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Art In Review

He Made Blood and Guts Familiar and Fabulous



By ROBERTA SMITH

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The International Center of Photography has been Weegee Central since the end of 1993. That's when it was bequeathed 16,000 photographs and 7,000 negatives by Wilma Wilcox, the longtime companion of Arthur Fellig (1899-1968). Fellig, the Austrian-born son of Jewish immigrants, grew up poor on the Lower East Side, fell in love with photography as a darkroom assistant, and in 1935 set out as a freelance news photographer.

He was just in time to convert the emerging genre of tabloid photojournalism, with its surfeit of murder and mayhem, into an earthy and memorable art form. Within a very few years he was a kind local personality and folk hero known for reaching crime scenes ahead of the competition, if not the police. He called himself Weegee the Famous.



A self-portrait from around 1944.
Credit: Weegee/International Center of Photography,
Steven Kasher Gallery, New York

Weegee's achievement is multidimensional, reaching all the way to underground film, but its main base is photography and books of photographs, especially the foundational noir classic "Naked City," a 1945 compilation of 229 images for which Weegee also wrote the text. Its success inspired him to give up tabloid photojournalism and move to Hollywood, where he worked as a photographer, actor and film consultant before shortly hightailing it back to New York to turn his attention to making what he considered art photography, mainly distorted images. In 1957, after developing diabetes, he moved in with Miss Wilcox, a Quaker social worker whom he had known since the 1940s, and who cared for him and then cared for his work.

The Weegee Archive, as it is now known, has resulted in a series of riveting exhibitions at the International Center of Photography. The first and largest was the 329-image "Weegee's World: Life, Death and the Human Drama," brought forth in 1997. It was followed in 2002 by "Weegee's Trick Photography," a show of woozy, distorted or otherwise caricatured images, many of them called "art" by their creator, and four years later by "Unknown Weegee," a survey that emphasized his more benign, post-tabloid photographs.

On Friday comes "Weegee: Murder Is My Business," a trim but multilayered exhibition that takes its title from popular back-to-back exhibitions of Weegee's work that he staged at the Photo League on East 21st Street in 1941.

Organized by Brian Wallis, this latest foray into Weegee's complex universe circles back with a new scrutinizing intensity to the core of his achievement: his frenetic, formative first decade as a full-time photographer. From 1935 to 1946, he lived by his wits and mostly at

night, taking harsh, flash-lighted pictures of fast-moving, often violent breaking news that he sold to the city's several dailies. Dead criminals — killed by one another or the police — fires, gruesome accidents and other catastrophes were his initial subjects. The show zeroes in on these early works, mixing in a raft of contextualizing materials, including photographs by others.



“Tenement Penthouse” (1941).
Credit: Weegee/International Center of Photography,
Steven Kasher Gallery, New York

Tellingly, one of his first acts of genius was not to focus only the events themselves — although his images are certainly strewn with bodies, crushed automobiles and the like — but on the people hanging out of windows or peering over rooftops for a better look, who mirror and encourage our own undisguised interest. One of his most famous photographs, “The First Murder,” captures a group of unsettled school children, whose surging faces and torsos set the image aswirl; the motion is anchored by a distraught adult face toward the center of the scene that belongs to the aunt of the victim, a hoodlum named Pete Mancuso.

The image perfectly typifies what Diane Arbus admiringly called Weegee’s “wild dynamics,” as well as the observation of John Szarkowski, the Museum of Modern Art’s prescient photography curator, that Weegee was “not a reporter but a fabulist.”

This exhibition affirms that Weegee brought to street photography a new, often shocking vitality. The combination of grit, humanity, intensity, merciless opportunism and spatial precariousness, coupled with an eye for uncanny details, regularly resulted in pictures that you can’t stop looking at — even when your finer instincts suggest that you should — and don’t soon forget. And you need to see only a few of his images to understand how he paved the way for Robert Frank, Arbus and Andy Warhol and others who have explored America’s dark side through photographic images.

But arguing for Weegee’s greatness is not the show’s main goal, even if it ultimately can’t help doing so. Instead it conveys a weird and very tangible sense of Weegee himself, both as

a driven hustler in pursuit of humankind in extremis and as the creator of a tough-guy, crime-fighter persona, as evidenced by examples of his many self-portraits that dominate the show's first gallery. (One shows him flopped down on his stomach on the floor of a paddy wagon, camera cocked, like a hunter, waiting for the first arrest of the night.)



“Resourceful Girl Manages to Watch Man on the Flying Trapeze and Feed Hot Dog to Escort at Same Time” (1943).
Credit: Weegee/International Center of Photography, Steven Kasher Gallery, New York

We also get a more intense view than usual (even by Weegee standards) of the harsh, turbulent world of post-Prohibition New York that was both the subject of, and the audience for, his images, a pressure cooker teeming with immigrants, inequity, crime, tawdriness and possibility. And because the show focuses on the different ways Weegee's work reached this audience, it reveals a great deal about how this world was covered by the press.

For all the gritty reality of its subject's work, the show is a rather delicately orchestrated series of framing, echoing, mutually elaborating contexts. There are labels to read and a series of brilliantly deployed touch screens that can take you deep into different aspects of Weegee's world.

On these you can leaf through the first edition of “Naked City,” read news articles about the murders that Weegee photographed or study the crime scenes, then and now. You can listen to Weegee on the set of “Dr. Strangelove” as he talks briefly with Peter Sellers, who based the accent of the film's title character at least partly on Weegee's nasal New Yawkese. Or you can peruse whole issues of PM, the short-lived daily that deftly combined sensational photographs and social concern, for which Weegee worked in the early 1940s.

For a more unbridled sense of Weegee, I recommend “Weegee: Naked City,” at the **Steven Kasher Gallery** in Chelsea, a kind of greatest-hits presentation of 125 images that roams across most of his career, divided into sections loosely inspired by the chapter headings of his first book. It is in many ways the perfect, sprawling, uncouth antidote to the rather more surgical approach of Mr. Wallis's museum show.

The museum presentation often sharpens appreciation of Weegee by comparing his images with those by other photographers. Juxtaposition of his work with that of his newshound

competitors and police photographers reveals his innate sophistication. Juxtaposition of his work with pictures taken by members of the Photo League, like Helen Levitt and Aaron Siskind, emphasize his relative lack of compassion.

With the help of the touch screens, it is possible to see the same image move among different formats, from the cramped front page of *The New York Post* to the more generous proportions of *PM*, which had superb print quality and often treated Weegee himself as part of the news, to the relatively text-free spreads of “Naked City.”

“Their First Murder” appears several times, including in a 1944 issue of *U.S. Camera* accompanied by an admiring text. We are informed that it is one of the most popular photographs in “Action Photo,” an exhibition then on view at the Museum of Modern Art, and that an “over-enthusiastic museum official calls it the greatest news photo of the last 10 years.” Today that assessment doesn’t sound over-enthusiastic at all.

Mr. Wallis’s exhibition recreates the “Murder” portion of Weegee’s Photo League show, “Murder Is My Business.” As in the original “Murder” section, the wounds of the victims in these black-and-white photos have been touched up with red nail polish, and in case you doubt that this really happened, a picture by an unidentified photographer shows Weegee doing the touching up at the Photo League.



Weegee/International Center of Photography, Steven Kasher Gallery, New York
Weegee's more quotidian fare like “Rent Party” (1950) typify how the photographer was, as one curator said, “not a reporter but a fabulist.”

Nearby are his photographs of other sections of the Photo League show, including “Faces,” “Society” and “Coney Island.” As Weegee proceeded, murder and other mayhem actually became less and less his business. His view of the living rarely seems genuinely sympathetic, but that is part of the enduring strength of his images. Their often cold-blooded toughness is, in its way, a tribute to human resilience.

“Weegee: Murder Is My Business” runs through Sept. 2 at the International Center of Photography, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, at 43rd Street; (212) 857-0000, icp.org.

“Weegee: Naked City” continues through Feb. 25 at the Steven Kasher Gallery, 521 West 23rd Street, Chelsea; (212) 966 -3978, stevenkasher.com.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/20/arts/design/weegee-at-international-center-of-photography-review.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1