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ARTS & ARCHITECTURE

Chicago photographers get a well-deserved salute

By Alan G. Artner | Tribune critic
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It's time to say it again: The greatest Chicago artists of the last 50 years, and the ones recognized as such around the globe, were photographers—not painters, draftsmen, printmakers or sculptors.

It's necessary to say it because even now, almost two generations after photography began to enter the contemporary art mainstream, many viewers here are still unaware that Chicago photographers are excelled in achievement only by Chicago architects.

The exhibition that raised the most awareness was the 2002 "Taken by Design: Photographs from the Institute of Design, Chicago, 1937-1971." But now there is another, "Made in Chicago: Photographs from the Bank of America LaSalle Collection," that not only revisits masters but also presents recent work in addition to images taken by occasionally surprising visitors.

As its title indicates, this exhibition, persuasively installed at the Chicago Cultural Center, is more modest than the earlier one, its primary aim being to show at one time more fine examples from an old and pathbreaking public collection than have ever before

been seen in Chicago. But LaSalle Bank collected far beyond the city's confines, so to show a selection from only this work involved more than just cheerleading. The point seen at nearly every turn is that, decade after decade, Chicago photography has ranked with the best done anywhere in the world.

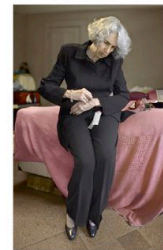
Start with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. Go on with Arthur Siegel, Nathan Lerner and Yasuhiro Ishimoto. There is Ray Metzker, Art Sinsabaugh and Richard Nickel. Then come Harold Allen, Joe Jachna and Ken Josephson. These are some of Chicago's giants and "little masters," complemented—not surpassed—by such stellar visitors as Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander and John Szarkowski.



Cecil Macdonald's 2005 "Frances Before Dinner," a color inkjet print showing a restaged incident in the photographer's family.



Nathan Lerner's 1937 "Night Volume," a searching, experimental image characteristic of the artist, one of the original 33 who attended the New Bauhaus.



Photographer Ben Gest's 2006 inkjet print "Jessica and Her Jewelry" is on view as a part of the new "Made in Chicago" exhibition.

But they take you only to the Chicago of about 30 years ago. Thereafter, the show splits into two camps: lensmen such as Bob Thall and Jay Wolke, who have strong allegiance to the history of their medium, and artists such as Tony Tasset and Jeanne Dunning, who use photography as but one tool in an expanded arsenal. If there is a flaw in the exhibition, it is the common one of collecting and showing more of the latter than the former. Recent acquisitions are to me a little disappointing because they're so predictable, as if institutions in town acquired works by the same people by consensus. Here pictures by Nathan Keay and Gary Stochl are standouts, as much for the pieces as the fact that the artists are not already represented everywhere else.

Discussions at 2 p.m. Nov. 8 and Dec. 13; talks at 12:15 p.m. Oct. 29, Nov. 20 and Dec. 18. 312-744-6630.

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"Made in Chicago: Photographs from the Bank of America LaSalle Collection" ***1/2