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## FINDING HUMANITY IN THE HEART OF VINTAGE NEW YORK

By Norman Borden – July 3, 2018



Despite his death in a plane crash in 1959 at the age of 39, Dan Weiner had an outsize influence on photographers and photography. Steven Kasher Gallery is currently presenting an impressive exhibition of vintage black and white prints spanning nearly 20 years of his work.

“Dan Weiner: Vintage New York, 1940–1959” offers ample evidence of the artist’s lasting impact by revealing his interest in photographing people from all walks of life, his ability to capture them in unguarded moments, and his deep affection for the city where he was born.

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In 1940, after having some of his pictures published in newspapers and magazines, Weiner joined the Photo League, a cooperative of socially conscious photojournalists and photographers that included Paul Strand, W. Eugene Smith, Aaron Siskind, Dorothea Lange and League co-founder, Sid Grossman. It was a place where like-minded photographers could meet and share their creative and sociological interests.

The League provided low-cost darkroom facilities and gallery space for exhibitions. It published the influential newsletter "Photo Notes" and operated a school that gave Weiner the opportunity to both teach and learn. The school's "learn by doing" approach in Sid Grossman's documentary class led Weiner and other members to take their cameras into the streets. Weiner, a first generation American, chose to photograph life on the Lower East Side. He captured Orchard Street's bargain basement ethos with his photo of shoppers crowded around a storefront with an awning that proclaimed, "You are missing plenty if you don't buy here."

Weiner would later become involved in a long-term project centered on Yorkville, a working class neighborhood on the Upper East Side — part of a larger project, "Neighborhoods of New York," that was championed by the League. With residents hanging out windows and on the streets instead of in their cramped apartments, the photographer had ample opportunity to record the everyday lives of residents, young and old. A good example is 1950's "East End Avenue, New York City" in which two women in frumpy dresses converse while their two dogs turn their backs on each other. The old car (maybe 1930s) across the street adds an historical perspective.

In another slice of old New York, three women look out of their open ground floor window, as a man and young girl stand nearby on the front steps. The scene feels intimate without being intrusive. As a street photographer, Weiner must have been drawn to the faces in 1950's "Two Women, New York City" — no doubt the subjects wouldn't have liked the picture. Well, it was honest.

Weiner found humanity everywhere. In fact, as an original "Concerned Photographer" (a term coined by International Center of Photography founder Cornell Capa to describe a humanitarian perspective meant to educate the viewer and bring about change), he would have surely been pleased to see his work alongside photographs by André Kertész, Robert Capa, David "Chim" Seymour, and others in a 1967 exhibition at the Riverside Museum — "The Concerned Photographer," organized by Capa. Weiner had numerous solo shows in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1984, for example, the International Center of Photography exhibited his photographs of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery, Alabama boycott. In 1989, his images from the book "America Worked: The 1950s Photographs of Dan Weiner" was shown at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1998, The Howard Greenberg Gallery presented the solo exhibition "American Photo." This current exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery is the first solo show of his work in over a decade.

Weiner seemed comfortable cutting across social classes to show how the other half lived. He spent nights at the legendary nightclub El Morocco and days at Coney Island; he visited smoke-filled poolrooms and celebrated New Year's Eve in Times Square.

In his remarkable 1955 photograph, "Poolroom Player, New York City" there's so much atmosphere, you can almost smell the smoke. It's a great character study, with a cigar hanging from the player's lips as he sets up the shot. Other players in the background add to the atmosphere. For something completely different, Weiner probably needed a coat and tie to spend nights at El Morocco (located on E. 54th St. at the time of Weiner's work from this exhibition). What's amazing about the 12 El Morocco-themed pictures here, which include boldface celebrities of the day such as Wallis Simpson, the Duchess of Windsor, Milton Berle, and Sid Caesar, is that all seem oblivious to Weiner's candid camera. One picture I

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found revealing is “Waiters, El Morocco.” Three tuxedo-clad waiters stand behind one of the club’s iconic zebra-striped seat, with just the female diner’s face visible. One picture, two social classes.

Some of the Coney Island pictures here are quintessential Weiner — candid moments of dancers in the surf, an old woman sleeping on the beach and another showing a jumble of bodies with a girl’s legs on top of her boyfriend’s chest, with her feet touching the guy next to them. It looks very intimate and feels honest.

Weiner’s career as a freelance photojournalist, as short as it was, took him around the world on assignment for Life magazine, The New York Times, Collier’s, Fortune, and other major publications of the day. Over the last 20 years, his work hasn’t received the recognition it deserves — but this exhibition is a fitting tribute to a concerned photographer who made a difference.

“Dan Weiner: Vintage New York, 1940–1959” is on view through July 28 at Steven Kasher Gallery (515 W. 26th St., btw. 10th & 11th Aves.). Hours: Tues.-Sat., 10am-6pm. Visit [stevenkasher.com](http://stevenkasher.com) or call 212-966-3978.