

IN THE STREET

A photographer's journey.



COVER:
Helen Levitt,
American; *New York*,
1938, gelatin silver
print. Fraenkel
Gallery, San
Francisco.

LEFT: Helen Levitt,
American; *New York*,
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By Cindy Frenkel Kanter

In Helen Levitt's *New York*, 1939, there's the intensity of three boys playing with complete abandon; one wields a large, veiny branch. They are an impassioned circle, syncopated, suspended in fluidity — a moment actualized and full of grace. But the setting's paradox takes hold: a rubble-filled lot flanks a graffiti-laden, burned-out building. It's late 1930s Harlem, and a timeless desolation is abundant.

Until the tour of this retrospective, entitled *Helen Levitt*, the artist's work has never been well-known to the general public, although her work has always been highly regarded by other photographers. The show, including 86 photographs and a film, makes her name more recognizable although Levitt herself remains both as private and unconcerned about public accolades as ever. Ellen Sharp, curator of the DIA's Department of Graphic Arts, describes the work: "Levitt's photographs are remarkable. No one has done anything like them. It's de-

ceiving. Modest. They look like there's no art involved since they aren't about heroic subjects or intense suffering. The drama's far more subtle."

Her work has been called honest, lyrical and acutely present. Never posing people, she waits until a scene strikes her. Best known for her photographs of poor children at play, she captures personal and emotional truths which she sees fleetingly before her. She has such innate respect for her subjects that her own presence recedes almost fully. Titles are merely factual labels, usually the place.

Born in 1913 of Russian Jewish parents, Levitt was raised in Brooklyn. She worked for a portrait photographer in the Bronx to learn the basics of photography while immersing herself in the city's culture, attending plays and concerts. She never officially joined the Film and Photo League, a group of socially conscious photographers who believed in using photography to improve poor and working class con-

ditions, but she watched the foreign films they presented.

Through a League friend she met Henri Cartier Bresson, whose work intrigued her. In the show's catalog, *Helen Levitt: A Life in Art*, Maria Morris Hambourg writes, "His (Cartier Bresson) work taught her three valuable lessons: that a blunt photographic record of ordinary facts could reveal the mystery and fantasy within daily life; that the poetry in such pictures turned its back on conventional value systems and notions of beauty; and that this art, which trafficked in the momentary, was not haphazard. Rather, each frame was constructed so that the content and form were coherent, indivisible and instantaneous."

At 23, Levitt ended her apprenticeship and purchased a second-hand Leica, a small, quiet, handheld camera — the kind Cartier Bresson used. She also learned about a right-angle view finder, an attachment which allowed her to take close-up pictures of people without their ever realizing it.



Helen Levitt, *American; New York*, c. 1942, gelatin silver print. Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

In 1937 she worked briefly under a Federal Art Project program teaching children art in East Harlem. Walking to school, she encountered wonderfully expressive chalk drawings and then, Hambourg states, she "independently produced approximately 160 photographs of children's chalk drawings." Some are in the show, and Sharp describes them



neighborhood. In 1939, Evans introduced Levitt to his friend Janice Loeb, a painter and art historian, and the two quickly became close friends.

Loeb introduced Levitt to her European acquaintances, including filmmaker Luis Buñuel, who hired Levitt to work as an apprentice film cutter. In 1945-46, she, Loeb and Agee worked intermittently on *In the Street*, a short, lyric film shot primarily by the women on the streets of East Harlem for which Agee wrote the prologue. Shown at the museum in conjunction with her photographs, the film is important not only because she devoted herself to the medium for over a decade, but because it's intrinsically connected to her strongest photographs. In 1946-47, Levitt worked with Loeb, Agee and Sidney Meyers on *The Quiet One*, a film twice nominated for an Academy Award.

In 1959, after more than ten years of work in film, she returned to still photography, exploring color photography with the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship (which was renewed the following year). In the 1980s she returned to black and

Helen Levitt, *American; New York*, c. 1942, gelatin silver print. Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

as "magical . . . part of the intuitive aspect of her art."

Levitt felt an affinity with the photography of Walker Evans, who also worked in the street. In 1938, she looked him up and showed him her work. He was struck by her work and so was James Agee, the writer, who happened to come by during her visit. For the next two years she and Evans shared a darkroom.

In 1938 and 1939, her work blossomed fully with photographs of children playing in Harlem not far from her middle class Yorkville

white. Today, approaching 80, she lives in Greenwich Village and listens to the music of Sam Cooke, the Temptations and Aretha Franklin. Her bathroom is her darkroom, and she works in both color and black and white. ♦

Helen Levitt is made possible by the Chase Manhattan Bank. Additional support has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. It is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In Detroit support has been provided by the state of Michigan, the city of Detroit and the DIA Founders Society.



Helen Levitt, *American; New York*, 1939, gelatin silver print. Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

Helen Levitt

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Related Offerings:

The film *In the Street* will be shown continuously in the Prentis Court Screening Room; also Sandra Phillips, curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and co-organizer of the exhibition, will give a slide lecture entitled "Helen Levitt and Street Photography" (for more information, see Tours, Talks and Classes, p.6A).

For a more complete account of Levitt's life, see the show's catalogue, *Helen Levitt*, available in the Museum Shop at the DIA, Twelve Oaks in Novi, and the new Somerset Collection in Troy.