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Art In Review

Vivian Maier: 'Photographs From the Maloof Collection'

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*Howard Greenberg Gallery
41 East 57th Street, Manhattan
Through Jan. 28*

Vivian Maier

*Steven Kasher Gallery
521 West 23rd Street, Chelsea
Through Feb. 25*

These two exhibitions nominate a new candidate for the pantheon of great 20th-century street photographers: Vivian Maier (1926-2009), who worked as a nanny in New York and Chicago, took pictures incessantly, printed only a few of the more than 100,000 negatives she amassed, and never published or exhibited her work. The variety of images suggests a consuming curiosity; the lack of prints an almost unfathomable sureness in her own vision. Similarly, she rarely took more than one shot of a scene.

The images are wonderful, with a keen but unvarnished empathy for their subjects, who include children, women, the indigent and the elderly. Other recurring themes suggested by the selections here are people who are asleep or are otherwise unaware of being photographed, among them travelers and commuters, as well as self-portraits. These reveal a tall, slightly awkward, intent woman — usually wearing a plain hat — who was intrigued by the spatial complexities of reflections.

Maier, who never married and seems to have had few friends, recorded life as it passed her by, but she also portrayed herself planted in its midst, pursuing her passion. That is hinted at by an image at Kasher, a rare interior taken inside a suburban home that shows a woman, with a coat drawn over her nightgown, talking to a man who is about to leave for work. A small dog with something in its mouth looks up at the camera.

Maier's photographs lack the consistent, indelible style of Diane Arbus, Helen Levitt, Garry Winogrand or any number of her contemporaries. Instead they may add to the history of 20th-century street photography by summing it up with an almost encyclopedic thoroughness, veering close to just about every well-known photographer you can think of, including Weegee, Robert Frank and Richard Avedon, and then sliding off in another direction. Yet they maintain a distinctive element of calm, a clarity of composition and a gentleness characterized by a lack of sudden movement or extreme emotion.

The story of the discovery of Maier's work by John Maloof, a former real estate agent in Chicago who has become the primary caretaker of her art, is more familiar to that of outsider art, which has been redefined over the past half-century by the sudden posthumous appearance of artists like Henry Darger, whose work came to light almost exactly 40 years ago, also in Chicago. With tens of thousands of negatives to be scanned or printed, it will be some time before the whole of Maier's achievement and the extent of her obsession is revealed. We can only count our blessings and wait.