

Creative Journey

Ferenc Berko and the Pursuit of Modernism

Words:
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From June 30 to October 2, 2011, the Royal Academy of Arts in London is presenting the exhibition "Eyewitness: Hungarian Photography in the 20th Century — Brassai, Capa, Kertész, Moholy-Nagy, Munkácsi." While other photographers are included, the primary focus is on these fab five, celebrating their innovative developments in photojournalism, portraiture, fashion, nude and abstract imagery.

However, the name of another Hungarian-born photographer is conspicuous by its absence from the exhibition's title: Ferenc Berko produced superlative work in all of the above genres, and his pictures, no less than those of his more famous compatriots, embody what might be termed the Hungarian modernist ethos: reality filtered through a slightly abstract perspective; an unvarnished visual lyricism; and an unsentimental yet sympathetic outlook on the human condition.

Berko synthesized many influences in his work—Bauhaus, surrealism, eroticism, social humanism—but put his own imprint on everything he photographed. Each image is charac-

terized by a singular purity and simplicity of expression, and a reveal of beauty through unexpected details and perspectives. Moreover, Berko mastered both black-and-white and color photography, putting him in a small and very select group of photographers.

Yet somehow, fame never came calling. Berko's versatility may have been one reason. Traditionally, artists who work in a variety of genres often receive less attention than those who can be easily filed, stamped, categorized and indexed. Just as Berko was never tied to a particular genre or style, neither was he affiliated with a particular region, like, say, Ansel Adams and Yosemite. Berko led a peripatetic lifestyle, having lived variously in Hungary, Berlin, Frankfurt, London, Paris, Bombay and Chicago before finally settling down for good in Aspen, Colorado, in 1949.

The latter was then an obscure little mining town, far removed from contemporary photographic circles, which may also have factored into his relative obscurity. Furthermore, Berko was not a self-promoter. Humble and discreet, he preferred to let his images speak for him. While Berko would have liked more recognition for his photographic contributions, he didn't let his relative lack of fame detract from pursuing his conceptions of form and beauty, exploring new visual perspectives, and pushing the medium's technical limitations.

He certainly never lacked recognition from his peers. André Kertész, never one to proffer compliments lightly, once said, "I consider Ferenc Berko one of the significant photogra-



Ferenc Berko (self-portrait)



Nude, Chicago, 1950-51



Solarized Nude, 1950-51

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phers in our profession.” Photographer and photo historian Helmut Gernsheim said, “Berko is one of the leading names in color photography — a field which he helped to pioneer in 1948/49 when other professionals were still skeptical about the advantages of color...Berko’s early abstractions of nature strike the beholder as a novel experience.”

Like many great photographers, Berko was fortunate to receive early exposure to the arts, even if other aspects of his formative years were less than idyllic. Born into a Jewish family in Nagyvárad in 1916, he lost his mother in 1921, moved with his father and sister to Dresden, Germany, and was adopted at 12 by a Berlin family. For the next several years, life was stable and productive. He was given a camera and encouraged to follow a creative path. More important, Berko was exposed to a number of important modernist artists thanks to his foster mother’s arts patronage. Prominent among them was László Moholy-Nagy, already a major figure in photography, typography, printmaking and industrial design. Moholy-Nagy became a friend and mentor to Berko, and his Bauhaus-inspired aesthetic helped shape the Hungarian émigré’s approach to the medium.

With Nazism’s rise by the early thirties, however, Berko’s Jewish heritage became problematic. He spent the years 1932 to 1938 in London and Paris (with brief trips to Budapest), studying philosophy, moving in film and photography circles, and producing documentary and abstract imagery. His style was already characterized by a sophisticated understanding of form and a beguiling visual elegance. Like their maker, his pictures project a somewhat cool and ironic detachment—not dissimilar from what Brassai and Kertész were then doing. He was also aware of the role that timing played.

“So much is luck,” he was once quoted in *Aspen* magazine. “Being at the right place at the right time. One split second and you have to get it. You try not to let that moment go. You can’t ever produce it again.”

It was also while living in London and Paris that Berko began a long collaboration with his wife Mirte on an ongoing series of nudes that would gradually become more daring and experimental. Ferenc’s granddaughter, Mirte Mallory, who has overseen his archive since he passed away in 2000, says this work was critical to his artistic development.

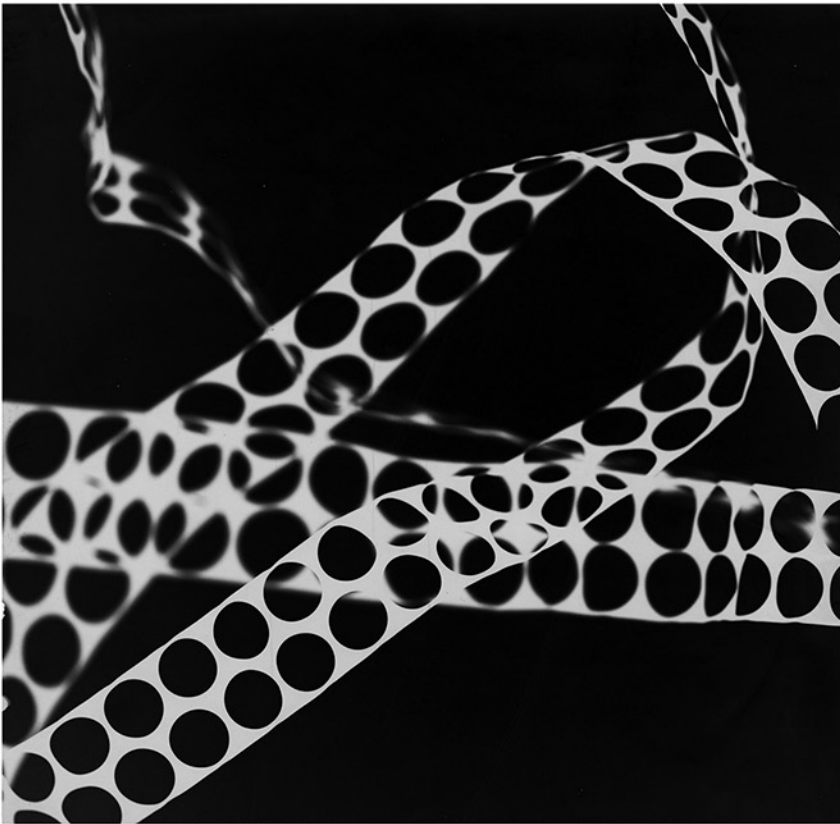
“I think the nudes helped him to better understand composition and perspective, as well as the importance of utilizing unusual shapes and forms. When one looks at his 1930s nudes, one sees similarities to the landscapes and abstractions he made later. They were very much at ease with each other, and Mirte moved very gracefully with the camera. These nudes weren’t sexual in the normal sense, but were graceful, respectful and beautiful.”

Mallory emphasizes the collaborative nature of this work, and further states that Mirte, who studied fashion under Gustav Klimt’s mistress, designer Emilie Flöge, and had a well-developed artistic eye, is under-recognized for her overall contributions to Berko’s success, encouraging his choice of theme and treatment, offering her opinions on his work, and even helping him edit his images.

With Hitler’s intentions very clear by 1938, Berko realized that France wouldn’t be



Chicago, 1947



Shadowgram, India, 1940-43

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safe much longer, so he moved to India, initially working as a cameraman for an Indian film producer. India was still under British rule, and Berko was immediately assimilated into the British community there. Mallory says he felt a sense of liberation upon arrival.

"He was no longer considered the outsider, even though in a sense he was even more so," she says. "He didn't feel as uncomfortable getting close to people. He had taken some street portraits of Hungarian Jews in Budapest before he left Europe, but they always have a little bit of context, and you can tell that he was taking them as he passed by. But in India he had this facility to be on more intimate terms with his subjects. You see more warmth in his work; you see more comfort with abstraction."

During the nine years Berko spent in India he opened a portrait studio, continued doing street scenes (but with more thematic context) and, doubtless inspired by Moholy-Nagy's use of these processes, began experimenting with the photogram (or shadowgram, as it was popularly known). Berko's shadowgrams, made by exposing the outlines of metallic mesh-like material directly onto photographic paper, took complete leave of representation.

Their graphic simplicity also anticipates the solarized nudes Berko would begin years later in Chicago. He would often reverse-print these to alter the tonalities, sometimes subjecting the same image to multiple iterations of this process to eliminate mid-tones and shadows and create an effect like pure line drawings. Such imagery reflects a freer approach, and shows him unafraid to take liberties with the technical elements of photography: light, film, paper, chemistry.

His innovative approach was driven by a combination of innate curiosity and analytical intellect. He wanted to explore as much of the world as possible, always from a photographic perspective, and always by capturing details and conjuring imagery only he could see. The title of his 1991 monograph could not be more apt: *The Discovering Eye*.

Ferenc and Mirte lived in India until 1947, but with the country on the brink of independence, it was time to once again find somewhere else to live. At first, it seemed as if Chicago would be his new home. While his brief stay there was, for the most part, uncomfortable on a personal level, he was able to push further into abstraction through images like "Fire Escape, Chicago, 1947" and "Billboard Lights, 1950," with its disorienting perspective and extreme black-white contrast. He also began working with color at this time.

"He very much anticipated arriving in Chicago," says Mallory. "His photography had been prolific in India. But he wanted to discover color. Moholy had said, come to Chicago, we're getting into color here, and you can teach. Sadly, when he got to Chicago Moholy was no longer there, and there was no color being done. He spoke of postwar Chicago as rather bleak in contrast to India, and most of his students, being on the G.I. Bill, were not that interested in photography. He also expressed disappointment in not finding the collaborative photographic community, in Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind, that he had anticipated."

After the false start in the Windy City, fate intervened in the person of Walter Paepcke, president of the Container Corporation of



Chicago, 1947

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America and a patron of the Institute of Design. Paepcke had a dream, to transform Aspen into a thriving cultural center. He invited Berko to help make that happen as the official photographer of the 1949 Goethe Bicentennial Convocation that attracted Dr. Albert Schweitzer and architect Eero Saarinen, the event that would subsequently give birth to the Aspen Institute and the Aspen Music Festival and School.

As he had done in Bombay, Berko immediately connected with Aspen’s nascent cultural scene. In addition to his official obligations, he became Aspen’s go-to photographer for portraits, dances, weddings and ski photos. He loved the small-town atmosphere in which everybody knew everybody. He also contributed by teaching workshops, writing photography columns for the local newspapers, and helping build the foundation of Aspen’s still-vital photographic community.

Meanwhile, he created a vast body of personal work, much of it groundbreaking color imagery that profoundly influenced Eliot Porter, Ernst Haas and other color specialists. Berko’s black-and-white work also benefited, especially during Aspen’s winters. He quickly recognized the potential of snow as a compositional tool. He would photograph a mass of

snow-dusted trees as if they were living tendrils shooting up from a pure white ground, or find beguiling abstract patterns in the details of a single tree trunk.

For a 1952 *Modern Photography* article, he said, “Snow not only reveals and emphasizes existing shapes and outlines, it also creates new ones — different and more beautiful than their originals.”

And if there was a single leitmotif Berko returned to throughout his life, it was beauty. Mirte Mallory developed a close relationship with her grandfather during her childhood, and often helped him out in the darkroom and on photo trips. As part of her college thesis, Mirte interviewed Berko about his life and work. They would spend mornings or afternoons in his studio as Berko leafed through images and told her stories.

“We spent that whole winter together reminiscing about this life behind the camera,” she recalls. “What a gift this time was, as he died of a sudden stroke at the end of winter. One of the conversations I remember most vividly is asking him about a particular image, ‘Well, what is that?’ He looked at me and replied, ‘What does it matter? It’s not about what it is, it’s about discovering the shape, discovering the pattern, the form. It’s the beauty.’”

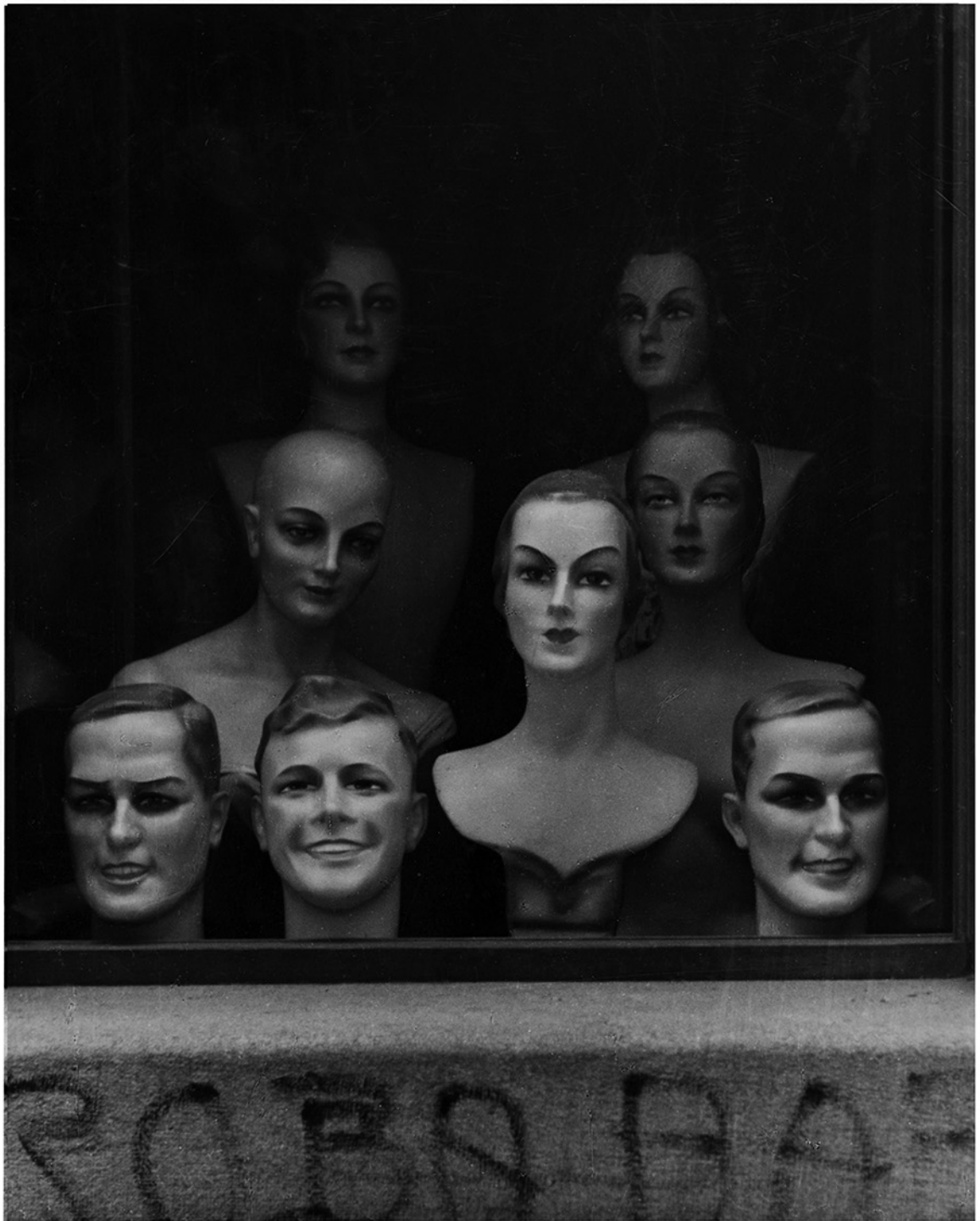
“He was a very internal, quiet, reflective person. For that reason it was easier for him to work with inner subjects, through this modernist industrial aesthetic, than it was to elicit a conventional emotion. I think that emotion for him was beauty. I wouldn’t say emotional in the sense of evoking a response of joy, fear or sadness. His work was about evoking the essential visual beauty in the world around him.”

Fact File

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Bombay Suburb, 1938-42



Budapest, 1937



Chicago, 1947



Aspen Tree Trunk, 1949-early '50s