

GITA LENZ

The life of Gita Lenz is a testament to the tenacious—and precarious—pursuit of making art. The self-taught, self-described “Sunday photographer” spent the better part of the late 1940s-1950s creating a large and unique body of work inclusive of then current trends in photography as well as more ambiguous directions. She was included in two exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, including the seminal *The Family of Man*, and a three-person show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Her photographs also appeared in such prestige publications as *Photo Arts*, *American Photography* and *U.S. Camera*. But talent alone doesn’t always ensure lasting recognition, and Lenz’ visual legacy came perilously close to slipping through the cracks of time. Happily, thanks to the combined efforts of a couple good Samaritans, Lenz’ elegant and enigmatic images are receiving long-overdue attention.

Undoubtedly, Lenz’ unmerited obscurity largely resulted from having had to abandon her fine art aspirations in the face of financial imperatives in the early 1960s. She was thus unable to consolidate the critical and creative momentum of her most fertile period. When her neighbor Timothy Bartling met her sometime in her ninth decade, she was living alone in the same apartment she had occupied since 1940. Bartling got Lenz into an assisted-living facility and showed her pictures to his friend, photographer/educator Gordon Stettinius, who agreed to store and organize her archive.

Stettinius was so taken with Lenz’ story and imagery that he launched Candela Books to preserve her work in book form. *Gita Lenz: Photographs* was published in the fall of 2010 in conjunction with an exhibition at New York’s Gitterman Gallery. Spend a few minutes with her photos, and it’s clear why her



benefactors have expended so much effort on her behalf. Although Lenz started working in the social humanist tradition of the contemporaneous New York Photo League, she soon began pushing the photographic envelope visually and thematically.

“By 1951, I believe she was aspiring to expand the expressive capabilities of the medium, trying to identify where an image came together or fell apart with regards to its impact and interpretation,” says Stettinius. “This is a more nuanced approach to the medium, I think, than her social documentary efforts. She visualized images that were not convention-

al subjects to begin with, and then trimmed her images differently at different times as though she was cropping, reinterpreting the work again. That seems to indicate that Gita had an open, no-rules approach to the medium, which is kind of liberating considering some of the prevalent trends in photography back

in the 1950s. She was trying to take reality to another place.”

One might say that her pictures have one foot in reality, and one out. The resulting thematic ambiguity only adds to the fascination of her work. Lenz didn’t seem concerned with telling straightforward visual narratives, and evidently felt liberated enough as an image-maker not to worry about filling in the blanks for viewers. As her work became more sophisticated, it manifested a subtle yet discernible strain of surrealism. Perhaps that’s why (like Atget) she was attracted to photographing mannequins and window displays, subject matter rife

with implication about the multiplicity of vision and perception.

There is also a dark emotional tenor to much of her work. Her pictures of children, while certainly empathetic, are among the most unsentimental ever taken; Lenz captures their innocence, but doesn’t ignore the complicated and troublesome character traits they will carry into adulthood. This theme carries over into her pictures of adults, who seem overwhelmed with disappointment and loss. Lenz’ image of a man sitting with shoulders slumped beneath a makeshift noose is as dark and devastating a visual metaphor as any photographer produced during the politically repressed ‘50s. Similarly striking is her use of visual fissures in the urban landscape—a jagged tear in a corrugated metal facade; spider web cracks in a junked car window; a poster of a roaring lion with a tear down the middle of its face—to suggest emotional and other ruptures, and perhaps the fundamental instability of life itself.

“I believe that hardship was a significant aspect of Gita’s life,” Stettinius says. “Not that this makes her unique among photographers or artists, especially women photographers and artists, but I do think her work was seasoned by her life experiences. By the time she began photography she had been widowed by her first husband and had divorced her second. To my rather piecemeal understanding, it seemed as though she had to be very resourceful to continue with photography as long as she did. I



UNTITLED—LATE 1940s-1950s



GIRL, PORT JEFFERSON, LONG ISLAND—1957

believe this indicates she believed in the importance of making images, but I also suspect that the difficulty of forging a career may have colored her interpretation of the life and city around her.”

While the advancing years have made Lenz’ memory increasingly fallible, she did articulate some of the concerns underpinning her work in a statement from a 1951 issue of *Photo Arts* magazine: “The moment you make a picture, you translate reality into photographic symbols, and dealing with symbols is the beginning of any

kind of abstraction. The closer the symbols mirror the real, the palpable thing, the less is the picture said to be abstract. The more removed the symbols are from their conventional organization in reality, the more abstract. I believe that the unique feature of the photographic medium—its ability to most closely reproduce reality—is irretrievably being forfeited when the object becomes unrecognizable in the photographic recreation.

“For me, the most valid abstract is one which both holds onto the reality of the object and yet transcends it by the strength

of the associations it evokes in the observer. When photography is used to destroy the object and manipulate what remains into something closer to the eye’s desire, a momentarily exciting picture may be the result, but the primary function and vitality of the photographic medium are seriously threatened. The world about us, penetrated with imagination, is ‘abstract’ enough.”

Lenz’ modernist aesthetic also characterized her poetry, some of which appeared in *The New York Quarterly*, and which shares numerous points of connection with her photography.

Stettinius chose to end the book of Lenz’ pictures with her poem “Mirror,” which is (fittingly) both cryptic and revealing:

*Mould of glass enfilmed with silver,
In it lies my doubled world, my
Ravining lusters. Riddles quiver in
Reverse. My image moves, unfurls
On light reflected. A phantom,
Revelation, or substance shadow
pearled?*

—Dean Brierly

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BUILDING ABSTRACTION—LATE 1940s-1950s



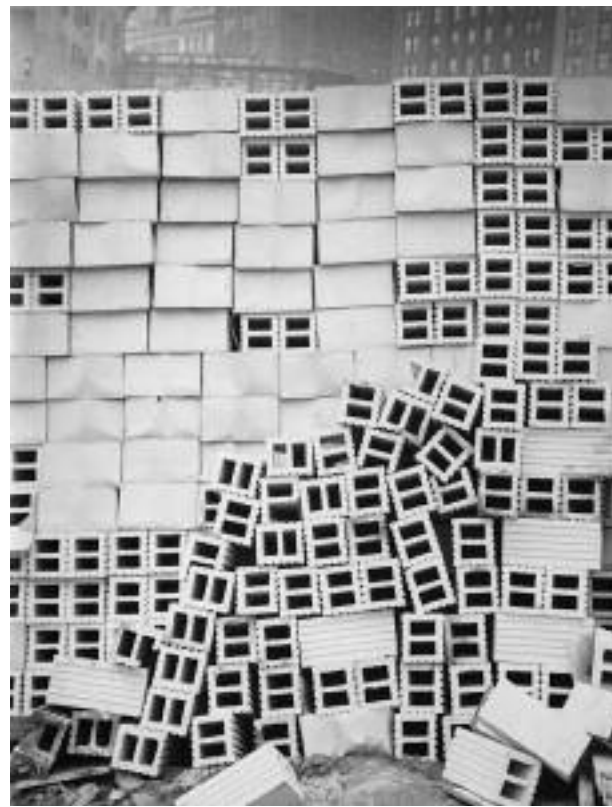
DOOR HANDLE—LATE 1940s-1950s



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UNTITLED—LATE 1940s-1950s



CINDER BLOCKS—LATE 1940s-1950s



MAN WITH NOOSE—1950s



LOOKING DOWN ON WOLLMAN RINK, CENTRAL PARK—1949-1950s