

STEVEN
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ARTFORUM

Fred W. McDarrah

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515 West 26th Street, Floor 2

April 24–June 6



Fred W. McDarrah, *Kenneth Noland, Chelsea Hotel, April 10, 1963*, gelatin silver print, 11 x 14".

Allen Ginsberg once compared Fred W. McDarrah, the inaugural staff photographer at the *Village Voice*, to Weegee, a fellow photojournalist whose nocturnal flash revealed a multitude of subversions. McDarrah, however, was preoccupied not with crime but with the convulsions of culture—in literature, art, music, and politics—and his lens was primarily trained on happenings south of Fourteenth Street, from Beat readings to Club meetings. In 1961, he published *The Artist's World*, a book in the tradition of the quasi-anthropological photographic essay, complete with explanations of the curious habits of downtown natives. McDarrah shot intrepid painters in illegal lofts; late-night coffees at the Chuck Wagon after the Cedar Tavern's last call; and opening-night dinners "invariably" held at Chinese

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restaurants—where the artist of the hour could bask triumphant, “replete with excitement and egg rolls.”

Artforum dismissed the book as a “movie magazine for intellectuals,” while Brian O’Doherty, in the *New York Times*, winkingly fretted that it signaled the East Coast avant-garde’s imminent decampment for Hollywood. But history has burnished this erstwhile gossip fodder: Today, McDarrah’s images often populate the archival nooks of exhibitions and the margins of catalogue essays. This show brings together a majority of its vintage gelatin silver prints (far outshining the book’s coarsely screened halftone repros), revivifying scenes from a lost New York: Robert Rauschenberg in a junked-out lot, reading the newspaper; Bob Thompson on the bongos, accompanying Red Grooms; Jane Wilson, pensive in a French twist.

If occasionally unremarkable as photographs, these images do remarkable work: Vasari frequently got his facts wrong, but McDarrah presents us with the lives of the artists in fine-grained detail. *The Artist’s World* may have been accused of glamorizing the avant-garde, yet McDarrah’s book divulged that the artists themselves picked up the post-opening dinner tab, and many returned to cold-water flats in the early morning hours, after the world stopped looking so picturesque.