

Vivian Maier

Capturing life everywhere

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« **What's really going on, what we're experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs everyday: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual ?** »

George Perec, *L'Infra-ordinaire*, 1989

The career path taken by Vivian Maier (New York, 1926 – Chicago, 2009) is unusual, yet it was taken by one of the 20th century's greatest photographers. The prolificacy and uniqueness of her oeuvre today earn her a place in the history of photography, alongside such big names as Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Robert Doisneau or Henri Cartier-Bresson.

The exhibition *Saisir la vie partout* (*Capturing Life everywhere*), on show at Le Delta in partnership with the Intime Festival, addresses the major themes that structured Maier's work between 1950 and the late 1980s. Her photographic language is located at the intersection between humanist photography (a movement that coaxed French photographers out of their studios to take an interest in humans and their surroundings), a sensibility she likely owes to her French origins, and American *street photography*, which constitutes her visual culture. Street scenes, sidewalk scenarios, portraits, self-portraits, gestures and details: this is the Vivian Maier's precise coverage of her moment in history.

It is at the heart of American society – in New York from 1951 and then in Chicago from 1956 – that Maier conducts her thorough observation of this human fabric. Her eye reflects human history's major social and political changes: it is the time of the American Dream and hyper-visible modernity, the inverse of which is formed by the very essence of Vivian Maier's oeuvre. She paints this era's portrait using the media of photography and cinema, creating a lavish visual language. Tirelessly, she paces through districts and streets, venturing into this human geography that is constantly on the move, whose fabric is made up by faceless persons ceaselessly criss-crossing in all directions. In this theatre of the ordinary, each person is made

a protagonist, unconsciously playing a role even for a fraction of a second.

Vivian Maier watches life. She observes, monitors it, follows its trail sometimes and leaves nothing to chance. The scenes that she photographs are often anecdotes, coincidences, slips in reality, 'residual' moments of social life nobody pays attention to but which become, nevertheless, the subject of her narratives. Each one of her images is situated at the very place where the ordinary comes unravelled, where reality falls away and is turned into something extraordinary.

Anne Morin,
art historian and director of diChroma Photography

Tessa Demichel,
head of exhibitions department at diChroma Photography



Self-portrait, Florida, 1957
Gelatin silver print, 40x50 cm (16x20 inch.)
© Estate of Vivian Maier, Courtesy of Maloof Collection and Howard Greenberg Gallery, NY

CHRONOLOGY

1926 : Vivian Maier was born in New York on February 1 to a culturally German father and French mother. Her brother Charles, six years older, was being raised in the paternal grandparents' legal custody. Vivian's parents had an conflictuous relationship and soon separated.

1930 : Vivian and her mother, Marie, moved to the Bronx to live with photographer Jeanne Bertrand who was from the same valley in France as their ancestors.

1932 : The pair moved to the family farm, Beauregard, in St. Julien, France and then to the near-by town of St. Bonnet. Vivian attended school and was raised as a strict Catholic.

1938 : Vivian's father requested that the pair return to New York to take care of brother Carl who was to be released from a reformatory. The siblings lived together on the Upper East Side for a year.

1940s : The family split up for good and Vivian moved to Queens to live with an elderly friend of the family. She was employed at the Madame Alexander Doll Factory.

1950 : Vivian inherited the family estate, Beauregard, and returned to France for its sale. Early in her year-long stay she bought a simple box or folding camera and took her first pictures. She subsequently took hundreds of photographs of the area's landscapes and residents.

1951 : Vivian moved back to New York and continued her photography, financed from her caregiving earnings. She accompanied one family to Cuba.

1952-1954 : During the summer of 1952 she purchased a Rolleiflex camera, elevating her photography. She took pictures on the street, but also tried to build a commercial career. She continued her nanny stints, accompanying one family on a trip through Canada and the western U.S.

1955 : Entranced by Hollywood and celebrities, Vivian decided to try her luck in Los Angeles. She again traveled west through Canada and secured work as a nanny. By fall she had joined the Mary Kay Trio's concert tour as a caregiver for the musicians' children. The roadtrip ended in Chicago where she applied for a position with the Gensburgs.

1956-1967 : Vivian spent 11 years as nanny for the Gensburgs, continuing her street and family photography and setting up a dark room in the basement. She vacationed in Canada and traveled with the family to Florida. In 1959, she was given six months leave to sail around the world with stops in the Philippines, India, Yemen and Europe. Vivian ended her journey in France, her last visit to her ancestral home.

1967-1980s : Vivian moved on from the Gensburgs to many other nanny positions. She gradually shifted the bulk of her photography to color slides using a Leica. She explored other mediums making tape recordings and 8mm and 16mm films. She began placing old newspapers, which she avidly collected, as well as prints, contact sheets, and undeveloped film, into storage lockers.

1990s-2000s : She had a desire to continue working but eventually could not secure positions. She continued her photography through 1999 at a much diminished level. The Gensburg boys helped to support her.

2009 : Vivian Maier died in Chicago on April 21 at age 83.

Art Dimanche - Guided tour with Jean-Marc Bodson, belgian historian of photography - Sunday November 23rd, from 10h30 to 12h30 (in french).

Screening - "Finding Vivian Maier" (John Maloof and Charlie Siskel, 2013 - 83 min) - Sunday November 23rd, 4 pm (in french).