



LEAST WANTED

A CENTURY OF AMERICAN MUGSHOTS

EDITED BY STEVEN KASHER
AND MARK MICHAELSON

STEIDL/STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

\$50.00

Spanning the 1880s to the 1970s, *Least Wanted: A Century of American Mugshots* culls Mark Michaelson's collection of more than 10,000 police photographs of unknown alleged criminals and presents the results in a format between historical record and personal scrapbook. The photographs (on view at Steven Kasher Gallery in New York this fall) are presented as Michaelson found them: they bear smeared blue penitentiary stamps, slanted handwriting, rust pocks, staples, and discolorations. Some are accompanied by newspaper clippings, notes, or cards from prisons and police stations. The edges and imperfections mark the pictures as artifacts nearly overlooked but ultimately saved from obscurity, even possible obliteration, by the curious collector.

The clues that accompany the images

imply fascinating stories behind them. Clippings that appear with shots of a smug-looking young man report that he is armless and purportedly took part in a pawn scheme involving a mandolin. A card accompanying shots of a man in overalls with a creased, rueful face describe him as drunk, German, and employed as a gas-station attendant. Details meant to identify other figures are oddly random and poetic: "nearly always bareheaded," "a floating mexican," "bites nails," "camera enthusiast," "likes to live big," "psycho." When we stumble across subjects with no notes, no years, no names, we're left to search their disquieting array of emotions—playfulness, defiance, pride, seduction, anger, defeat, boredom.

Yet *Least Wanted* presents more than an anthology of possible narratives, as curator/critic Bob Nickas points out in his essay. We're witnessing a private moment, when the subject is expected to put on the persona of the accused. Their images, having lost their original associations, now function as a medium for our voyeurism. It makes our curiosity uneasy; if these images became found—unforgotten—what moments from our own pasts might also surface? One man, staring straight ahead with dark eyes half closed, carries a look of defiance that suggests he is onto us. It is a discomforting feeling, as if we have been caught staring. But comforting, too: by projecting this emotion of defiance, perhaps we save him, this anyone, either from accusation or from oblivion. Or perhaps we save ourselves, ultimately effecting an escape from our own moment of being accused.

A.E. PETERSON