


THE CITY OF NORTH VANCOUVER

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# CITY VIEWS

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Helen Levitt photo of New York children in 1940: The depth of feeling was unsurpassed. Photos are being exhibited at Presentation House...333 Chesterfield Avenue, North Vancouver.

## Touring photo exhibition opens

The Helen Levitt exhibition will be showing in the Gibson Room Gallery of Presentation House from May 28 to July 25! This is a major touring exhibition originating at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Such notable galleries as The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Art Institute of Chicago and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are included in the tour. Presentation House Gallery is the only Canadian gallery that is participating — this is very prestigious for North Vancouver and Presentation House.

Helen Levitt is considered one of the greatest living photographers in the U.S. — best known for her perceptive takes on street life in New York City, particularly the life of children at play.

We will be screening the film *IN THE STREET*, by Helen Levitt, Janice Loeb and James Agee, continuously during open hours. This 16 minute film is a beautiful, touching work filmed by the artist in 1952.

At the same time as the Levitt exhibition we will be presenting the work of Vancouver artist Lorna Brown in the top floor gallery. The exhibition entitled *CHARACTER: A*

*project for Presentation House* by Lorna Brown will be a photo-installation work that references the history of the Presentation House building.

The dates for the Lorna Brown exhibit are June 5 to July 25. There will be an opening reception for both shows on Saturday, June 5 from 2 to 5:00 pm in the galleries. All are welcome.

*The following review of Helen Levitt's exhibition is reprinted from the San Francisco Examiner.*

By David Bonetti  
Examiner Art Critic

The retrospective of Helen Levitt at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (through March 15) is a modest show of the modest photographs of an essentially modest photographer.

Don't get me wrong; there is nothing wrong with modesty — if it's honest. Within the narrow limits Levitt set for them, her photographs can be extraordinary — complex, beautiful, bold, touching in their intimacy and brazen in their truth. They are

profoundly humane documents. It's just that she's never made any extravagant claims for her work, and following her lead, neither should we.

Levitt, who was born in 1913 in Brooklyn and has lived in New York her entire life, is admired by those who love mid-century photography, but has never been a star like her friends and colleagues Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans. This retrospective, organized by SFMOMA and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and scheduled to travel to nine North American cities, is clearly intended to change that.

Opening it in San Francisco is a little strange. Levitt was one of the great poets of New York City during the decades of its greatness, and it only seems appropriate that it should have opened there. (Don't worry, the Met gets it next.)

Again don't mistake me when I say greatness. Levitt never photographed New York's rich and powerful, nor the obvious symbols of "Manhatta," the engine of capitalist triumph. She found — and still finds, although not so easily — greatness in



the streets of New York's poor neighborhoods, and the fact that the same high comedy she found there in the '30s, '40s and '50s is now largely gone marks the passage of what was once the seat of a great civilization.

In Levitt's photographs, people live their lives in the streets; they have no shame that they prefer their stoop to their stuffy and crowded living room. They enact the dramas of their lives publicly for everyone to see.

What they often didn't know was that the small woman pointing her camera at an

angle 90 degrees away from them was actually taking their picture. Levitt's street photos are remarkable for the apparently transparent candor of her subjects. They seem to be who they are, rather than a prepared face. The reason they didn't pose is that they didn't realize Levitt was photographing them. She used an angle viewfinder camera that made it look as if she was photographing something else.

Such a gimmick is, of course, no guarantee of a good picture, but it did allow Levitt to focus on what was happening within the

total frame. For that reason, each of her pictures tells a complex story of relationships: relationships between people and architecture, between people, architecture and the public space of the city street.

One of the first things you notice about Levitt's photographs is that in them the street functions like a stage and that under her direction, all the pedestrians become players, dancers, singers — sometimes hams. The image chosen for the catalog cover — of four boys playing foreign legion — makes that clear. With these four characters, Levitt didn't have to pretend. She shot them full face — and they loved it. Up against a graffiti'd storefront, the two eldest appear to break into song, milking the audience for applause — "Figaro, Figaro, Fiiiiiiiiiiiiigaro."

Levitt's is an art of gesture, pose and attitude. You're not surprised to read in the catalog (which contains two engrossing essays, one by each curator — SFMOMA's Sandra Phillips and the Met's Maria Morris Hambourg) that Levitt loves dance and music. Her photographs are informed by the convention of the stage and by the rhythms and syncopations of American music and dance.

You could tour the exhibit just noting gestures that sum up a moment in the ongoing tragicomedy of everyday life. There's the old woman holding a cat with her other hand held to her breast. There's the woman crossing the street as if it were paved with eggs, stuffing a cigarette in her mouth. There's the old man on the wooden chair alongside the elevated gesturing broadly, "that big." There's the man resting on the fender of his truck, hailing help with one hand, holding his throat with the other. There's the young man with his arms akimbo looking away from the young woman with her fat arms behind her back. There's the young black girl with her arms crossed, fed up and defeated. There's the woman placing her hand in sympathy upon her distressed friend's shoulder.

Levitt is attracted to children more than any subject. In their play they don't hide themselves under layers of socialization; they live their lives on the surface. Her pictures of children playing are paradigms of human interaction, stripped of pretense and false emotion.

Some of her best photographs are of children in masks. There's one from Halloween 1939 of three children on a townhouse stoop that would guarantee her reputation if all her other work were lost. It is about appearing in society. Still protected by the threshold, a girl pulls on her mask. One steps out onto the stoop, her masked sister prepares to pose. Ahead of them, their elder brother the lead, rests his arms nonchalantly on the pressed metal balustrade while he elegantly crosses his leg. The three stages of socialization are visualized in their unconscious actions, but we'll never know who those children are beneath the masks.



Helen Levitt finds greatness in streets of New York's poor neighborhoods.

ART

Now

# On the streets of New York

## Helen Levitt's timeless images at Presentation House Gallery

► **Helen Levitt:** a touring retrospective exhibit curated by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: a Gallery exhibit in the Presentation House Museum, 333 Chesterfield Ave., North Vancouver, until July 25.  
 ► **Lorna Brown:** *Character*, an installation at Presentation House Art Gallery, 333 Chesterfield Ave., North Vancouver, until July 25.



Ron Falcioni

### ART REVIEW

**C**ONJURE THE following image with your mind's eye. It's 1945 on the backstreets of New York. In the foreground, lounging about the sidewalk on dilapidated chairs, two old men in drab suits are engaged in a languorous conversation.

Across the street, in the penumbra of the el, a horse-drawn laundry van makes its way past a parked roadster with whitewalls and mounted headlights — as conspicuous a reminder of the esthetic of another era as the laundry wagon itself.

Further left, offset by a



Photo Helen Levitt

**NEW YORK: 1939.** In Levitt's world children "inhabit a joyful if fleeting realm impervious to the jeering taunts of reality."

brownstone tenement building and in direct view of the old man gesturing in the foreground, a solitary child, distant, inconspicuous and seemingly ignored, is framed by the plumb pillars of the el, hands raised to mouth in an ambiguous expression whose meaning no amount of vain conjecture on my part could ever precisely explain.

Such is the substance of just one of the 60 black-and-white

photographs currently on display at Presentation House.

Pregnant with lyricism and subtle drama, it is typical of the life achievement of Helen Levitt, who was able to maintain a distance and anonymity not unlike that of the child in the photo described above.

In *Helen Levitt*, a belated retrospective of works by one of America's most highly esteemed living photographers, Presentation

House has once again brought to Vancouver an exhibit as rich and satisfying as one is ever likely to find anywhere.

Unlike Diane Arbus, another New Yorker five years her junior, Levitt felt no attraction to Grand Guignol, no affinity for transvestites, nudists and circus freaks.

In fact, even in the '60s, '70s and '80s when she switched from

See Short film page 34

## Short film central to show

From page 27

black-and-white to dye transfer color prints (24 of which are included in this show), she no more succumbed to the new photo-journalism of Arbus than she had to the more overtly social-documentary realism of Walker Evans, Bernice Adams and Weegee in the '40s and '50s.

From the late '30s on, the streets of New York have provided Levitt with an ideal and constant backdrop for commemorating the tender, human drama of its denizens, a drama whose portrayal probably more fully reflects the artist's benevolent vision of human nature than the whole truth of the *milieux* she recorded.

Utilizing her 35-millimetre Lieca, often equipped with its 90-degree viewfinder, she was able to transfix forever the immediacy of the transient moment without distracting her subjects or compromising the dramatic potential of their day-to-day lives.

By narrowing her focus to the poor and dispossessed, to the seemingly powerless victims of Harlem, the Bronx and the Lower East Side, to the elderly, on whose faces are graven boredom, hopelessness and *ennui*, to the ghetto blacks, the Hispanics, the poor immigrant whites — all of whom she intimately understood and obviously loved — Helen Levitt, in her perseverance and dedication

to her art, was able to unmask their plight and reveal something of the modest joys and quiet dignity of their lives.

That hopeful spirit in the face of defeat is best exemplified in Levitt's tireless preoccupation with children.

With the elusiveness of myth, Levitt's photographs of children defy temporal specificity.

Central to this show, in fact, is the poignant documentary film *In the Street*, which she made with Janice Loeb and James Agee in 1952.

This silent film, whose quirky piano accompaniment evokes a Gershwin score nostalgically paraphrased by Charles Ives, is a celebration of childhood that says more about the optimism of the human spirit in its brief span of 16 minutes than a dozen talking feature films rolled into one.

In Levitt's street urchins is found the universality of the despondency and capitulation of the adults who surround them.

Unlike *Character*, the rather cold and trivial post-modernist exercise upstairs by Lorna Brown (an installation which purports to promote the cause of Presentation House with its pretentious display of enigma and trite allusion) this show, like so many others of its calibre, is the true justification for the preservation of Presentation House.



## LIVELY ARTS

# Stately and charming ol' Presentation House

**A**DJECTIVES ARE a powerful persuader. Want to tear a building down? Call it *dilapidated*. Say it's a *derelict*. Tell people the life lived within the old walls, if there is any, is *squalid*. Inform the public that the land the structure sits on is *wasted*.

On the other hand, you might want to save the building. Then there are other adjectives.

How about *stately*? Or *grand*? What about *charming*?

And if you really wanted to get bold you could call a building *living* history.

These terms can also be used in combination. You could say a house or apartment block or office tower that was once grand is now dilapidated and derelict but could, in the proper hands become stately and charming once more. Living history, in fact.

With human beings, and what we like to term ways of life, things are

not quite so simple.

When people get old and dilapidated they die. No words, not even adjectives, can save them.

They survive through their children and their children's children.

The same with societies. Parts of them — bits and pieces, hints really — remain, but what was there is never the same from generation to generation. We can preserve ourselves and our times only in stories,

books, film, video and so on.

I had these thoughts (such as they are) the last Friday as I spent a couple of hours in the labyrinthine passages, rooms, alcoves and stairwells of Presentation House in North Vancouver — a building that itself always seems to be under some kind of threat.

Keep it. Tear it down. Change it. Designate it historical. But never, never stop talking about it or its fate. That seems to be its perpetual fate. But that's (kind of, sort of) another story.

Upstairs on what I take to be (but can't exactly be sure) the top floor of Presentation House is Vancouver artist Lorna Brown finishing up an installation called *Character*. It features large photos of portions of the head of the breath-of-life practice doll Resuscitation Annie. In most,

Annie's features — nostrils, lips — have come to look like isolated segments of classic sculpture.

I talk with Brown about the ideas expressed in the opening paragraphs of this column.

About adjectives. On the walls are newspaper articles

(about Presentation House and about the recently demolished Saint Alice Hotel) with these words highlighted.

There are piles of take-away, blueprint-like posters with another picture of Resuscitation Annie and the same words.

Brown tells me she has had old staircases (featuring yellowing, prepared-but-never-painted gyprock) opened up as part of the exhibit.

These staircases have gone, she says.

"from raw to decrepit without ever having been clean in the middle."

A floor below (down a finished staircase) is a 60-year history, in photos, of the street life of New York by the

photographer Helen

Levitt. On the screen of a television set, a silent movie, made by Levitt in the '50s, plays.

I am startled by the fact that the

images of the film do not seem to be from the '50s. The clothing, the shoes, the faces, all seem from two to three decades before that. Only some of the cars, from the late '40s, betray the era. For the poor of that time and place, time appears to have moved more slowly than for those Happy Days people who couldn't wait for the latest pair of fins to sprout on the newest, boldest Chrysler product.

The catalogue that goes with the Levitt show explains her vision.

her history, some of what she was trying to do. But the photos on the wall of Presentation House are all you need. In this case, academic explanations and biographical information seem superfluous.

Levitt has, in shooting her New

York in her time, preserved it for us half a continent and decades away.

The images (both black-and-white and color) are technically fascinating and remarkably free of cloying romanticism.

Photos without adjectives, you could say, but probably wouldn't.

Both the Levitt show and Brown's photographic installation will be at Presentation House, 333 Chesterfield in North Vancouver until July 25.

The gallery is open at noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday to Sunday. On Thursday it stays open in the evenings to 9 p.m.



**HELEN LEVITT: her photos offer sharp vision of poverty**

Peter Wilson writes  
Monday, Wednesday and Friday



VISUAL ARTS

# Profound photos of childhoods lost

By ROBIN LAURENCE

**I**n Helen Levitt's photographs, children invent a wealth of games and disguises out of the most meagre and impoverished materials.

Caps and crumpled handkerchiefs transform little boys into Foreign Legionnaires. A crudely cutout paper mask renders a slum child into a tree sprite, a spirit from the dark woods of fairy tales and folk mythology.

An abandoned packing crate becomes a secret fort or clubhouse, shutting out bad times and urban debris. A wooden barrel slung over an open fire hydrant creates a baroque fountain, converting an inner city street into a garden of watery delight.

In the hands of children, dead trees become standards of resurgent knighthood, and broken mirrors, the portals to a world of solemn invention.

Critics and curators who have long admired Levitt's work are hoping that a new retrospective exhibition organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and on view at Presentation House in North Vancouver until July 25, will bring the artist's vision to a broader public.

"A photographer's photographer," the 80-year-old Levitt has spent much of her career quietly and anonymously stalking New York street life, often employing a right-angled viewfinder to ensure the candor and spontaneity of her subjects.

Her interest — her obsession — is not the life found in the prosperous streets, nor the glamorous streets, nor the streets of politics, high culture and commerce, but in the poor residential streets of New York's immigrant and black communities.

Since the 1930s, Levitt has been honing a vision of the sidewalks and doorways, stoops and storefronts, newsstands, bus stops and rubble-strewn vacant lots of East Harlem, the Lower East Side, Brooklyn and the Bronx.

The people who play out their lives in these places, who constitute her subtle yet affecting images, are European Jews and gypsies, Italians and Hispanics, Poles and Afro-Americans.

They are old men sitting on peeling kitchen chairs under the El, middle-aged women chatting or smoking or hosing down the sidewalk, young couples leaning in doorways or against one another in scenes of sunny desolation.

But mostly they are children, absorbed in their necessary



IMAGES OF THE YOUNG AND EAGER: Girl with Milk Bottles (top), Foreign Legionnaires

games. Like the French photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Helen Levitt has a special affinity for the antic energies, roller-coaster moods and makeshift culture of children.

**C**artier-Bresson was an important influence in Levitt's photographic career, and one of Levitt's photos, a 1945 image of a young girl proudly and smugly carrying two large bottles of milk down the street, is immediately reminiscent of Cartier-Bresson's famous "Sunday morning errand, rue Mouffetard, Paris."

In the Cartier-Bresson photo — which is dated 1958, much later than the Levitt, flipping the master-protégé dynamic — a young boy with an expression nearly identical to that of the young girl carries two large bottles of wine down the street.

What both images offer us is a profound projection of childhood

activity into the realm of adult responsibility, anticipation charged with the child's joy and the viewer's sadness. Levitt's photo engages the additional symbolism of motherhood and fertility: the young girl clutches the full milk bottles to her flat chest while a vastly pregnant woman looks disdainfully on.

As with the best photographs, Levitt's work casts universalities from the moulds of particular moments. Her genius is in catching the moment when her subjects unconsciously intersect with the symbols that make their lives eternal. The unconscious symbolism of Levitt's children is especially affecting, since much of it involves climbing and costuming.

Clambering up bare trees, fire escapes, house beams or door posts, wrapping themselves in rough sheets, cloth bags or butcher's paper, covering their faces with masks or charcoal markings or handkerchiefs, Levitt's kids seem to express not only their ready commitment to the world of make-believe, but their relentless drive to raise themselves,

through both energy and imagination, out of the dreary dullness into which they have been born.

Although possessing this symbolic quality of timelessness, Levitt's photographs also (unintentionally) record the decline of American life over the last half century.

Her black-and-white still images of the 1930s and 1940s, and her award-winning short film, *In the Street*, released in 1952, show us how comfortably people could conduct their lives in public places, and how easily children of European and African heritage could play together.

But Levitt's images from the 1970s and 1980s (many of them in paradoxical color) reveal, through their very omissions, how degraded urban experience has become.

Graffiti changes from the innocent chalk drawing of children to the enraged spray paintings of youth. Wrecked cars and homeless people establish a sad presence, and only the elderly seem to linger — elegiacally — on their

peeling stoops.

And, as Levitt has aged and the city has deteriorated, critical theory has shifted too. Despite her great and genuine humanity, it would be impossible for Levitt to launch her career today making representations of classes, cultures and races to which she did not belong. In this exhibition, an era of thronging possibilities seems to have passed.

Also recommended:

**Lorna Brown, Character:** site specific photographic installation, illuminating issues of architectural preservation and demolition. At Presentation House Gallery, 333 Chesterfield Ave., North Vancouver, until July 25.

**Robert Davidson, Eagle of the Dawn:** retrospective of prints, drawings, sculptures, masks, poles, jewelry and ceremonial objects by the preeminent Haida artist. At the Vancouver Art Gallery, 750 Hornby St., until Sept. 26.

**Word Power:** a group exhibition of phototextual art, including a gargy bathroom installation by Joy Henley. At the Foto-Base Gallery, 231 Carrall St., until Tuesday.

**Frances Grafton, 1789:** immense charcoal drawings of defaced statuary. At the Monte Clark Gallery, 233 Carrall St., until July 17.

**Jacqueline Berting, The Glass Wheat Field:** 14,000 glass wheat stalks, quivering in the breeze. At the Douglas Uddell Gallery, 1558 West Sixth Ave., closing today.

SOUTH GRANVILLE GALLERY ROW	CURRENTLY EXHIBITING
ATELIER 732-3021	Group: Davis, Eckert, Neil McAvity, Coupey, Young
BAU-XI 733-7011	LANDSCAPE: Mayors, Epp, Fennick, Godwin, Pickett, Pizman, Smith, East, Wallace
DIANE FARRIS 737-2629	Ailita Lukars "Military" Series: Kerr, Bierk, Woods, Koerner, Lam
DOUGLAS UDELL 736-8900	GROUP: Matisse, Miro, Held, Fischl, Fafard, Delise
EQUINOX 736-2405	Group: Falk, James, Johnson, Lichtenstein, Wedman
TRIBAL ART 732-4555	Group: Davidson, Bartow, Cardinal-Schubert
HEFFEL 732-6505	Joe Andoe, Vicky Marshall, Tony Scherman
PETLEY JONES 732-5353	William Hogarth "Engravings & Etchings" June 24-July 14, 1993.
SIMON PATRICH 733-2662	Luis Merino & group show: Will Jusling Nobory Sawai
THRESHOLD 736-1427	GALLERY ARTISTS

# PREVIEW

**HELEN LEVITT**  
**Presentation House, North Vancouver**  
**May 28-July 25**  
**Seattle Art Museum**  
**August 20-October 13**

Presentation House will be the only venue in Canada for this major exhibition of approximately 60 black-and-white and 25 colour photographs by the American Helen Levitt. Early works (from the 1930's and 40's) as well as recent ones (from the 1980's) will be shown.

Now in her sixth decade of professional photography, Levitt continues to chronicle ordinary people, particularly street people and children at play. With her initial goal to "frame the telling picture", she moved in 1937 from the kind of "pictorial script" in photography which sets up conditions to describe the telling, to a "gestural sign language" which tells its own story.

In doing so, Levitt focuses on action, transitional and unguarded moments, interrelationships between people and places, and interaction between people. She rarely exposes more than one frame of any scene or incident. Instead, she singles out what T.S. Eliot would call "the still point of the turning world." At the same time she prefers expressive stage scenery, such as highly ornamental building surfaces, trash or graffiti. Her backdrops are often rich and chaotic.

—Mia Johnson



Helen Levitt, *New York (1938)*, gelatin silver print (Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver, May 28-July 25)

## Humberston Edwards Fine Art

1360 Marine Drive,

☎(604)922-7934

Hours: mon-sat 11am-5pm *Thru Jun-July-Aug* Gallery artists.

## WHISTLER

### Shepard Gallery

next to Val d'Iserre,

☎(604)938-3366

Hours: mon-fri 11am-8pm sat 10am-10pm sun 10am-5pm *Thru June-July-Aug* Featuring contemporary artists with works ranging from **Lawrence Ruskin**, glass-works, **Kathryn Youngs**, ceramics, **Patrick Amiot**, sculptures to flowers by **Rob Wilson**. Changing exhibitions every 30 days. Gallery artists include **Christian Ricordi**, **Dianne Ostioich**, **Pat O'Hara**, **H.E. Kuckein** and **Alix Hirabayashi**.

## The Whistler Village Art Gallery

Lobby of the Delta Mountain Inn,

4050 Whistler Way,

☎(604)938-3001

Hours: 7 days a week 10:30am-10:30pm *Thru Jun-July-Aug* Group show of gallery artists featuring Westcoast art by **Alex Pavlenko**, **George Schmerholz**, **Donna Jane Miller**, **Ken Wallace**, **Patricia Johnson**, **Brian Pollack**, **Ken Wesman**, **Brent Lynch**, **Isobel MacLaurin**, **Marilyn Sugiyama** and **Val Sewell**, ceramics and glass by **Sue Hara**, **Judith Burke**, **Debbie Deware**, **Fred Rahn**, **Vincent Massey** and **David New-Small**, also master jade works by **Lyle Sopol**.

## WHITE ROCK

### ◆ Arnold Mikelson Mind and Matter Gallery

13743 16th Ave, ☎(604)536-6460

Hours: daily noon-6pm or by ap-

pointment *Thru Jun* **Alice Mahon**, watercolours, **Frederick Clark**, watercolours, **Arnold Mikelson**, wood sculpture, **Maria Zaron**, pottery; *July 10, 11, 17 & 18 Festival of the Arts*, painting, pottery, glass blowing, jewellery, soapstone sculpture, batik, weaving, etc.; *thru July* **Bill Anderson**, pen & ink, **June Bourque**, watercolours, **Arnold Mikelson**, wood sculpture, **Chris Clarke**, blown glass, **Jeanette Boothby**, soapstone; *thru Aug* "Fine Arts Five", watercolours by **Doris Paterson**, **Malonie Kasian**, **Ruth Adams Booth**, **June Pender** and **Dorothy St. Hilaire**.

### Jenkins Showler Gallery

1562 Johnston Rd,

☎(604)535-7445

Hours: mon-thur & sat 9:30am-5:30pm fri 9:30am-9pm sun 12-5pm *Jun 11-20* **H.E. Kuckein**, "Locations", oil on canvas; *thru July* Gallery artists including **Genn**, **Julsing**, **Noel**, **Aikang Chen**,