

Photo mojo

Lee Friedlander helps MoCP celebrate its 25th anniversary with two exhibitions

By Ruth Lopez

Lee Friedlander's street images of the 1960s helped shape American documentary photography. His work, along with that of Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand, gave us what we know of as the social landscape.

The Museum of Contemporary Photography, which marks its 25th anniversary this year, helped shape the cultural landscape of Chicago when it opened its doors in 1984. It is fitting that MoCP would celebrate by hosting two exhibitions by one of this country's greatest living photographers.

"At Work," 60 images from six Friedlander projects examining businesses, is a portion of an exhibition curated by the Columbus Museum of Art. "Sticks and Stones" is his newest body of work on architecture. It is a testament to the strength of this artist's vision that two seemingly dissimilar topics could be so distinctly from one voice.

Friedlander doesn't like to talk about his work specifically—or photography in general, for that matter—and there are plenty of stories involving the master photographer presenting slides at "lectures" sans commentary. Maybe Friedlander is too polite to state it this way: The picture will speak for itself if you shut up and look. It's a generous gesture on his part to encourage us to see for ourselves.

Rod Slemmons, the director of MoCP, met Friedlander in 1976 when Slemmons was an intern at the Eastman Kodak house in

Rochester, N.Y. They became friends, but photography never figured into their conversations.

"We talked about jazz," Slemmons said.

Among Friedlander's earliest work are portraits of blues and jazz performers. He worked for Atlantic Records in the 1950s producing images for musicians' album covers, among them the great Charles Mingus.



Lee Friedlander, *Washington DC, 1999*

Jazz and blues also seem to have provided a soundtrack for his work. The elements in Friedlander's images riff off each other—from shadows and reflections in windows, mirrors or semitransparent surfaces to tree branches, fences and architectural elements. Bodies of work are borne from bodies of work like visual tangents that manage to meet up in the end. Friedlander spent years taking images of monuments, but he also created a series of self-portraits and lonely motel rooms. When knee surgery kept him from traipsing about the country, he took pictures of flower stems moodier in tone than his witty street work, but

just as visually complex.

Friedlander is also responsible for the rediscovery of an important early 20th-century photographer, E. J. Bellocq. He found the photographer's glass-plate negatives in an antique shop while passing through New Orleans in the late 1960s. Friedlander started taking pictures when he was 14 and attended the Art Center in Los Angeles for two years in the mid-'50s. He left because he preferred working to being an art student. He worked as a freelance commercial photographer for magazines, including *Esquire*, *Art in America*, *McCall's* and *Sports Illustrated*. In 1990, he was given the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Award.

In 1986, Slemmons was working at the Seattle Art Museum when Friedlander stopped in for a visit and proposed a museum exhibition. For Friedlander, who was born in Washington in 1934, it was as much of a homecoming as it was a can-tankerous thumbing of the nose to New York. The title of his first big show, "Like a One-Eyed Cat: Photographs 1956-1987," was lifted from Joe Turner's song, "Shake, Rattle and Roll."

In these two exhibitions, Friedlander selected the work, as he always does. "He is an assiduous editor and sequencer," Slemmons says. "Sticks and Stones" is very carefully ordered."

Friedlander is the last of the old guard photographers but he is also one of the most important photographers in the country. Photography broke into a lot of factions in the 1980s, Slemmons says. There are still people doing straight social documentary work but there are also a lot of people doing mixed-media work. The Starn Twins, for example, are artists who blend conceptual art with photography. "Lee is still a photographer making art, not an artist making photographs," Slemmons says.

The free public opening will be Saturday and a big-ticket benefit celebration with Friedlander will take place Friday night. The evening will include an auction with work donated by Friedlander, Dawoud Bey, Barbara Crane, Mary Ellen Mark and Victor Skrebneski.

There also will be live jazz. Naturally.