

## Image and Self-Image: the moment of self-actualisation

A rebel, a lover, an athlete – how do you want to be remembered? If I asked you to strike a pose to tell the world who you are, could you? Would you?

Born in 1934 in Washington, USA, Lee Friedlander earned fame depicting American society, portraits of a time and place. But, as his current [retrospective](#) at the CaixaForum gallery in Barcelona <sup>(a)</sup> shows, his was also an original talent for capturing people, through which he learned to present himself as anything but just a face.

Peter Galassi, Chief Curator of Photography at New York MoMA, organised this show into groups by date, theme and style. This reveals the maturing of Friedlander's anarchic style and allows us to single out portraiture among the other themes stretching back over the 50 or more years of his career.

The exhibition begins with some commercial work – the few examples here of commercially-driven images in a life providentially devoted to capturing “only what interests him” <sup>(b)</sup>. In these studio portraits leading musicians are shown with the clichéd signifiers of their trade: a guitar, a saxophone. Aretha Franklin in a characteristic grimace of song. The poses are classic: other-worldly artists gazing beyond the frame. Only Miles Davies is shown confronting our regard, challenging and mistrustful.

A related group shows an older generation of jazz players, in black and white prints shot against the full stage-set of their home surroundings. **Sweet Emma Barrett, 1958** sits on a stoop filled with junk and her piano. **Wooden Joe Nicholas** in overalls with his trumpet, perched in a tiny garden behind a shack. At first glance, a gardener not a musician.

Both sets of commercial photos have the hand of a magazine art director heavy upon them; they exist to illustrate the pre-determined point of an article. These poses are neither the sitters' choice in how to express themselves, nor in truth that of the photographer. They depict a job, a background; they do not depict the essence of a human character.

Yet Galassi is able to claim, “When it came to people, Friedlander is essentially an observer of individuals”. In the 1980s Friedlander was commissioned to capture the working people of Ohio and Pennsylvania. By now more established as a photographer, Friedlander no doubt had a freer hand in his approach. Nonetheless, here too he illustrates ‘types’. Friedlander himself rejected the definition of these images as portraits, seeing them as tributes to an unsung activity. But in these pictures his 30-year experience of capturing people tells. Though the elderly machinist in **Canton, Ohio, 1980** shows the concentration of a factory worker, through her flowered apron and check print dress that fill so much of the shot, Friedlander lets us know that this is not just a matronly machinist but also a mother, a housewife, a baker of cakes and sewer of curtain hems.

It was the portraits which were snatched, un-posed, even unaware that they *are* portraits that allowed Friedlander this sensitivity. Evolving alongside his trick of making common errors of photography into witty, wry observations, the first of these images in the exhibition are not shown as portraits but as a location in time. But Friedlander's skill was never simply happenstance: in their compositions, even compositions snatched from a single instant, these images capture essentials of the people in them. In **Newark, New Jersey, 1962**, through the windows of an ice cream parlour we see a man and a boy watching a parade pass by. The man has a white shirt over his billowing stomach, stopped at the top with a too-small bow-tie. His hands are on his hips and under his white hair he is frowning. Nothing quite comes up to scratch these days. Framing him in the window are signs for “Well-made Ice Cream” and “Beef Sandwiches”. Beefy, well-made – these appear as comments on the man's character. In contrast, the young boy in his dark jacket fades into the darkness of the interior, a Stars and Stripes held limply, and a look of doubt or tearfulness on his face.

In the image **New York, 1963**, the eye lights first on a bright balloon in the centre of the image, a balloon of concertina pleats behind the glass of a stationers window. Only as the eye struggles to make sense of the image do we realise it is a smock dress covering a very

pregnant stomach. We forget to seek beyond that bright fullness, but seconds later with a shock we see the pregnant stomach is attached to a woman, her face obscured by shadows and reflections, but who is looking directly at the camera, startled. Does this express the feeling women often have that their identity is stolen by the child they carry, as complete strangers reach to touch their swelling, ignoring the woman herself?

According to Galassi, "rooted in the ritual simplicity of the family snapshot, [Friedlander's] pictures set forth the essentials: this person and no other, in this place at this time." Friedlander himself has said that photography can't help but include all the 'clutter' surrounding the subject. He calls it "a generous medium [...] doesn't just give you the tree, it gives you every leaf on the tree". Galassi extends this claim, saying that the camera and the photograph must also account for the things hidden by what you *can* see in the image. However, he does credit the other special characteristic of a photographic portrait which is that, at some instant of the reaction of chemicals and light, a human soul can be captured by the camera even when undetected by the naked eye. Is it conscious or unconscious, this momentary denuding of the self before the camera's eye? At what exact instant does it occur?

Far from any "ritual", today children are fully accustomed to being photographed from birth, barely stopping in the flow of their lives for the click of the shutter that records yet another moment. And with not just a camera for each family, but one for every family member, they see the resultant view of themselves immediately, seeing themselves the moment others do. But the ceremonial of the portrait has been lost ...

In a recent experiment, photographer David Steel attempted to recreate the ritual of the portrait by asking friends and their children to pose for the camera with objects that they felt defined who they were. For the children, it was the first time they had held a pose while light meter readings were taken, dials adjusted and the other children chased from the frame. Despite these distractions and the unaccustomed attention span, at the moment the camera's eye opened on them, and clutching their favourite possessions, we see revealed their different characters and potentials. In [Flockton Caravans](#) **Maura** has pulled all her elements around her, controlling them and fixing a dynamic pose, her badminton racquet rimming her head like a slipped halo. She is all action, unconsciously choosing to show herself taking a step forwards, out of the picture. There are 20 months between Maura and her sister **Caitlin**. Caitlin, in contrast, is caught with her gaze cast down, clutching the most feminine doll she can find but uncertain of herself and how she should appear, how the viewer would want her to appear. She is softer than her sister and as if waiting to learn who she should be.

Glance back at ***The Nieces of Wade Ward, Galax, Virginia, 1962*** in the Friedlander show. Two young women, sisters or cousins, smile at the photographer. They know he is a recognised photographer; perhaps they have prepared for this event. They sit in a diner at a table covered with a plastic version of a damask tablecloth. They both have bright faces, innocent clean faces. But there are differences. One is prettier than the other, but she has freckles and her hair in rollers beneath a scarf. She is wrapped in a coat and her face is un-made-up. She has not prettified herself for the picture; she is a home-body and will be married before long. The other has plucked eyebrows and newly set hair. She wears a crisply-ironed linen blouse. She is less pretty, less bright-eyed, and her eyes show her consciousness of using artistry to make up for that.

Our faces are the conventional way by which we recognise each other. Babies will respond to a face from their earliest days, and a picture of a big smile on a plastic doll can keep a young baby happy for hours. A few months later, and the baby will recognise and kick in excitement to see its parent approaching through a crowd of other people. But until it is around 2 years old, a baby won't recognize itself in a mirror, even though it will recognise its parent in the same mirror.

After the unconsciousness of childhood, self-imaging becomes problematic again as we grow. Despite the constant availability of mirrors photos, as we prepare for and enter adulthood we increasingly avoid facing ourselves, preferring to study our shoes in the lift and hang on to the dream of who our clothes, hairstyles or books tell us we are. The children asked to bring

some article that summed them up simply grabbed their favourite toy of the moment. Little calculation of 'how will I appear; what will people think of the person I am?' was behind the selection of *Miles's* stick or *Rosalind's* kite. Yet somewhere between the instinctive selection of their current obsession and the unaccustomed moments of being placed in the frame, the truth of who they are, now, comes through.

Adults facing the same request immediately showed calculation about their self-representation. Office-based workers chose to be seen as creative; a teacher showed himself as enquiring and open. And the mothers reached for their children – is it as mothers that they wanted to be defined, or were they conforming to society's views? As individuals do they remain as invisible behind their offspring as the woman in *New York, 1963*?

Yet even here, the depiction of these people was in the hands of the photographer. Lee Friedlander decided at what moment to press the shutter on his friends and family; David Steel set the agenda within which his friends were to present themselves. Much more than portraiture, it is through self-portraiture that a person can control the memory of who they are. Friedlander developed this theme throughout his career, and it is as much for his unusual take on self-representation as for his presentations of American society that he is famous today.

Sooner or later, every artist creates their self portrait. There they sit, with peering, examining, even suspicious eyes, an arm outstretched holding the pencil or brush – or if the artist was ambitious, disguising that enforced posture as something else, a hand holding a book, perhaps. And the easel or mirror creeps in to so many of them. Tools of the trade. Signifiers that they want to be regarded by posterity as Artist. Tellingly, a Friedlander photograph of the artist *RB Kitaj* burns the surface of the photographic paper with the intensity of his gaze, quizzical as only a painter's would be in a self portrait.

Galassi claims Friedlander stumbled over his unusual approach to self portraiture by accident, when the "familiar photographic error" of not realising the photographer's own shadow or reflection was being captured gave him the idea to have fun. "His tongue-in-cheek self-portraits encapsulate the hipster wit of his early work". But in reality, like all artists with their self portraits – like all of *us* with the prospect of portraying ourselves for posterity – Friedlander controlled things more than Galassi's observation suggests. His self portraits contain deliberate comments on his role as a photographer and how the persona of Photographer is viewed.

In *Westport, Connecticut, 1968*, a woman in a black swimming costume sits behind a glass window, pointing an instamatic camera at the viewer. Her head is not included. Friedlander is doubly portrayed: his shadow with camera held to his eye falls on the woman's pale thigh, while his less glamorous legs in their shorts, socks and shoes are reflected in the window. A portrait of a photographer, the woman's small camera stands in for his more professional one, while both he and she are faceless behind their apparatus, as photographers so often are for their subjects. It is an unequal relationship where the photographer sees everything in the subject's eyes, but the subject sees nothing of the other's expression. In a similar vein, *Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1968* obscures half of Friedlander's face and one eye behind a brightly-lit bare light bulb, mimicking a flash gun.

In one picture where only the dark silhouette of the photographer is reflected in the window of an old factory, the eye easily passes to a man standing further off in a hat, hands in jacket pockets, beside a white car. A classic image of a crumpled private eye from a film. The photographer becomes imbued with the attributes of a spy, a watcher of what people reveal, gathering the evidence. In another image, just the shadow of Friedlander's head and shoulders against the back and big fur collar of a blond woman walking in the street. She is unaware of his presence behind her: the photographer as voyeur, *voyou*, the wolf and Little Red Ridinghood.

We are all in the business of creating the appearance of who we think we are. Each time we select what to wear or fret about the style of our haircut, we make tiny adjustments to the focussing and props we think define our image. Are these deliberate distractions from the

truths that might come through our faces or our eyes onto the photographic paper? Or do these props serve to reveal more about us than even our faces would?

When young people across Britain were invited to create self portraits by the National Portrait Gallery in London, for public display in the exhibition [Look at Me](#), a number of them chose to show themselves other than by their faces. Their comments revealed an awareness that a face might not tell the whole story <sup>(c)</sup>. A girl from a community of travellers said, "When you first look at this, you think, 'what's that?' ... because that's what non-travellers do to us: they judge first, before seeing who we really are. When you look deeper, you see what this picture is - ME." A recent refugee chose to portray herself through postcards to people she has left behind and to "friends that I have recently met in London as they represent my here and now". Another presented pages of doodles and scribbles: "I spend most of my time in school planning my life outside of school. These pages are taken from my school planner, representing a snippet of my life, my self-portrait".

Friedlander's later works, in lush images from his large-format camera for the book overtly about him, return his own face to centre stage, the compositions jocular. In **Anza-Borazco State Park, California, 1997** Friedlander has his head turned sideways against a carved wooden bedstead, the dome of his head and the hook of his nose extravagantly echoed in the sweep of the wood. **California 1997** shows him looming with a lunatic stare behind some tiny sprigs of fir tree. **Paris, France 1997** returns to role of the photographer, with Friedlander laying his head on the upholstery of an antique chair, the shadow of his tripod falling on his neck at roughly the place an axe or guillotine would fall.

But here, as in recent images of Friedlander with his wife, the photographer seems to be playing the fool, contorting his features, performing odd gestures. A buffoon. Is this the new persona that, in later life, he has chosen to hide behind? Concealing himself behind full images of his face? Or is he not in hiding any more; is he really just a jovial old chap, as the sight of his face implies?

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Notes:

(a) CaixaForum Centre Social i Cultural, Av Marquès de Comillas, 6, Barcelona, until 24 June 2007. Free entry, see [www.fundacio.lacaixa.es/centros/caixaforumbcn\\_ca](http://www.fundacio.lacaixa.es/centros/caixaforumbcn_ca) for details.

(b) Quotations are from the brochure to the CaixaForum Friedlander exhibition catalogue, written by Peter Galassi, 2007.