

ARTS



The very things orthodox '50s photographers condemned Robert Frank for—"out-of-focus pictures, unnecessary grain"—make works such as *Hitchhikers*, *Butte*, *Montana*, from his book *The Americans*, seem uncommonly powerful today.

Frank Images of America

A Swiss photographer's '50s odyssey ages well

VISUAL ARTS

Robert Frank and the Everyday

At Presentation House until October 10. Free admission on First Thursday art night (October 7). Claudia Beck will discuss Frank's work on Thursday (September 30) at 7:30 p.m.

• BY ALEX WATERHOUSE-HAYWARD

It is 1955. Robert Frank walks into a dark, dingy bar. It is the domain of tough local cowhands, their image unsoftened by the Marlboro Man yet to come. There is a brief silence as they give Frank a cursory glance. He is ignored. Crouching, he pulls out a Leica 2C with a Zeiss Sonnar 50mm f1.5 lens and quickly shoots an exposure at the absolute limit: 1/30 second, wide open. (The Leica's viewfinder is useless in such dim light, so Frank focuses by guesstimating the distance.) The resulting exposure, *Bar—Gallup, New Mexico*, and many more exposures like it became the 1958 book *The Americans*. Some of these photographs, and others from Frank's London series—27 in all—can be seen until October 10 at Presentation House, in North Vancouver, in the show Robert Frank and the Everyday.

The Americans, with an introduction by beat writer Jack Kerouac, was either hated or ignored by critics. James M. Zanutto, one of the editors of the then-influential *Popular Photography*, wrote: "It seems as if he merely points the camera in the direction he wishes to shoot and doesn't worry about exposure, composition and lesser considerations. If you dig out-of-focus pictures, intense and unnecessary grain, converging verticals, a total absence of normal composition, and a relaxed, snapshot quality, then Robert Frank is for you. If you don't, you may find *The Americans* one of the most irritating photo books to make the scene."

When I browsed through photography magazines and annuals at the time, I preferred to look at the "artistic" nudes—as a 16-year-old, I was unable to buy *Argosy* or *Playboy*. Frank's dark and depressing images made no impression on me, although I remember admiring the photographs of another Swiss photographer, René Burri. Age and experience have since opened my eyes to the now-fashionable Frank.

The September 13 issue of *Newsweek* contained this: "Richard Avedon is probably the most famous, successful, and, along with his stylistic antithesis, Robert Frank, influential photographer of the second half of the 20th century."

One person who did notice Frank in his day was American photographer Walker Evans, who was a mentor and inspiration to him. Evans described my favourite Frank photograph, *U.S. 235, New Mexico*, in this way: "The simple picture of a highway is an instance of Frank's style, which is one of the few clear cut signatures possessed by any of the younger photographers. In this picture, instantly, you find the continent. The whole page is haunted with American scale and space, which the mind fills quite automatically—though possibly with memories of negation or violence or of exhaustion with thoughts of bad cooking, extremes of heat and cold, law enforcement, and the chance to work hard in a filling station."

Zurich-born Frank emigrated to the United States in 1947, and in 1955, with a 1950 Ford, a Guggenheim grant, and about 750 rolls of film, he set out to record his personal view of America. In a 1947 letter to his parents, he wrote: "Nothing is impossible. They have electric toothbrushes and nail clippers. In 10 minutes you have eaten and there are three men standing behind you waiting for you to leave." By 1955, when he had begun his cross-country project, his tone had changed: "I am photographing how Americans live, have fun, eat, drive cars, work, etc. America is an interesting country, but there is a lot here that I do not like and that I would never accept. I am also trying to show this in my photos."

This he did, and the rest is history. Although Frank worked for *Harper's Bazaar* in the late '40s under the influential art director Alexey Brodovitch, he generally avoided working for pictorial magazines. Of these, he wrote, "Some of our best photographers had their spines seriously bent under the weight of *Life* or *Condé Nast* or *Holiday* or some commission without whom they'd be 'poor'." Frank also avoided photo agencies like Magnum, unlike other "street" photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson.

In 1959, Frank abandoned the still camera for the movie camera. His first film, *Pull My Daisy*, starring

poets Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky and narrated by Jack Kerouac, became a Beat Generation cult movie. A later film, *Cocksucker Blues* (1972), commissioned by the Rolling Stones, became famous when the Stones blocked its release because of the explicitness of the sex and drug scenes. (Some of his films were screened at the Pacific Cinéma-thèque in conjunction with the exhibit, proving mainly that he was a better photographer.) "In making films," Frank wrote, "I continue to look around me but I'm no longer the solitary observer, turning away after the click of the shutter. Instead I'm trying to recapture what I saw and what I heard and what I feel. There is no decisive moment, I've got to do everything to make IT happen in front of the lens."

With photographs from the collection of Vancouver's Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Canada Council Art Bank, interim Presentation House director and curator Helga Pakasaar has put together a show juxtaposing the Frank photographs with 34 greatly enlarged and anonymous snapshots picked by Seattle Art Museum curator Rod Slemmons (perhaps taking a cue from the long-forgotten *Popular Photography* editor who equated Frank's photographs with snapshots). Pakasaar and Slemmons can be forgiven this photographic non sequitur, given that for 10 years Presentation House has been photography's only steady home in the Lower Mainland.

Viewers of the show should stop at *London Street*, 1951 and admire one of the finest photographs ever taken by anyone. The child on the left running away into the distance, the empty hearse's door open on the right, the bleak and foggy street: all meet at the perfect instant—chosen by Frank. We know this because, some months ago, Presentation House displayed Frank's contact sheet showing the sequence before and after this signature photograph. To even hint that Frank's photographs resemble snapshots is like saying that Thelonious Monk needed piano lessons.

A friend of mine, a fan of street photography and of Frank in particular, succinctly explained the role of street photographers in our lives: "They have the courage to stand where they have to stand." As for me, I wouldn't have been caught dead in that bar in Gallup, New Mexico. ■