



An Unknown Photographer, Remembered

Categories: Daily Picture Show

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It's amazing — and unsettling — to realize how much of life is left to circumstance, and chance, and being in the right place at the right time. Photographer Gordon Stettinius, for example, just happened to have a friend, who happened to have an elderly neighbor, who happened to have an incredible archive of unseen photographs just *waiting* to be discovered.

Gita Lenz, the aforementioned elderly neighbor, was destined to be a great photographer. In the 1950s, her art could be found on the walls of the Museum of Modern Art — in the good company of Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson. She was friends with Aaron Siskind, in the circle of Edward Steichen.

But for whatever reason — call it "circumstance" — her career as a photographer never took off. The negatives in her collection come to a halt in the mid-1960s, at which point Lenz turned to other, steadier sources of income, like copywriting and research positions. For whatever reason, she sort of fell off the photography grid while her contemporaries soared into eternal greatness.

Many years later, without any close family or friends (again, let's call it "circumstance"), Lenz was getting old and began the process of moving into assisted living with the help of her neighbor, Timothy Bartling. In the process of sorting and packing, Bartling came across the photographs and invited his friend Stettinius, an established photographer, to come appraise them.

Fast-forward to today, and Lenz finally has a monograph, published just last year with the help of Bartling and Stettinius. Her memory was fading during the process of curating the book, and, as Stettinius explained over the phone, each time she saw it was a new discovery. "I took these?" Stettinius says she'd ask. Followed almost immediately by the more practical, "How much is this book going to cost?" Sadly, she was able to forget her photographs — but always remembered the cost of the trade.

A few weeks ago, a friend introduced me to Stettinius, who, at the time, was trying to promote the book — to get Lenz some belated recognition. We e-mailed back and forth a few times, and then the sad news came: "Gita just passed away yesterday," he wrote on Jan. 21. "So that is something that sponsors all manner of thoughts and emotions."

To say the least.

Perhaps this is a proverbial case of *better late than never*. Still, it's unclear why circumstance seemed to be working against Lenz for so long. Without doing any thorough reporting, i.e. based on hearsay and the first-person accounts of those close to Lenz, it seems as though the stars just never aligned.

As is the case with so many artists, perhaps Lenz will get her recognition posthumously. "For our part," Stettinius recently updated via e-mail, "we are starting a new phase of the project, sorting, preserving and scanning ... negatives, which has been pretty interesting." Maybe circumstance has, finally, decided to favor Lenz.