

May 23, 2013, 5:00 am

From Pictorialism to Modernism, With Little Notice

By JONATHAN BLAUSTEIN

Imagine you're a young photographer. It's 1930, and you're armed with a letter of introduction from a family friend — a fellow patron of the arts. The letter is addressed to Edward Weston.

Alma Lavenson, a young photographer from the Bay Area, had traveled south to Carmel, Calif., to visit Mr. Weston. She had been photographing around Oakland, where she was raised, and was hoping Mr. Weston might critique her work. Her images were heavily influenced by Pictorialism, in which soft-focus lenses created a dreamy effect, rendering reality as if seen by a painter (or a Photoshop filter, if computers had existed back then).

Mr. Weston complimented her compositions, but firmly suggested she jettison her style. It must have been difficult for Ms. Lavenson to be told she had gotten it so wrong. But it was probably not surprising, given Mr. Weston's predilection for sharply focused, crystal clear photographs. He was a champion of Modernism, soon to sweep Pictorialism off the pages of publications like Camera Craft and Photo-Era Magazine, through which Ms. Lavenson stayed current.

Technically, Ms. Lavenson was self-taught, having learned to print while hanging around a drugstore in Oakland. Susan Ehrens, the curator who would collaborate with her many years later, says this was not uncommon. "Let's face it," Ms. Ehrens said. "None of them went to school. They were all learning photography and had darkrooms in the woodshed."



Alma Lavenson/Alma Lavenson Associates, all rights reserved
Girl, Majorca, 1961.

Fortunately, a good critique, once digested, often makes the difference in a photographer's career. Ms. Lavenson heeded Mr. Weston's advice, swapped out her soft-focus lens for the sharp one that came with her camera and embarked on a remarkable, if not exactly well known, career.

Shortly after meeting Mr. Weston, Ms. Lavenson began photographing architecture, machinery and still lifes, stressing their formal qualities. She depicted dams, bridges and ships in a manner that highlighted the angular shapes and sweeping curves. In an interview, Ms. Ehrens said Ms. Lavenson had been drawn to the forms, enchanted by "the idea of light on metal, and the way it would gleam in the sunshine."

In 1932, she was invited to participate in an exhibition at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, featuring work by a recently formed photo group called f/64. The official members, including Mr. Weston, Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham, decided to allow auxiliary members to join the exhibition, and Ms. Lavenson was among those chosen.

The f/64 artists' photographs reflected the same shift away from a painterly style that Mr. Weston had urged in Ms. Lavenson's work. The resulting images were primarily stark depictions of nature in the American West, presenting photographic reality as art, unadorned.

"Group f/64 was not about differentiation in style: it was about conformity," said Rebecca Senf, the curator of photography at the Phoenix Art Museum and the Norton family curator at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, at the University of Arizona, where Ms. Lavenson's archive resides. "As an attempt to distinguish 'pure' photography from the soft-focus, highly manipulated and very popular California Pictorialist style, the point of Group f/64 was to present a unified front about what the new modernist approach for art should be."

That exhibition marked the beginning of the best-known phase of Ms. Lavenson's career, in which she had solo exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum and even bested the legendary Ansel Adams in a landscape photo contest. (Mr. Weston placed first, Ms. Lavenson second and Mr. Adams fourth. Her prize was \$75.)



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Snow Blossoms, 1932.

Soon after, Ms. Lavenson married a locally prominent lawyer, Matt Wahrhaftig, gave birth to two sons and began to raise a family. She continued to make and exhibit work throughout her life, but photography would never again be her sole focus. It's hard not to view this as a function of the limited role for women in society at the time. Even today, though women have achieved a much greater degree of freedom and equality in the workplace, the balance between family and career proves difficult.

"I do think that Lavenson would have had a more acknowledged career if she had been a man and had actively pursued the opportunities that her male colleagues did," Ms. Senf said.

After her husband died prematurely, Ms. Lavenson devoted herself to charitable causes and traveled the world, documenting disparate cultures in black and white. She had also taken extended journeys as a young woman, including a trip to Mexico to purchase work from Diego Rivera. The list of countries in which she photographed is too long to enumerate, but she managed to visit every continent except Antarctica and Australia. (She did make it to New Zealand, though, which almost counts. Right, Kiwis?)

The resulting pictures, made over several decades, reflect a humanistic style and an anthropologist's curiosity. Her work has gone largely unseen, as few of the photographs were ever exhibited in museums. While Ms. Lavenson continued to travel and shoot, her Modernist photographs received intermittent recognition throughout the 20th century. She mounted three solo shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and was included in Edward Steichen's famed "The Family of Man" exhibition, as well as group exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Late in life, Ms. Lavenson met Ms. Ehrens, and they began a comprehensive effort to catalog and preserve her archive. The endeavor, which lasted more than a decade, resulted in a major solo exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1988 and the publication of a book edited by Ms. Ehrens, "[Alma Lavenson: Photographs](#)," which accompanied the show. The exhibition introduced a new generation of viewers to Ms. Lavenson's work. By then, she had fallen off the radar, having never managed to break into the commercial gallery world — which was a fraction of the size it is today, as were the prices garnered for photographic prints in the art market.

"Inspiring" is often a cliché. But in this case, it's perfectly appropriate. Alma Lavenson died in 1989, at the age of 92. She photographed for almost 70 years, documenting Native Americans in New Mexico, abandoned Gold Rush towns in the Sierra Nevada foothills, Shinto priests in Japan and just about everything in between. She survived the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, and lived long enough to photograph the futuristic Transamerica Pyramid.

We should all be so lucky.



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Self-Portrait, 1932.