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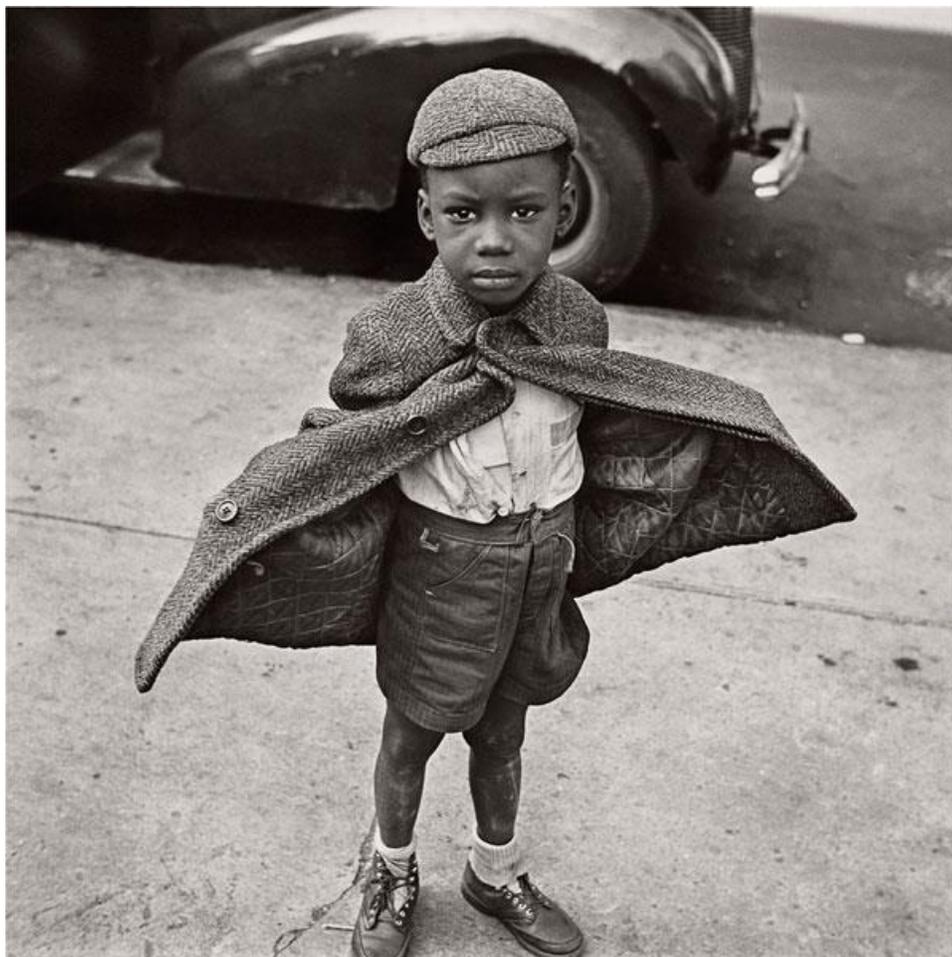
THE NEW YORK PHOTO REVIEW 1900

CITY STREETS

Jerome Liebling

Brooklyn and Other Boroughs, 1946-1996

*Norman Borden*



Jerome Liebling's second exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery, some 50 black and white and color photographs, is testament not only to his prodigious talent, but also to his love of his home city. Born in Harlem in 1924, he grew up in Brooklyn, and attended Brooklyn College for a semester until he quit in 1942 to enlist in the U.S. Army. Returning to

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Brooklyn College after the war, he studied art and design with Ad Reinhardt and Walter Rosenblum whose pictures of the streets opened his eyes to the power of the photographic image. In discussing his school experience, Liebling said, "...it was a documentary approach, which had a purity of the world as it really looked so that the pictures we made were true observations of what was out there."

Liebling joined the Photo League as its youngest member in 1947 where he studied with Paul Strand, taught classes and participated in group exhibitions with like-minded photojournalists such as Berenice Abbott and Arthur "Weegee" Fellig. Membership in this socially minded collective gave Liebling the opportunity to explore neighborhoods throughout the city and document street life as he saw it. To Liebling, children who survived on the city's streets became a symbol of strength. The photographer said, "Their faces could inform all that they felt, from grace to reflective questioning to supreme prescience." It's beautifully illustrated in his 1949 image entitled "Butterfly Boy;" an evocative picture of a young boy in Harlem dressed up for Easter Sunday, his tattered coat flung open as if he wants to fly away from the poverty all around. The boy's head framed by the car's fender in the background adds to the picture's impact.



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In 1949, Liebling left New York to teach photography and filmmaking at the University of Minnesota. He says, "I was a teacher but that didn't mean I had a grand salary. I tried to be a photojournalist. And I had many opportunities to go out on jobs. I would always look for opportunities to do MY picture MY way."

When Liebling returned to New York twenty years later, he was shocked by the changes he saw. The city he grew up with had crumbled, the South Bronx was a shambles and reminiscent of a war zone. In "Charlotte Street, South Bronx, 1977," he offers us a "true observation" of the devastation, boarded-up buildings in the background, weed-filled lots and a single solitary young boy who is the sole sign of life.



In the late 1970s, Liebling began photographing in color, which seemed to signify a sea change in his outlook. He went back to Brooklyn, to the Brighton Beach neighborhood known as "Little Odessa" because of all the Russians who had settled there, and brought

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it to life. His daughter, the filmmaker Rachel Liebling, says: “There was nothing as exciting as wandering the streets of Brooklyn with my father. He found mystery and intrigue around every corner. The people on the streets— with their indefatigable energy and their human foibles—became larger-than-life through his lens. Human struggle took on mythical proportions; the perseverance and ingenuity of everyday people was heroic in his eyes.” An example is “Blonde Woman at Store, Brighton Beach, 1985” where he captures the woman’s modest wave; the gesture makes it seem as if she’s imitating a Betty Grable movie still from the 1940s. In “Woman with Scarf, Brighton Beach,” Liebling’s camera seems to look deep into the woman’s eyes—and she doesn’t blink. I love the juxtaposition so evident in “Woman Buying Peaches, Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, NY). The question is: do the peaches match her dress or does the dress match the peaches? Either way, this picture seems more contemporary than some of Liebling’s other color work from this period.

