

# ARLENE GOTTFRIED

## *SOMETIMES OVERWHELMING*

JANUARY 9 – MARCH 5, 2016

From Wednesday to Saturday, 2-7 pm and by appointment  
Opening on January 9, 2-7 pm



©Arlene Gottfried / Courtesy Les Douches la Galerie

Humor, tenderness, intimacy, joy... there is no lack of words to sum up this portrait of New York in the 1970s and 80s. Life back then had no limits and seems light years away from what we have grown accustomed to today. This black and white fresco exudes the boundless freedom of expression that existed before the AIDS epidemic. Our gallery is very pleased to be the first in France to present these works by Arlene Gottfried, a great figure in photography who deserves wider recognition.

**Curators: Laurence Cornet and Françoise Morin**

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Arlene Gottfried, whose work is still not well known in France, is a New Yorker first and foremost. All of her work is part of that very particular urban world that has whetted her thirst for observation since her childhood.

The exhibit organised at les Douches is the first in Paris to offer a selection of photographs taken during her youth, in the 1970s and 80s, when she tirelessly criss-crossed Brooklyn in search of vibrant places, startling faces and unusual street scenes.

Spontaneity devoid of ambition is what characterises her path. Eschewing a traditional education, she preferred to take an office job during the day and attend evening classes in photography. This form of discipline allowed her to spend time outside, to plunge head first into the sea of her contemporaries.

Outside the city, she captured strong images in the great gathering that was Woodstock, where she went in August 1969, like tens of thousands of other young people of her generation, armed with the new camera that her father had given her. Subsequently, she piled up portraits at the beach and in clubs. Though she later became a professional photo-reporter, she has continued over the course of the last forty-five years to relish picturesque scenes of New York life, to which she has dedicated several books. "It took me forever to think of my photos as works in their own right," she notes soberly.

"Sometimes Overwhelming" documents an earlier New York that she eagerly photographed, when disco and the strains of R&B shook the walls of the Xenon where the gay community danced with such provocative theatricality, decked out in furs and dripping makeup, flirtatious bodies, plumed costumes, panther outfits, dildos of every size and shape... nothing was inappropriate except a lack of daring. The same insouciance swept the streets, from Brooklyn to Soho, from Central Park to the Lower East Side.

The eccentricities of Riis Beach where women alternately flashed and hid their breasts, the beginnings of the Big Apple Circus – which she goes back to every year, even though it's lost the simplicity of its earliest days – the Midtown clubs (before 42<sup>st</sup> Street was the dazzling and blaring advertisement that it has now become), all of these images are like a "verse in a song's couplet" for Arlene today. New York was on the edge of financial collapse back then, vainly trying to seem tough; it was rocked by insecurity, disfigured by crumbling buildings. "Things were strangely easier back then," she says, "less turbulent, and definitely less drab."

Some of her earliest photographs have already become iconic, like the one entitled "Angel and Woman on Boardwalk, Brighton Beach, 1976". As in many of Gottfried's images, there is a playful harmony that develops from the artificial contrast. Beside Angel's near nudity, with his arms tightly crossed, accentuating his muscles, the elderly lady shows evident nonchalance, her arm in the flower-print motif resting on the back of the bench. Her eyes are just visible behind her dark glasses, their gaze as piercing as Angel's dark eyes, fixed on the camera lens. Their hair sweeps upward in a thick curly mass, frizzed by the salty air. They're the essence of oil and vinegar, improvised opposites like the bodybuilder and the Hassidic Jew in another image, or the trainers on a grandmother's feet. Their unexpected commonalities are just so many details that show that Arlene Gottfried does not judge her subjects; she is content to observe and play with visual coincidences.

More than a nostalgic homage to a time and city that are so often the stuff of fantasies, this collection of images is closer to a film. A film where the actors might have been chosen for their unshakable attitude or their preposterous eccentricity.

**Laurence Cornet**

# SOMETIMES OVERWHELMING

Hating High school, I graduated. My parents insisted I go to college. I knew I would have to do something besides just sit in a classroom trying to pay attention, and it was my mother who looked through the college catalogue and asked if I would be interested in taking a class in art. At registration, I saw that there was a photography class listed.

One night a week, I left my typist job at in Manhattan at 5pm and took the A train to High Street in Brooklyn, where the class was held in a factory building. The first time I entered the room full of male students, I had to choke back the tears.

When I had gotten to know the guys a little, I was invited to a classmate 's birthday party. A few weeks earlier, this student had taken a picture of me, but strangely, he had asked me to turn around and had photographed the back of my head. At the party, I asked to see the picture; he said he didn't have a print, but that I could look at the negative in the enlarger. When I saw the image of my long hair merging into my antique fur jacket, I realized why he had told me to turn around. That was a turning point for me; I knew then that photography could be a form of expression that spoke with a voice of its own. I began to consider the art more seriously, and decided to enroll in a two-year photography program at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

After graduating, I worked as an assistant for many photographers in their commercial studios, and also as a staff photographer at an advertising agency for several years. Even so, I was constantly photographing in my free time, after work and on weekends. Being a native New Yorker, I was always outside, where I felt most comfortable. I had grown up in Brooklyn, and so my first photographs were of life on the streets. I turned my camera on friends, relatives, and neighbors in my ethnically diverse area. Eventually, my photographs became instinctual, and I did not think about what to photograph or why.

In clear to me now that these black-and-white photographs from the 1970's and 80's document a part of New York City that has disappeared. It was a rough and unpolished environment, and I always gravitated towards the individuals that had unique characteristics and large personalities. I went to festivals, clock parties, and all the parades – Veteran Day, Easter, Puerto Rican Day, Gay Pride, St. Patrick's Days, and the especially charming and original early Halloween parade.

During the summers I returned to the beaches of my childhood, Coney Island and Brighton Beach. I have clear memories and strong attachments to these beaches, and still visit them. I photographed at Riis Beach's Bay One, the only nude bay in New York. When I was visited to clubs and discos I brought my camera; Studio 54, GG's Barnum Room, Le Clique, Les Mouches, Paradise Garagen and the roller disco Empire Rollerdrome had glamour, grit, sexual exhibitionism, and a sens of wild and free self-expression in a world before the AIDS epidemic. My photographs were like souvenirs; I liked to collect moments and remembrances of the people in the places that I visited. If I got great photographs out of them as well, that was the icing on the cake? When Radio City was going to be demolished, I joined those who were outraged by the loss, and decided to immortalize New York City's last great music hall by photographing the Rockettes. I photographed the dancers at Roseland Ballroom, who had started going there in the 1940s and 50s and still loved to dance.

The photographs in *SOMETIMES OVERWHELMING* are glimpses of an era and its people. Most of the people I photographed were aware of the camera, but I never told them to pose – it was a collaboration. The older people pictured, many of whom I know and love, didn't pay any attention to me, while the children acted completely out of their imaginations. Looking back at them, I am catapulted through time to each place and event, and to all those people I have had the pleasure of seeing along the way.

**Arlene Gottfried**

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## SELECTION OF WORKS

*Brazilian Carnival, Waldorf-Astoria, New York, 1979*

Gelatin-silver print, signed by the artist



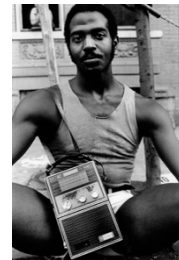
*Elaine Stellar, New York, 1980*

Gelatin-silver print, signed by the artist



*Guy with Radio, East 7th Street, New York, 1977*

Gelatin-silver print, signed by the artist



*Angel & Woman on Boardwalk In Brighton Beach, 1976*

Gelatin-silver print, signed by the artist



*Isabel Croft Jumping Ropfe, Brooklyn, New York 1972*

Gelatin-silver print, signed by the artist



*Houndstooth Blanket on Coney Island Beach, New York, 1976*

Gelatin-silver print, signed by the artist



*Sid's Basketball Game, Coney Island, New York, 1976*

Gelatin-silver print, signed by the artist



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## SOLO EXHIBITIONS (SELECTION)

- "These Days" Hardhitta Gallery, Cologne, Germany, 2015
- "Sometimes Overwhelming" Daniel Cooney Fine Art, New York, 2014
- "Bitter Sweet" Soho Photo New York, 2009
- "Bitter Sweet" Alice Austen House, 2008
- "Midnight" BCA Gallery The Gatehouse, Bedford, 2006
- "Midnight" Internationale Fototage, Mannheim, Germany, 2005
- "The Eternal Light" Associazione Culturale Magister Ludi, Milano, 2003
- "The Eternal Light," Leica Gallery, Tokyo, Japan. 2001
- "One Woman Show," York College, Jamaica, NY. 1998
- "The Eternal Light," FNAC Galeries Photo, Montparnasse, Paris, France. 1995
- Centro Colombo Americano, Medellin, Columbia. 1994
- "The Eternal Light," Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, Florida. 1993
- "Bacalaitos and Fireworks," Union Square Gallery, New York, NY. 1991
- Guta de Carvalho, Lisbon, Portugal. 1990
- Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, New York, NY. 1990
- "Puerto Rico," Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY. 1983
- "Portraits," Alternative Museum, New York, NY. 1980
- "Coney Island," Foto Gallery, New York, NY. 1977

## GROUP SHOWS (SELECTION)

- "Westbeth Artists Open Studios Tour", New York, New York, 2015
- "New York" Les Douches La Galerie, Paris, France, 2015
- "We Live in Brooklyn, Baby" Photoville, Brooklyn, New York, 2014
- "Street Photography 2013" Soho Photo, 2013
- "Central Park", Leica Gallery, 2012
- "Divas", Robert V. Fullerton art Museum, 2008
- "Acts of Faith", Noorderlicht, The Netherlands. 2007
- "Midtown Y", New York Public Library. 2007
- "One on One", Minnesota Center for Photography, Minneapolis, MN. 2007
- "70's Disco", powerHouse Arena, Brooklyn, NY. 2007
- "Holiday Exhibition", Galerie Lichtblick, Cologne Allemagne. 2006
- "Night Life New York", Tanqueray Ten-NYFA. 2003
- "Game Face," Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. 2001
- "Women in Documentary Photography," Springfield Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio. 2000
- "Dancing Through Time," Palazzo Reale, Milan, Italie. 2000
- "New York Now 2000," The Museum of the City of New York. 2000
- "The Power of the Photograph," Hudson Guild, New York, NY. 1999
- "Inside These Walls," Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. 1998
- "Snapshots," FNAC Galeries Photo, Paris, France. 1992
- "New York at Night," Department of Cultural Affairs, New York, NY. 1983
- "Portraiture in Light," Rheinisches Landes Museum, Bonn, Germany. 1982