

Look Again, With Love and Liebling

By James Estrin Apr. 11, 2014 Apr. 11, 2014 3

Jerome Liebling's lyrical vision of everyday life permeates a body of work that combines passionate idealism with sometimes brutal realism. It is a style shaped by a destitute childhood in Depression-era Brooklyn and forged by horrific firsthand experiences during many of the most violent battles of World War II.

At the core of Mr. Liebling's work, however, was the belief that life has meaning and that every individual has value and dignity. It also reflects his own astonishment about how a poor kid from Brooklyn managed to have a 65-year career pursuing his passion.

"His photos showed people doing the day-to-day things to just survive, that were heroic and really hard," his daughter Rachel said. "Not just for people who were working in the fields but hard for everybody. He wanted to change the perception of who are our icons, who are our gods. He wanted us to look around at the beauty of everyday life, appreciate it and see it. And really look."



*Girl and World's Largest Open Pit Iron Mine, Masabi Range. Hibbing, Minn. 1950.
Credit Jerome Liebling/courtesy Steven Kasher Gallery*

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

There is an opportunity to do just that in “Jerome Liebling: Matter of Life and Death,” at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Manhattan through April 19. Curated by Rachel Liebling, who is also a filmmaker, the show goes beyond his best-known early photos and reveals his more aesthetic and formal concerns, particularly in his later color images.

Mr. Liebling, who died in 2011 at the age of 87, had a visceral understanding of the hardships of human existence and fervently desired a just world. Born to poor European immigrants in New York in 1924, he enrolled in Brooklyn College but volunteered for the Army during his freshman year. He fought at D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge as well as in North Africa and Italy.

He served in the glider airborne forces, one of the more dangerous jobs in the Army: He sat in a small, unarmed engineless aircraft that was dragged by a larger plane, released and flown behind enemy lines to gather information and launch surprise attacks.

Many of his fellow gliders died in crashes or were captured, imprisoned or killed by enemy forces. He survived, but the experience colored his view of the world and he became an ardent pacifist.

After the war he returned to Brooklyn College and joined the Photo League, a pioneering social documentary photography movement that included Berenice Abbott, Sid Grossman, Aaron Siskind and Paul Strand. Mr. Liebling showed his work in group exhibitions and served on the league’s executive committee. He studied with Mr. Strand and also assisted him in the field.

While he was originally driven by social issues, Rachel Liebling said that over time her father’s work went beyond the documentary genre.

“He did continue to want to get at truth, but not as literally,” she said. “There were different kinds of truths that could be told. The artistry and the formalism were equally as important as the sense of this is really happening in front of us.”

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*Counselor, Camp Taconic. Hinsdale, Mass. 1980.
Credit Jerome Liebling/courtesy Steven Kasher Gallery*

The youngest of his five children, Ms. Liebling was raised mostly by her father as a single parent. She often accompanied him as he photographed during the 1970s and '80s. Yet when her father died, she was surprised at the breadth of the work that he left and was shocked to discover "six decades of work here, all of it is as good as the early photos."

While Mr. Liebling shot continually throughout his life, he also taught photography and film full time. In 1949 he established the photography and film program at the University of Minnesota and applied his aesthetic, honed on the streets of New York, to coal fields, Indian reservations and even a slaughterhouse. He made several award-winning films with Allen Downs, including "Pow Wow," "The Tree Is Dead" and "The Old Men."

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He moved to Amherst, Mass., in 1970, taught photography and film at Hampshire College and influenced a generation of filmmakers including Ken Burns, Buddy Squires, Roger Sherman, Karen Goodman and Erica Huggins.

Although he photographed throughout his life, Mr. Liebling rarely sought the limelight. Like most of his subjects, he was a working man.

“There are no superiors,” he said in 2006 in the film *Looking at Liebling*. “I think we all are about the same. But there certainly are advantages in life — money, who writes the history and who says who’s good. The rich control the history. So I suppose I’m saying these people are valuable. You have to look again.”