

artnet Magazine

News

Reviews

Features

Books

People

Videos

Horoscope

Newsletter

Spencer's Art Law Journal



Valentin de Boulogne
The Lute Player
ca. 1626
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Jean Antoine Watteau
Mezzetin
1718-20
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Caravaggio
The Musicians
ca. 1595
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Henri Matisse
La Séance de Trois Heures
1924
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Rudy Burckhardt
["Eagle" Barber Shop Window, New York City]
1939
Metropolitan Museum of Art

AN AFTERNOON AT THE MET

by Christopher Sweet

As wars sputter and flare and markets stagger downward and the fevered globe turns on its uneasy axis, art nonetheless continues to offer its more enduring consolations. Strolling through the Metropolitan Museum the other Sunday afternoon, I went for a quick last look at Giorgio Morandi's quivering bottles, bowls, and boxes, and then to see the newly acquired work by Valentin de Boulogne, *The Lute Player* (ca. 1626). The painting of a musician or, as the picture's label states, "a soldier of fortune singing a love madrigal," resonates with Watteau's *Mezzetin* (ca. 1718-20), in the next gallery, as well as the central figure of Caravaggio's *Musicians* of ca. 1595, which I didn't find on view that day. The *Mezzetin* is plaintive and full of yearning where Valentin's musician is more intent in his purpose of seduction while Caravaggio's lute player would appear to be the more passive object of seduction.

From the European Paintings galleries, I made my way across to the recently expanded 19th-century galleries toward the museum's new Henri Matisse acquisition. Along the way, I was still pleased to see the expatriates Cassatt, Whistler and Sargent where they belong, among their European peers. Their usual exile in the American Wing is unfortunate, but at least while the American galleries undergo renovations, one can see *Madame X*, *Theodore Duret* and the rest in a more fitting context. In the southwest corner of the museum in the corridor that ushers visitors across from the 19th-century wing to the 20th-century wing, a group of Matisse paintings from Nice in the 1920s has now been joined by his fresh and luscious *Three O'clock Sitting* (1924), a studio scene with painter and model that adds considerably to the cluster of odalisques, still lifes and rooms with a view (the painting had previously been on loan from a private collection to the Portland Museum of Art in Maine).

After that warm-up, I doubled back toward the primary object of my visit, the exhibition, "New York, N. Why?: Photographs by Rudy Burckhardt, 1937-1940," featuring a photograph album composed in 1940 by the Swiss-born photographer and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt (1914-1999). The album consists of 67 photographs sequenced in three sections accompanied by six sonnets by the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby. The photographs and poems present a series of images and evocations of New York City streets and the urban struggle several years into the Great Depression and on the verge of world war. The imagery runs from august yet nondescript building facades to shop fronts and street advertising to the passing throng, from individual pedestrians to the swirl of the midday crowd. The tone of the work exudes an absurdist blend of melancholy and drollery. It is Burckhardt's early masterpiece, his *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*.

I had become a friend of Burckhardt's in the early 1980s. And in early 1985, I got a job in the publications department of the Met. Rudy and I were making a short film together in Central Park that first spring I was at the Met, and he would come up and meet me after work and we would go into the park and film. He told me that the museum had his *New York, N. Why?* album, and every now and again, I would go to look at it in what was then the Prints and Photographs Department. In certain quarters of the city in the 1980s one could still see and feel the remnants of New York in the 1930s, and Burckhardt's tales of the art world and Bohemian life over a span of 50 years were pure enchantment to me, a recent émigré from Suburbia.

The romance of those bygone years is summed up for me by Burckhardt's photograph of Denby in 1937, his then-companion and lifelong friend, on the roof of the cold-water loft on West 21st Street they shared when they first came to New York in 1935 (not in the album, but included in the exhibition). Denby had been touring Europe in an avant-garde dance group and met Burckhardt in Burckhardt's native Basel when seeking to have a passport photo taken.

An Afternoon at the Met - artnet Magazine



Rudy Burckhardt
[Checkerboard Tiled Wall Detail with Ice Cream Advertisements, New York City]
1938
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Rudy Burckhardt
[Pedestrians, New York City]
1939
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Rudy Burckhardt
Edwin Denby on West 21st Street
1937



Rudy Burckhardt
Willem de Kooning, New York
1950



Rudy Burckhardt
[Newsstand, New York City]
1939
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Rudy Burckhardt
[Man in Suit Holding Newspaper on Street, New York City]
1939
Metropolitan Museum of Art

They became close and through Denby's connections they were quickly caught up in the New York avant-garde and mingled with the likes of Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Paul Bowles. And one day they met their neighbor who came by looking for his cat. It was a young painter, then little-known, named Willem de Kooning. The three became friends, and Denby and Burckhardt were de Kooning's first great collectors. One of the paintings they owned, *Woman* of 1944, now hangs in the Met, a gallery away from Matisse's *Three O'Clock Sitting*. Denby would live in the West 21st Street walk-up until his death in 1983.

Burckhardt and Denby were immersed in the worlds of art, music and dance, and the *N. Why?* album in its intertwining of poetry and photography evokes those dimensions of their lives (here Burckhardt's photography is principal, while in a later, 1956 collaboration, *Mediterranean Cities*, poetry takes prominence). In the images themselves, and their sizing, sequencing and juxtaposition, one can almost hear the syncopated rhythms of jazz and modernist music that Burckhardt used in his films, see the improvisational choreography of the ebb and flow of people moving through city streets, and sense the oncoming of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism in the abstracted details, the geometric patterns, the allover flow and the hectoring signage.

Burckhardt often said in those years that he was thinking a lot about Mondrian, whose abstract austerities appealed to Burckhardt's own. To this austerity Burckhardt would bring his own gentle humor, by way of his studied croppings, curious juxtapositions and humble details. The Morton Schamberg-like standpipes congregating at the abutment of cement pavement and granite foundation seem to anthropomorphize into lowly comedians à la *Wall-E*.

In those first years in New York, Burckhardt says he was overwhelmed by the scale of the city and began to photograph it only in detail from relatively close up. And indeed in the album he focuses in direct, frontal compositions on facades and shop fronts at street level, always within the zone of the pavement or sidewalk, on the verge of dark interiors. The side streets are dim, but the avenues are shot in full unobstructed light. Persons passing through the field of view squint in the sun and step forward forthrightly, and yet they are utterly anonymous, their lives a mystery. In Burckhardt's photographs of Basel, nary a soul can be seen in the streets.

A reticent man, Burckhardt would nonetheless plunge into the throngs of the New York City streets with his camera and shoot away facing his subjects. The aspirations of solidity, permanence and profits expressed by the heavy facades and the bronze plaques of enterprises located therein are in a sense belied by the fugitive movements of the crowd and the more immediate needs catered to by newsstand and sodashop, and yet all is suspended, motionless, flat, two-dimensional. The formalist tone of these photographs did not suit photographers as much as painters early on, but Burckhardt's place in the history of photography is gradually being established, from the exhibition at MoMA QNS in 2002 to the retrospective of his New York photographs and films earlier this year at the Museum of the City of New York (which included the film we made together) and now with this exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum.

Burckhardt and I often walked together through Chelsea and the Flatiron District and Union Square. Once while passing some empty storefronts on or near Park Avenue South, he remarked that it had always been a bad sign of the times when they couldn't rent out these places. It has become so again. But art will continue to be made, and perhaps a new art will be born. And a new austerity perhaps best leavened by a rueful sense of humor is in store.

"New York, N. Why?: Photographs by Rudy Burckhardt, 1937-1940," Sept. 23, 2008-Jan. 4, 2009, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10028

CHRISTOPHER SWEET is Artnet's photo specialist.