

Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors

There are two forces operating in my work: pleasure and terror. One is this ego force that comes out in what I call impressionistic pictures, the pictures that seem to have all kinds of "bogeymen." Painter Franz Kline once said I am trying to excise the "bogeyman" by doing that. But these are animate things, and are very related to German Expressionism.

My idea of what a picture is: it's there, it exists by itself, it's clean, it's economically stated, it's pure, it has meaning. I want to bring my pictures to the ideal of music. Like music, it means everything, it says everything, but it is objective.

– Aaron Siskind, 1983¹

Aaron Siskind was an American photographer, editor, and professor who worked primarily in New York and Chicago. He was born in New York in 1903 to Russian Jewish immigrant parents. Siskind's early and sustained interests included poetry, music, literature, and social reform. He began photographing during his time as an English teacher at a public school shortly after he received a camera as a wedding gift in 1930. In 1932 his interest in social justice and newly-established interest in photography led him to join the Photo League, an organization founded to document New York's working class and urban life in the midst of the Great Depression. He remained active within the group in various capacities through 1941, generating seminal bodies of work such as *Harlem Document*.

In the 1940s, Siskind turned from depicting people to picturing increasingly abstract and two-dimensional subjects including architectural facades, walls, and painted and weathered signs. He continued cultivating this aesthetic interest through the end of his career. A close friend of painters Willem de Kooning (1904-97) and Franz Kline (1910-62), Siskind's work was described by critics as reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism, the artistic movement characterized by dynamic and abstract formal qualities used to emphasize psychological tensions. According to art historian and photographer Carl Chiarenza, Siskind's primary interest "was in the revealing visual gesture, the visual closeness or separation, the visual evidence of human encounter."² Upon examining these visual "conversations," a term he developed to describe his compositions, we find that Siskind's work enacts the role of the photographic document in multifarious capacities: as document of the un-manipulated, objective piece of reality set before us; as social document



of his relationships with and influence by the Abstract Expressionists; and an inward-looking sort of document, what Siskind has described as "highly symbolic orderings of reality."

At the invitation of photographer Harry Callahan (1912-99), in 1951 Siskind assumed the post of Professor of Photography at the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, where he remained until 1971. He then moved to a position at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he taught until his retirement in 1976. Though Siskind cited his primary motive for teaching as one of financial necessity, he also formed deep and lasting relationships with many of his students, and asserted that his teaching role fulfilled a personal need to be around people.³ It was during this time that he took on important extended documentary projects with his students, including the documentation of the Chicago buildings of American architect Louis H. Sullivan (1856-1924), many of which were demolished soon thereafter.⁴ Though these architectural works are a lesser-known subset of Siskind's oeuvre, one can see how they may have acted as a logical bridge between the earlier documentary work and his later more abstract and textural compositions. Siskind died in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1991 at the age of eighty-seven.

The works in this exhibition begin and end in New York, starting with the iconic *Savoy Dancers*, *Harlem Document* (1936), part of the important series Siskind initiated during his time with the Photo League, and culminating with *New York 25* and *New York 85* (both 1988). These final two works, made just three years before his passing, demonstrate the mature articulation of

Siskind's sensibilities—though evidence of these driving visual strategies can be found even in his earliest works—and interest in framing close shots of urban mark-making. Other photographs included in the exhibition were taken in England, Italy, Mexico, Brazil, and throughout the United States. The works included here were donated to the CMP by Mrs. David S. Traub in 1986, and by Joe D'Angerio, Nancy Foy, and Family in 2007. Siskind's work stands uniquely among photographers of his time for his adept employment of the theoretical concerns of Abstract Expressionism within the arena of photography, and for his sophisticated stylistic modes that concretely and poetically trace the human encounter.

– Kathryn Poindexter

Notes

¹ Adapted from an interview with Aaron Siskind, *Columbia 1*, eds. Alan Cohen and Karla Vocke, Photography Department, Columbia College Chicago, 1983, page 7.

² Carl Chiarenza, *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, in association with the Center for Creative Photography, 1982, page 49.

³ Interview with Aaron Siskind, *Columbia 1*, pages 2-3.

⁴ These photographs are not displayed here, although other works picturing architecture are included in the exhibition.

Related Events

Gallery Talk

John Divola in conversation with Kathryn Poindexter
1:30pm Thursday, October 29

Fall Reception

celebrating all of ARTSblock's exhibitions
6-9pm Saturday, November 14

All events are free and open to the public.
Visit artsblock.ucr.edu for more information.

About the Exhibition

Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors is organized by the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock and is curated by Kathryn Poindexter, CMP Curatorial Assistant. The exhibition is comprised of works from the museum's permanent collection. This presentation was made possible by the generous support of UCR's College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS) and the City of Riverside.

Images: **Front**, Aaron Siskind, *New York 25*, 1988, collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, gift of Joe D'Angerio, Nancy Foy, and Family; **Interior**, installation view, *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors*, California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, 2015-16, photo by Nikolay Maslov; **Below**, Aaron Siskind, *San Luis Potosi 16*, 1961, collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, gift of Joe D'Angerio, Nancy Foy, and Family.



Works in the Exhibition

Aaron Siskind

Savoy Dancers, Harlem Document, ca. 1936

Gloucester 1H, 1944

Jerome, Arizona 21, 1949

Chicago 30, 1950

Martha's Vineyard 108, 1954

St. Louis 9, 1955

Chicago Façade 7, 1960

Rome: Arch of Constantine 10, 1963

Jalapa 24 (Homage to Franz Kline), 1973

New York 78, 1976

Gelatin silver prints

Collection of the California Museum of Photography
at UCR ARTSblock, Gift of Mrs. David S. Traub

Kentucky 7, 1951

San Luis Potosi 16, 1961

Providence 33, 1972

Jalapa 62 (Homage to Franz Kline), 1974

Vera Cruz 20, 1974

Providence 22, 1975

New York 317, 1978

New York 56, 1982

Bahia 40, 1984

Providence 203, 1986

Recife 22, 1986

New York 56, 1986

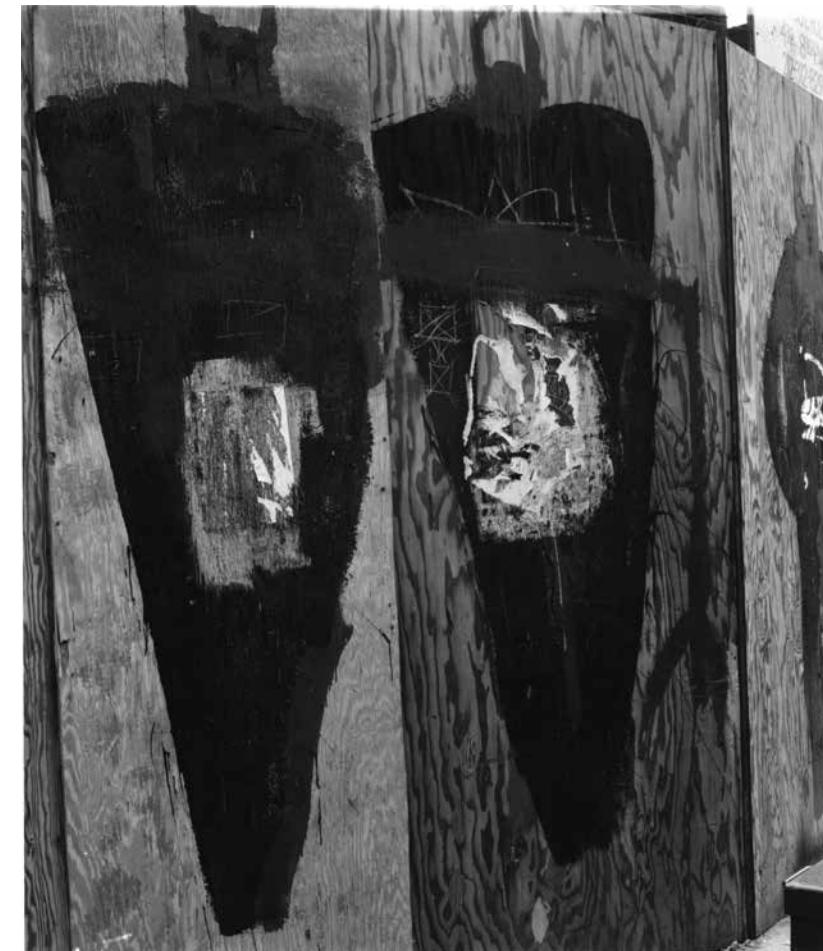
New York 25, 1988

New York 85, 1988

Gelatin silver prints

Collection of the California Museum of Photography
at UCR ARTSblock, Gift of Joe D'Angerio, Nancy Foy,
and Family

Aaron Siskind Pleasures and Terrors



August 8, 2015–January 30, 2016

California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock
3824 Main Street, Riverside, CA 92501