the village VOICE

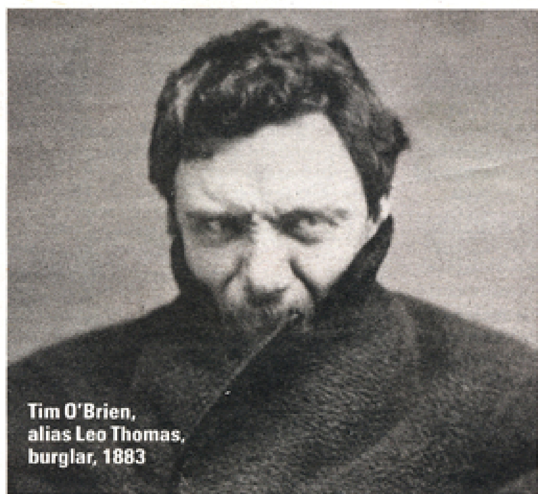
Least Wanted: A Century of American Mugshots
Steven Kasher Gallery
521 West 23rd Street
Through October 28

Rogues' Gallery

Floating in a historical limbo without past or present

BY LESLIE CAMHI

Years ago, when pictures of missing children were still being printed on milk cartons in New York City, a friend and I shared a macabre preoccupation; we would imagine them morphing into the faces of wanted criminals hanging in the post office. In our fantasies, these two continents of the lost were joined together, each providing the key to the other's mystery. No such closure awaits the unwilling subjects in *Least Wanted: A Century of American Mugshots*, a show and catalog (published by Steven Kasher/Steidl) of some 200 police photographs of suspected criminals drawn from Mark Michaelson's extensive collection. These alleged shoplifters, car thieves, forgers, and hookers float in a historical limbo without past or present, preserved in shame like flies in amber.



Tim O'Brien, alias Leo Thomas, burglar, 1883

Steven Kasher Gallery

A mug shot, Michaelson reminds us in his catalog essay, offers no proof that a crime has been committed. But does anyone survive such an experience with his or her innocence intact? Late at night or early in the morning, a suspect—dazed or defiant, hardened or harried, doped up or beaten about the head—is handed a number and hauled before a camera. The flash goes off, and its harsh glare exposes the underbelly of the American dream: people accused of crimes sometimes so petty they barely merit recording; darkly compelling or downtrodden faces, staring out impassively at this latest turn of misfortune. The rumpled clothes and unshaven visages, the palpable perspiration and whiff of coercion blanket everyone with guilt.

The earliest mug shot in Michaelson's collection, dating from 1883, is of one Tim O'Brien, a mustachioed alleged burglar who scowls into his overcoat; you wouldn't have wanted to meet this Byronic outcast alone at night on a gaslit tenement street. Nineteenth-century police departments welcomed photography as a tool to help pinpoint criminal elements in cities whose swelling populations made shifting identities and disappearing into the crowd that much easier. These pictures offered unprecedented likenesses, but as thousands of them began flooding the precincts, they proved largely useless without a system of classification. Around 1890, a Parisian policeman, Alphonse Bertillon, set the standard that has endured (with modifications) for over a century: two photographs, front and profile, accompanied by an intricate series of bodily measurements and marks (from tattoos to fingerprints), whose notation would allow officers to sort images and identify repeat offenders.

While Bertillon's followers were measuring the unique characteristics of individual criminals, other forensic researchers were superimposing pictures of say, Russian prostitutes or Italian pickpockets, to arrive at a physiognomy of wayward types, which also still circulate, if only in our imaginations. Witness our continual efforts, in looking at these pictures, to fit the crime to the face. That acne-scarred punk's crooked grin, that suspected burglar's low brow and receding chin—are they signs of degeneracy?

As a collector, Michaelson's tastes tend toward the trifling and the bizarre, the inconsequence of the alleged crimes often serving to highlight the system's inherent prejudice. (His first purchase was the mug shot of a New Mexican laborer, who was loitering with "two pairs of trousers in [his] possession which [he] could not account for.") Together they offer a portrait of society in negative. Mothers are accused of abandoning their children. Grim-faced, grandmotherly types are alleged abortionists. "A closed-mouthed Negro" booked on the catchall charge of vagrancy in 1938 is "probably committing burglaries." A Mexican immigrant from the same year is described as "a floater." Pictures of Communists were relegated to special pink cards; their political affiliation was no ordinary crime but a potentially contagious threat to the entire social order.

You wouldn't have wanted to meet this Byronic outcast alone on a gaslit tenement street.

All these characters have found their Warholian 15 minutes (or rather, 15 seconds) on the walls of this Chelsea gallery. They look oddly in sync with contemporary fashions in photographic portraiture, in which the subject's blank expression often masquerades as artistic insight. But the aura of documentary reality they exude is all their own.