

L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

2023 Art Basel Miami and Miami Art Week with CYJO, A Journal, Part 2

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Before the Miami Art Week rush, I visited the **Margulies Collection** in Wynwood to explore **Helen Levitt's** extensive body of work. Stepping into the images that captured a time devoid of smartphone addictions and the digital panopticon felt pleasantly nostalgic. It brought me back to the 1990's where I spent my free weekends wandering the streets of New York City with my manual Pentax K1000 35mm camera, attempting to capture brief moments of exchange with what and who seemed compelling. In Helen's work, there were no choreographed images, nor manicured depictions of beauty, only the raw, the real, the fleeting, and the deeply human.

Associate Curator, **Jeanie Ambrosio** elaborated more on the exhibition and work.

CYJO: This exhibition refreshingly delves into a lifetime of Helen Levitt's work, spanning decades, unveiling the richness of her artistic journey. Why did your team decide to exhibit her work here in Miami?

Jeanie : The exhibition was inspired by the international success of the *Helen Levitt* exhibition organized by the Albertina Museum in Vienna, Austria which travelled to the Photographer's Gallery in London. Our loan of over 30 Helen Levitt photographs to the exhibition inspired us to have a long overdue showing of her work here in South Florida. Longtime curator Katherine Hinds, collector Martin Margulies, and myself pulled together the Margulies Collection's Helen Levitt archives to produce one of the most comprehensive shows of her photographs in South Florida to date.

C: Tell us more about the exhibition.

J: The exhibition emphasizes Levitt's dedication to the city of New York where she lived for her entire life through a large showing of the New York Street Scenes. In addition, we included subsets of her works which may be lesser known such as the Graffiti, Subway Portraits, Mexico City series and First Proofs. In our portfolio book, *From the archive*, we placed 96 Levitt photographs for visitors to have a more intimate and comprehensive sense of her work.

The exhibition also pays tribute to the lifelong friendship and collaborations Levitt had with author James Agee and photographer Walker Evans through the inclusion of *In the Street*, the 1948 16mm film she made with Agee and cinematographer Janice Loeb and the subway portraits she produced with Walker Evans in 1938.

C: It was memorable to see her First Proofs framed on the wall and also in the portfolio book you had next to it. The scale of the images can also alter the way one receives the work. And to see so many small windows exposing the rich moments she captured brought more intimacy to the experience.

J: I love the first proofs. All of the Helen Levitt's photographs in the Margulies Collection came directly from her archives by way of Laurence Miller gallery in New York. I think the small size has such a nice connection to early photography. She made them slightly more enlarged from the contact sheets so that she could see the gestures and facial features more clearly. But of course they're still small because she didn't want to waste photo paper. Enlarging her contact prints to first proofs helped emphasize bodily movements and stance which was important to her work. It helped her decide which images she wanted to print at a larger size.

C: And what about her personal life? I read that she didn't complete high school, preferred not to travel much and didn't do a lot of interviews.

J: She only took one trip to Mexico City in the summer of 1941. The fact that she spent her whole life in the New York City and photographed it from the 1930s to the early 2000's is part of the interest and really the crux of her work.

I did research on her friendships with James Agee and Walker Evans. The three of them were very close. She made "In the Street" with James Agee and the cinematographer Janice Loeb. And she made her subway portraits sharing the same camera and darkroom as Walker Evans. It's funny, they would fight sometimes over whose photo was whose because it got quite confusing.

She also travelled to Mexico City with James Agee's wife. Her portraits there are different from her NY street scenes. They have similar gestures but some scholars say they are a bit more sociologically focused compared to her New York Street scenes because she was unfamiliar with Mexico City.

I read a brief interview towards the end of her life that said she was interested in helping animals, and animal welfare. By in large, when I think of her, I think of her as a New Yorker, her relationship to the city and her unsentimental approach to her work with children. While describing New York she states, "I happen to live here," and when discussing the children she elaborates, "People think I love children, but I don't. Not more than the next person. It was just that children were out in the streets."

C: When viewing her color photography, there are distinct changes to the energy and content in the scenes which speak to the changing culture. Can you talk a bit more about this?

J: From the 1930's and 40's, what really marked her photographs was the fact that people in New York were out in the street. They didn't have air conditioning and TV so there was not much keeping them inside. Both children, shopkeepers and people alike would spend their time outside. The city became a backdrop, like a theater performance. But that changed quite a bit when she started photographing in color, especially from her photographs from the 1970's onwards.

C: Can you tell us about Helen Levitt's film collaboration, "In the Street"?

J: She was a big film buff and would go to the theater all the time. She was also influenced by Charlie Chaplin. It was natural for Helen to explore New York in moving image and collaborate with her friends James Agee and Janice Loeb. Seeing the work is almost like watching her photographs come to life. James Agee explains it beautifully below in his text appearing at the beginning of the film:

The streets of the poor quarters of great cities are, above all, a theater and a battleground.

There, unaware and unnoticed, every human being

is a poet, a masker, a warrior, a dancer: and in his innocent artistry he projects, against the turmoil of the street, an image of human existence.

The attempt in this short film is to capture this image.

CYJO

About the writer: CYJO is a Korean American artist based in Miami whose work, since 2004, focuses on identity of person and place, exploring existing constructions of culture and categorizations. She is also co-founder of [thecreativedestruction](http://thecreativedestruction.com), an art collaborative with Timothy Archambault, and is a long-time contributor to L'Oeil de la Photographie. www.cyjostudio.com @cyjostudio