich, subtle, and durable color process that only a handful of practitioners use today. (Guy Stricherz and Irene Malli printed Hofer's color photographs, collaborating with her throughout the process.) Dye transfer possesses the depth of oil painting alongside an unparalleled fidelity. Words such as "clean" and "pure" are often used to describe it. With dye transfer, color, nuance, and brightness can be controlled to express exactly what the photographer wants. A print is produced from three separate negatives made by photographing the original negative through red, green and blue filters. A mould is made from each of the three negatives, which are then transferred to a gelatin-coated paper to produce a full color image. It is an enormously time consuming and expensive process, complicated by the fact that Eastman Kodak ceased making the materials needed for its production over fif-

teen years ago (photographers have stockpiled it since). Once you have held a dye transfer and looked into its surface depth, few (if any) color processes rival it.

Hofer worked in color out in the street at the same time as William Eggleston, Joel Meyerowitz, and Stephen Shore (as did Helen Levitt, also unrecognized at the time). Until the 1960s, color photography was considered the realm of advertising, not fine art. But Museum of Modern Art photography curator, John Szarkowski, changed that in his breakthrough 1976 exhibition, *William Eggleston's Guide*, the first one-person exhibition of color photography at MoMA. Although initially resisted by public and critics alike, it asserted color as a legitimate aesthetic language, at once factual and edgy, romantic and intimate. It is hard to imagine, given color's present ubiquity (it is now the language of photography), the exact nature of Szarkowski's battle for color's acceptance into a dominantly black-and-white fine art mindset.



MEXICAN STILL LIFE WITH SAINT (STILL LIFE NO. 5), NEW YORK—1997

Later in her life, Hofer made exquisite 17th-century inspired still-lives, complete with raking light articulating silver plates, fruit, textured wood, a saint's silhouette. The jewel-like, painterly quality of dye transfer suits an interpretation of the Dutch genre. She also made still-lives of Marianne Moore's cape and tricorne hat, and gloves lovingly laid out, their white cotton against light blue tissue paper. Moore, one of America's great poets (and, like Hofer, a woman of irony and wit) wore these clothes for celebrated portrait sittings with photographers Richard Avedon and George Platt Lynes. The cape and hat now hang as Moore usually left them, in a recreation of her living room at the Rosenbach Museum and Library, evoking the simultaneous presence and absence of the writer who found inspiration in "the vastness of the particular...so that in looking at some apparently small object, one feels the swirl of great events," as fellow poet William Carlos Williams wrote about Moore.

This aptly describes Hofer's vision as well. As with this simulacrum of Moore's presence, so, too, with Hofer's photographs: each describes her presence, an expression of her eye and mind, her great intelligence and curiosity about our shared humanity. Hofer dedicated her life to photography as a way to connect with it. Many of her images could be mistaken for the cool reserve applied to much 21st-century photography (she would revolt against this enslavement to trends), but they come from a very different sensibility. Unselfconsciously, she worked for nearly fifty years, creating an oeuvre that is, like a leaf in amber, a fusion of her and her time, exquisitely expressed in restrained beauty and empathy.

■ CONTACT AND PRINT INFORMATION

RoseGallery, Santa Monica, California
www.rosegallery.net; info@rosegallery.net



THE NEW YORKER

April 23, 2010

In Focus: Evelyn Hofer: A Lifetime of Perfection

Posted by Elisabeth Biondi



Evelyn told me the following anecdote with a slightly mischievous smile and a bit of triumph in her voice.

She was asked to photograph Jean-Michel Basquiat for Vogue. Basquiat was the darling of the art world, young, hip, and very successful, Evelyn the established photographer, in her late sixties then and very much a lady. She arrived at his downtown loft at the agreed hour and was told that Basquiat was busy. Her response was please tell Mr. Basquiat that Miss Hofer will wait for him. She waited for hours—much longer than she thought tolerable. Eventually she heard rumblings upstairs. Basquiat descended the staircase. She looked at him, he looked at her, and then she simply stared him down. For the rest of the shoot he treated her with great respect. Evelyn had risen to his challenge and had won the battle. The portrait was excellent.

Portraits are always an encounter between two personalities, the sitter and the artist. It is my opinion that the photographer's talent as well as his personality determines a successful portrait session (along with a bit of good luck). Evelyn was highly disciplined; she was a perfectionist, demanding, but most demanding of herself. She knew all about equipment, lights, cameras, paper, printing. No Photoshop then, just her perfect negatives. Psychologically alert, she observed and studied her subjects patiently, with no shortcuts along the way. She had a great laugh and an impish smile which lightened the mood of the setting. The result was fine portraits, perfectly composed, revealing her perception of the sitter.

She photographed countries, cities, places, and interiors much the same way. She went on literary journeys with writers, and together they created a series of books, portraits of places in words and pictures. "The Stones of Florence," with Mary McCarthy, is one that has become a classic.

The last time I visited Evelyn in her Westbeth loft she showed me a series of still-life compositions in 4x5 format. They were extraordinary. They had a painterly quality, reminiscent of seventeenth-century Dutch and Spanish still lives, but were clearly photographs. The arranged objects were bathed in the most serene light, and the backgrounds were dark and warm. They were masterful compositions.

Evelyn Hofer died in November 2, 2009, in Mexico City. The New York Public Library commemorates her, Helen Levitt, and Lilo Raymond, who died the same year, in a show that runs through May 3rd. Rosegallery honors Evelyn's lifetime of work with an exhibition through May 1st. And Steidl has published an excellent catalogue of her work. Here's a selection.













