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The view from *The New Yorker's* photo department.



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September Preview: Josef Breitenbach

Posted by [Jessie Wender](#)

As fall approaches, New York galleries take down their summertime group shows and gear up for their fall programming. In the course of the next three weeks, I'll preview a handful of September exhibits that I'm especially excited about.

The first is a forthcoming exhibition, at Gitterman Gallery, of pictures by the photographer Josef Breitenbach (1896-1984). Below is a selection of Breitenbach's photos, followed by a brief Q. and A. with Tom Gitterman, the owner of Gitterman Gallery.

Tell me a little bit about Josef Breitenbach's work and about this exhibit.

Breitenbach is best known for his sensitive and dynamic portraits of artistic luminaries and for his early use of color as an expressive element in photography. We are trying to expand the understanding of Breitenbach's work, which relates to Pictorialism, modernism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. Breitenbach used whatever means was at his disposal, switching between traditional and experimental processes and employing a wide range of styles. This selection also emphasizes Breitenbach's largely unknown body of cameraless photographs, made between 1946 and 1949, after Breitenbach lived in avant-garde Paris, in the nineteen-thirties, and taught at Black Mountain College, in 1944, for Josef Albers.

What is important to know about Breitenbach's life and the ways in which it informed his work?

Breitenbach was raised with a profound respect for the history of art and culture, and he worked with a conscious understanding and appreciation for many different styles of artistic expression. His family had a wine business, which provided him with the means to travel outside of Munich, his home town, and experience more culture and artistic ideas. Living in Paris, where he spent time with Bertolt Brecht, Max Ernst, James Joyce, Aristide Maillol, and Wassily Kandinsky, must have had a huge impact on him. I also think that being interned, in 1939, escaping via Marseille, in 1941, and arriving in New York, in 1942, must have profoundly affected him.

Anything additional you would like to share about Josef Breitenbach, his work, or the exhibition?

It's interesting to note that in addition to being Jewish, Breitenbach was a left-wing political activist with strong Socialist ideals that attracted the attention of the Nazis. In the essay "[Josef Breitenbach: Manifest Beauty](#)," Larisa Dryansky writes, "In August 1933, a bank of SA trooper's banged on the door of his studio. Thrusting under their noses a portrait of Von Papen he'd taken the year before, and a letter of thanks he'd received in exchange, Breitenbach convinced the gullible bullies that he was under the former chancellor's protection. With his passport about to expire, Breitenbach made his way to France a few days later, joining the cohort of German exiles seeking refuge in Paris."