

photograph

FERENC BERKO AT GITTERMAN GALLERY



Ferenc Berko, *Lighthouse Light, India*, ca. 1938-47. Courtesy Gitterman Gallery

An artist's biography can be misleading. I could tell you, for example, that Ferenc Berko grew up a Jew in 1920s Germany, and that he spent the next three decades – partly because of anti-Semitism, and partly out of curiosity – living in places as diverse as Bombay, Paris, and Chicago. But the truth is that Berko didn't so much live in cities as he did in the world of forms, or at least that's what his photographs, on view at Gitterman Gallery through August 19, suggest. Just as the Cubists set about reducing the world to its constituent geometric shapes, Berko used his camera to uncover, as he put it, "the shape...the pattern, the form" that lay behind what the rest of us perceive as a muddled and complex reality.

The exhibition is divided into two parts: the first dedicated to Berko's street photography, and the second (and more sizable) to his studio work. In his street photography, Berko made little effort to get close to his subjects – only two shots here

clearly show people's faces. Instead, influenced by the Bauhaus school and László Moholy-Nagy, he was attracted to the serendipitous patterns (checkered floors, tessellated windows, oblong boats) that surround us, as well as those we, like the two sunbathers on a Budapest beach, form ourselves.

Berko's formal obsession found a greater outlet in his studio work, which is here largely represented by nude studies. Shooting with a high contrast, and using bold lighting that darkened his models until they resemble silhouettes or sculptures in an unlit museum, Berko calls our attention to the beautiful physics of the human body – the perfect curve of the breast, but also the bridge-like heft of shoulders and outstretched arms.



Ferenc Berko, *Nude*, Chicago, ca. 1950-51. Courtesy Gitterman Gallery

His project approaches a sort of platonic ideal in the exhibition's final photographs, some of which are solarized to the point where they look like line drawings (pure form, without distraction). They might seem like objects of obsession, but they are also manifestations of inquiry and grace.

— *By Ratik Asokan 07/20/2016*