

Gita Lenz

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By Valerie Gladstone

While the names of Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan, László Moholy-Nagy and Walker Evans are well known to photography lovers, Gita Lenz, whose pictures matched theirs in elegance and expressiveness, has never received the same attention. However, from the 1940s to the early '60s, she produced a remarkable collection of images, abstract and humanistic, which won her entry into the Edward Steichen-curated exhibition *Abstraction in Photography* in 1951 at MoMA, and inclusion a year later in a three-person show at the Brooklyn Museum. In 1955, Steichen included her photographs in MoMA's famed exhibition, *The Family of Man*.

Now 100 years old, Lenz lived at a time when few women artists received recognition, and probably would not be known now but for the efforts of her neighbor, Timothy Bartling, and photographer Gordon Stettinius, who archived her work. In fact, Stettinius recently established Candela Books to publish a book of her photographs, which was brought out to coincide with the exhibition. The Gitterman Gallery does her and us a great favor with this show, an absolute must-see for anyone interested in great photographers of the 20th century.

As a result of Lenz's eye for detail and compositional brilliance, each of her images takes on powerful life well beyond its particular focus. For instance, in the beautiful "Looking Down on Wollman Rink, Central Park," which shows people watching ice skaters, the sun streaming through the buildings gives the scene a mystical glow. The light falling on the rocky outcrop where the individuals stand reminds us of the city's ancient foundation. And the onlookers resemble witnesses at a ritual or religious ceremony, though of course, they are simply watching iceskating.

Again, in "Street Scene, Carmine St. and 7th Avenue," she makes an ordinary scene resonate with mystery. Seen from on high, the pavement looks like a stained canvas, with a dark curve broken by a lone figure. A white Texaco gasoline sign stands on the photo's edge, like a signpost in an empty land. Her joy in people shines through in the delightful "Boys, 1950s," where a group of city kids sits crowded together, clumsy, disheveled, with baseball bats at their feet. We know them—they are ourselves or our brothers or our own kids—and she captured them, always young, always plotting their next move. Because of the emotion underlying even her purest abstractions, it would be hard to imagine anyone walking away from this show unmoved.

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