



Roger Mayne, 'Teddy Boy and Girl, Petticoat Lane' (1956).

London Calling

By WILLIAM MEYERS

Roger Mayne (born 1929) is one of the few important British photographers of the last half of the 20th century. In several ways, he is the second coming of Bill Brandt (1904–1983), arguably the most important British photographer of the century. They share a preference for contrasting black-and-white prints, overcast weather (maybe unavoidable in Britain), and many of the same subjects: working-class urban districts, dramatic landscapes, portraits of writers and artists, etc. A broadly representative selection of 50 vintage prints of Mr. Mayne's photographs from the late 1950s through the mid-1960s is currently up at the Gitterman Gallery.

Mr. Mayne also has in common with Brandt an instinct for striking compositions that make his intentions clear. The first picture in the Gitterman show is a close-cropped self-portrait from 1956, when his career was just getting under way. A handsome man of English and Welsh extraction, Mr. Mayne's mouth is firmly set, the right half of his face is cast in deep, theatrical shadow — the one eye we see intent upon the lens — his brow is slightly furrowed, and a hank of hair hangs significantly over his forehead. And he wears a black turtleneck sweater, so there is no mistaking this young man's serious and artistic ambitions.

One of Mr. Mayne's best-known projects was his documentation of Southam Street in North Kensington, London. There are two pictures from this series at Gitterman, both taken in 1956. The first shows three working-class young women (and the hand of a fourth) playing cards in the open air on the front steps of a doorway in the

ROGER MAYNE

Gitterman Gallery

decaying neighborhood. We know the neighborhood is on the skids because the once-elegant classic column to the right of the doorway is badly deteriorated. The women, one with a cigarette in her hand, two with their hair covered in tightly done-up kerchiefs, are intent upon the piles of cards and the coin on the stoop.

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Southam Street series shows three young girls, likely between 5 and 7 years old, blowing bubbles. Again a bit of architecture — a wall covered with layers of chalked graffiti — provides the social background, as their clothes and hairstyles provide period markers. One girl holds the wand to her pursed lips and blows, the second girl has her hand on the first girl's shoulder and stares longingly at the bubble-making apparatus, while the image of the third girl is blurred as she grabs for the bubbles. Southam Street was demolished in 1969 in a fit of postwar urban renewal, and Mayne's record of the neighborhood is prized for its ability to conjure up the lost ethos of the

time and place.

Two of Mayne's strongest talents were honed shooting Southam Street: his feeling for urban streets and his affinity with children. There are several pictures of individual children in the exhibition — the introspective "Keith, Addison Place" (1957), the theatrical "Swordsman, St. Stephens Gardens, W2" (1957), and the "Boy, St. Stephens Gardens" (1957) in his school cap and shiny leather jacket — and more pictures of children in groups. In "Two Children" (c. 1958), the youngster in the foreground points his finger with Churchillian authority at something out of sight.

Several of the pictures of children were taken outside of Britain. There are six boys wearing knee pants larking for the camera in front of a doorway in "Dublin" (1957), and four young girls and a woman with her hand over her face in the charming "Children, Almunecar, Costa Del Sol" (1962). The simple setting in this humble village is at odds with the broad smiles of the three youngest of the girls, although the fourth, who stands with her arm akimbo in the doorway, looks at the camera with a more critical gaze.

Of Mr. Mayne's streetscapes, "Off Harrow Road, Paddington" (1960) is memorable for the old-fashioned street lamp silhouetted against a row of brick tenements, and more particularly for the smoky trash fire burning unattended at the curb. Two clotheslines of white wash stand out against the darkly shadowed rows of houses in "Leeds, Slum Clearance" (1959), and remind us perforce of the billowing laundry in Humphrey Spender's earlier "Washing Line" (c. 1937–38). A

black cat and a car partially covered with tarpaulin are all that inhabit the cobblestone street in "Cat, Addison Place" (1957).

"Teddy Boy and Girl, Petticoat Lane" (1956) and "Teddy Girls, Battersea Fun Fair" (1956) are part of Mr. Mayne's documentation of the beginnings of the postwar youth culture, as is "Soho" (1959), a picture that shows only the bottoms of two pants legs and the daintily pointed and buckled shoes some Teddy boy is wearing. The dislocated working-class dandyism is summed up in those shoes.

An image that troubled me is "At a Protest Meeting, Trafalgar Square" (1961). The protest was in support of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, a movement that endorsed Bertrand Russell's craven motto, "Better Red than dead." The two well-lit and sharply focused faces in the middle — a man and a woman who seem to be a couple — are the center of interest, and Mr. Mayne surely intends for us to admire their remonstrating. But I instinctively despised their look of vacuous sanctity. Since the secret files of the Soviet Union have been opened to Western researchers, we know for certain what many suspected at the time: that the nuclear disarmament movements in the free world were heavily financed and informally directed by the Kremlin. The man and woman in "At a Protest Meeting" are what Lenin meant by "useful idiots," and Mr. Mayne, wittingly or unwittingly, captured them perfectly.

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