HYPERALLERGIC

Rudy Burckhardt's Innocent Eye

Burckhardt was never surreptitious; he did not hide his camera, and his subjects often knew they were being photographed.

by John Yau

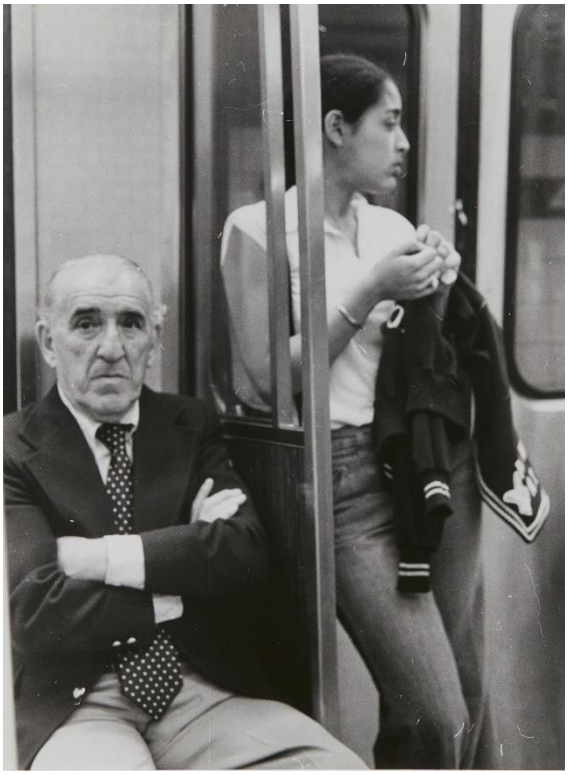
Rudy Burckhardt, "V-Back, New York" (1985), gelatin-silver print, 8 x 10 inches (all images courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery)

In a world where an artist is either a professional or an outsider, it is useful to consider these words by Rudy Burckhardt:

I am enough of an amateur existentialist and Buddhist to believe that we actually just mess around because we're alive and awake — working, playing, scheming, falling apart, getting it together again, but never in control.

Burckhardt's statement, which is cited in the press release for the exhibition *Rudy Burckhardt: New York Hello! Photographs and Films from the 1970s and 1980s* at Tibor de Nagy (December 11, 2020 – January 23, 2021), emphasizes his love for "mess[ing] around" rather than pursuing financial recompense in an industry where auction prices are often used to measure one's accomplishments.

It is worth noting that the exhibition's 25 black-and-white photographs were taken on the streets of New York between 1975 and '86 by a diminutive man who had joined the "over 60" club in 1974. More importantly, they were taken after a hiatus of more than a decade, during which time Burckhardt became a father (1964), taught painting and filmmaking at the University of Pennsylvania (1967–75), and photographed artworks for various galleries, including Leo Castelli.



Rudy Burckhardt, "New York Subway (seated man with crossed arms)" (c. 1985), gelatin-silver print, 9 3/8 x 7 inches

When Burckhardt returned to photography, he had already created an important body of work that included three collaborations with the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby and the photo albums *New York, N. Why?* (1940), *An Afternoon in Astoria* (1940), and *A Walk Through Astoria and Other Places in Queens* (1943), which I have previously written about. In addition to these albums, he took many iconic photographs of New York's buildings, pedestrians, and artists between 1935 and 1960, as well as made many films. It is for these early works that he is best known.

Burckhardt was never surreptitious when he was working; he did not hide his camera, and his subjects often knew they were being photographed. In one image, “New York Subway (seated man with crossed arms)” (gelatin-silver print, 9 3/8 x 7 inches, ca. 1985), a man in a suit and tie seated opposite Burckhardt stares disapprovingly, his arms folded across his chest. To his right, a standing young woman is leaning against the partition separating the seats from the subway door, looking in the opposite direction. Their negative and aloof reactions are the exception, rather than the rule — and that is unexpected.

Rudy Burckhardt, “34th Street, New York” (1978), gelatin-silver print, 10 1/4 x 12 3/4 inches

The etiquette of looking and not looking, of being intrusive or minding your own business, is a constant dance in New York, especially on the subway. Walker Evans hid his camera in his overcoat with just the shutter peering through two of the buttons, and often was accompanied by fellow photographer Helen Levitt. Taken between 1938 and ’41, his series *Subway Portraits* is routinely described as “candid.” There is something ironic about this view, because Evans is secretly taking the photographs and there is nothing particularly candid about that.

I am not disputing the greatness of Evans's photographs, which are riveting. Rather, I am suggesting that we might need to rethink our terms. In the *Subway Portraits*, Evans defines the observer as a voyeur; we get to look without worrying what the subject of our attention might think. It is a kind of looking that is considered intrusive and even judgmental; you are looking and being looked at for a reason.

Rudy Burckhardt, "Walking Couple" (c. 1978), gelatin-silver print, 9 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches

It is in this fraught space that Burckhardt situates himself, whether on the subway or on the sidewalks of Manhattan. He stands at the bottom of an escalator carrying commuters to the platform at 53rd Street and 5th Avenue (a stone's throw away from the Museum of Modern Art) or on one of Manhattan's wide sidewalks and photographs people above him or walking toward him. He appears fearless and almost no one seems to be upset by the man holding a camera and taking a photograph.

This openness to the world enables him to capture images very different from the ones taken by Evans, Garry Winogrand, or Robert Frank, who discreetly snapped photos. In contrast to them, Burckhardt recognized that he was “never in control” and worked with that foremost in his mind.

The themes of isolation and estrangement are absent from Burckhardt’s photographs. He was drawn to scenes such as a mother holding her child as they cross a street or a young couple on their way somewhere. They are dressed casually. His subjects are often people of color, who express trust in this older white man taking their photograph.

Rudy Burckhardt, “Untitled, New York, (two girls with long dark hair)” (c. 1978), gelatin-silver print, 6 3/4 x 9 3/8 inches

A longtime New Yorker, Burckhardt seemed perfectly at ease walking about the city, taking photographs. This was true of his earlier work, and even more so in these later images. Other than the gentleman sitting on the subway, no one seems bugged by Burckhardt. Also — and I think this should be stressed — none of the couples are arguing or appear distanced or uncomfortable with each other, which is a common theme in photography. They are joyous, energetic urban dwellers.

In one, a young Black woman turns and looks over her shoulder at Burckhardt as he photographs her, curious but not bothered.

He photographs two girls in the street because their black hair is long and shiny. They are wearing jeans and white tops. What catches our attention as we walk around New York? Why do we look at one person and not another? I think Burckhardt’s comfort and openness leads to a

very different body of work than that of other photographers who used Manhattan as their setting. There is an innocence and curiosity to his looking, a feeling of quiet joy. He is genuinely glad to be living in New York and does not find it threatening or alienating.

Rudy Burckhardt, “Untitled, New York (Woman with two children)” (c. 1985), gelatin-silver print, 7 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches

This is what he and the poet Frank O’Hara share in their work: they love the energy and diversity of the city’s inhabitants, the hustle and bustle, and are able to capture the fleeting without becoming sentimental or preachy. They are simultaneously tender and resilient.

Looking at Burckhardt’s photographs — which I find particularly striking in this time of deepening divisions in America — I am reminded of the last lines of O’Hara’s poem “My Heart”:

I want my face to be shaven, and my heart —

you can't plan on the heart, but

the better part of it, my poetry, is open.

Rudy Burckhardt: New York Hello! Photographs from the 1970s and 1980s *continues at Tibor de Nagy (11 Rivington Street, Manhattan) through January 23.*