

## A WEST COAST MASTER Alma Lavenson

*Christopher Strome*



*Alma Lavenson, "Self Portrait" 1932.*

Best known for her modernist architectural and industrial photographs from the 1930s and 40s, Alma Lavenson is one of a group of outstanding West Coast photographers that includes Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham. Currently on view at the Gitterman gallery is a handsome selection of her material showcasing the full range of her achievement.

Raised in San Francisco and Oakland, Lavenson first exhibited in a 1929 group show, a decade after her graduation from Berkeley, and the Bay area remained her home base until her death in 1988. Attentive to the work showcased in photography magazines during the '20s, she eventually met Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham, the latter becoming a life-long friend. Acknowledging the influence of these West Coast masters, Lavenson rapidly evolved from a soft-focus pictorialist to a purist, adopting a sharp-focus lens and glossy paper to highlight contrasts of form and illumination.

Although Lavenson spoke of her work as an avocation and considered her family to be her priority, she had an impressive exhibition record. She was included with Cunningham, Weston and Ansel Adams in the 1932 inaugural exhibition of Group f/64 at the de Young Museum in San Francisco and, in 1955, in the landmark Family of Man exhibition at MoMA curated by Edward Steichen.



*Alma Lavenson, "Calaveras Dam" 1932.*

One of the most interesting early images, *Rowboats*, 1929, shows a strong modernist influence before the switch to a sharp-focus lens. Five rowboats bunched together, their bows pointed to the upper left, are cropped at a diagonal to the frame. The brightly lighted gutters of the hauls contrast with moody shadows cast to the lower right while handles on the rudders create additional shadows that seem to penetrate deeper into the water. *Waterlily*, 1932, which brings out the abstract qualities of an ordinary form and heightens shadows within the petals, exemplifies the direct influence of Weston. *Calaveras Cement Works*, 1933, is an impressive early example of Lavenson's industrial images. A horizontal barrel-like tank and platform jut forward at a diagonal emphasizing their bulk. The gradation of shadow underneath the tank reveals its curvature while in the foreground a brightly highlighted lamp, shaped like a shepherd's crook and attached to the platform, serves as a delicate curving counterpoint.



*Alma Lavenson, "Indian Ovens, New Mexico" 1941.*

The Southwest was another important subject for Lavenson. *Indian Ovens, New Mexico*, 1941, depicts a Taos-like courtyard and employs especially distinct light-dark contrasts. While most of the building surfaces are darkened by strong shadows, the form-defining edges are bright. A ladder leans to the left so that its patterned shadow defines a wall surface and the ground beneath. In this image, the camera is pointed directly at its subject like a stage set, so that the sunny foreground, the bulbous earth ovens against the back wall, and the cumulous clouds in the sky above may be read as receding layers.

California's decaying mining towns were also of ongoing interest to Lavenson. Some of these recall Walker Evans' treatment of dilapidated small town America in the '30s. However, Lavenson brings her own sensibility to the image. *Mother Lode: Church, China camp*, 1939, at first seems to present a dialogue between twin trees in the foreground and a weathered structure behind. Then you notice multiple subtle contrasts: the small diagonal grid of roof shingles versus the horizontal layers of the clapboard siding; the view through a darkened church interior from the foreground window back to the outside visible through another window; and the contrast between two barren but comely trees, one in the sun, the other in shadow.

A solo retrospective of Lavenson's work in 1988 at the Baltimore Museum of Art solidified her place in the history of photography. But Lavenson deserves to be a more prominent figure. Don't miss this opportunity to see for yourself.