

Exhibition Chronicles Turning Point in American Photography

Debating Modern Photography: The Triumph of Group f/64
February 16 – May 4, 2008

Tucson, AZ – February 8, 2008 - In 1930s, a small group of California photographers challenged the painterly, soft-focus Pictorialist style of the day. They argued that photography could only advance as an art if its practitioners exploited characteristics inherent to the camera's mechanical nature. This small association of innovators – named Group f/64 after the camera aperture which produces great depth of field – included Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, Sonya Noskowiak, Willard Van Dyke, and others. The Center for Creative Photography now revisits this debate in the exhibition *Debating Modern Photography: The Triumph of Group f/64*. In addition to major works by members of Group f/64, it includes images by such Pictorialists as Anne Brigman, William Dasonville, Johan Hagemeyer, William Mortensen, and Karl Struss.



Brett Weston. *Succulents and Eucalyptus Leaves*, 1943 Gelatin silver print, ©The Brett Weston Archive

With more than 100 works by 16 artists, *Debating Modern Photography* offers a feast for the eyes while illustrating both sides of a high-stakes debate. Outstanding examples of the clean edges and bold forms of Group f/64 stand in sharp contrast to the romantic, hand-crafted Pictorialist work – elegant portraits, tonalist landscapes, and allegorical studies.

The exhibition was organized by the Center for Creative Photography and Phoenix Art Museum, and was first presented in the Phoenix Art Museum's Doris and John Norton Gallery for the Center for Creative Photography. The Phoenix Art Museum and the Center began collaborating and opened a gallery dedicated to the Center in Phoenix two years ago.

Background

California in the early 1930s bustled with camera activity: portrait photographers captured likenesses; amateurs composed landscapes, still lifes, and figure studies; documentarians recorded the effects of the economic depression; and specialists found work in the Hollywood film industry. Camera clubs hosted salons, providing an opportunity for professional and amateur photographers to display their work. Visitors to these salons expected painterly, “pictorial” imagery created by those endeavoring to prove that photographs, even though machine-made, could still be works of art. Pictorialists emulated traditional art forms in subject matter and style, producing photographs that looked like unique, hand-crafted objects.

Within this pervasive Pictorialist culture a new idea was gaining currency. For some, the way to demonstrate a camera's true artistic value was to take advantage of its mechanical qualities to produce sharply focused, graphic compositions. One night late in 1932, a group of like-minded Bay Area photographers – including Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, Sonya Noskowiak, and Willard van Dyke – discussed what they saw as the appropriate direction for modern photography. They decided to exhibit their work as a demonstration of a new aesthetic, under the name “Group f/64.”

The f/64 setting produces great depth of field, meaning everything from the immediate foreground to the distant background is in focus. Group members used large-format cameras and contact-printed their negatives on glossy paper to preserve all the rich detail they recorded. “Subject matter was less important than technique,” notes exhibition curator, Rebecca Senf. “Group f/64 photographs include nearly every possible category: industrial, urban and natural landscapes; portraits of friends and fellow group members; isolated objects for sharp-focus still lifes; and details extracted from the visible world.”

Between November 15 and December 31, 1932, Group f/64 held its inaugural exhibition at the de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, inviting four non-member photographers with compatible approaches, including Alma Lavenson and Brett Weston. To distinguish themselves from the Pictorialists, they wrote, “Pure photography is defined as possessing no qualities of technic [sic], composition or idea, derivative of any other art-form.”

Opening Reception and Lecture

Reception at 5 p.m., Lecture at 6 p.m.

Innovation in Pictorialism and Modernism: Anne Brigman, Imogen Cunningham, Alma Lavenson

Susan Ehrens, noted author, curator, and photography historian, will look at three California women photographers who created significant and unique bodies of work; examining their contributions in Pictorialist and Modernist traditions in photography, as well as their relationships to each other and to other members of Group f64.

Friday, February 15, Auditorium

Gallery Walks

Join **Becky Senf**, who organized the exhibition, on a gallery walk as she discusses the exhibition premise and highlight the artists and works on view. Senf is the Center's new Assistant Curator.

Sunday, March 9, 1 p.m., repeated on Thursday, April 24, 5:30 p.m.

Lecture

The Photography Paradox: Truth against Beauty

Joan Fontcuberta, internationally acclaimed artist, curator, and theoretical writer, will discuss the tension between truth and beauty that has propelled photography's evolution since its origin. Relevant photographic contributions to the aesthetic and ontological issues present in this tension, including that of Group f/64, contemporary practice, and Fontcuberta's own work, will be used as examples.

Friday, March 28, 5:30 p.m., Auditorium

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About the Center for Creative Photography

The Center for Creative Photography holds more archives and individual works by 20th-century North American photographers than any other museum in the world. The archives of over 60 major American photographers—including Ansel Adams, Harry Callahan, W. Eugene Smith, Edward Weston, and Garry Winogrand—form the core of a collection numbering over 80,000 works. The Center for Creative Photography has an integrated program of preservation, access, and education that celebrates the history of photography and its contemporary practice.

For More Information: 520-621-7968 or <http://www.creativephotography.org>

Gallery Hours: Monday–Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; weekends, noon to 5 p.m.

Admission: Center for Creative Photography exhibitions, print room viewings, and education events are always FREE and open to the public.

Location: The CCP is located on the University of Arizona campus, Fine Arts Complex, 1030 N. Olive Rd., Tucson, AZ.

Parking: Parking is available at the Park Avenue Garage at the NE corner of Park and Speedway Blvd. The pedestrian underpass gives you direct access to the CCP. Parking directly behind the CCP (off 2nd Street) is free after 5 pm on weekdays and all day Saturday and Sunday.

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