

# Lee Friedlander

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The black and white photographs in the exhibition are gelatin silver prints developed by Lee Friedlander. The prints date from various periods over the course of the artist's six-decade career. The colour images were reproduced digitally from the original slides.

Most of Friedlander's photographs from the 1960s to the 1990s were taken with a 35 mm Leica camera and were generally printed

on 27.9 × 35.6 cm paper. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the artist also used a medium format Hasselblad camera, printing most of these images on 50.8 × 40.6 cm paper. In recent years he has principally returned to using the 35 mm Leica.

All the works are courtesy of the artist and of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, apart from those in the collections of Fundación MAPFRE.

Lee Friedlander (born Aberdeen, Washington, 1934) is one of the key artists in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century photography. For the viewer, his images always look modern, particularly in the case of those that made the works of many of his contemporaries in the 1960s seem outdated or naive, and also his more recent ones in which his intelligent gaze avoids any repetition and continues to surprise us. Each new series or continuation of earlier ones offers an expanded and enriched vision of the world. This is a body of work that reveals its creator's intuitive powers and his need to learn about and name everything for the first time in a process of constantly renewed enthusiasm.

This sensation of newness characterises all Friedlander's work, while that type of mismatch or difference in relation to the photographic tradition is applied with the same critical gaze and internal coherence in the case of his portraits, self-portraits, nudes, photographs of workers, landscapes and trees or gravestones and shop dummies.

Like his masters, Friedlander liberated himself from the prevailing formal canons which demanded a quest for technical perfection and beauty and he rather opted to focus on a natural, direct and technically unmanipulated type of photography, eliminating the barrier between the beautiful and the ugly and the important and the trivial. By revealing the arbitrary nature of these imposed norms his work questions our way of seeing the world through the camera. If art is a form of experimenting, the sense of alienation that we experience when looking at Friedlander's images allows us to look afresh at the world, free up our perceptual capacities and discover what the rigidity of tradition had made invisible; in other words, it allows us to renew our experience of the world.

For Friedlander, the modern world in all its complexity, vitality and incongruousness finds its essence in the American social landscape. Using a 35 mm Leica, the most popular camera at that time in the 1960s and a rapid, agile extension of the eye, he created a landscape of an originality that lies in the freedom with which he presented it. This is because Friedlander's aim is to show us how images work; for him, the magic lies not in Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" but in the "decisive framing", in how the world that lies before the camera becomes photography.

In the 1990s Friedlander started to use a Hasselblad in order to continue investigating the potential of the medium. This challenge of maintaining the vitality of his photography reflects a statement once made by Willem de Kooning: "You have to change to stay the same". Maintaining that imperative over the course of such a lengthy career involves facing risks and a great deal of work, energy and resistance. This, however, is not a problem for an artist for whom enjoying the act of seeing is a pleasure and who possesses remarkable observational powers.

Organised chronologically, the exhibition provides an extensive survey of Lee Friedlander's six decades of uninterrupted work seen here through his principal series. His photography books, of which there are more than fifty monographs alone, accompany this display of around 300 photographs.

**Carlos Gollonet**  
Curator

# Jazz

Lee Friedlander's relationship with jazz goes beyond his love of this type of music. From a very young age he followed jazz bands across the country and would happily travel thousands of miles to see a performance. In professional terms he took photographs for numerous record sleeves, particularly as commissions for Marvin Israel, the artistic director of Atlantic Records. Friedlander also photographed many of the great American jazz performers during these trips. His words recalling the first time he heard Charlie Parker aged sixteen are revealing: "I was dumbfounded. I somehow knew exactly where he was coming from. He made me understand that anything was possible." A plausible parallel has been suggested between the freedom inherent to jazz performing based on improvisation and the gestural liberty of Friedlander's photography, a trait that makes his visual style identifiable. This is the "anything is possible" as a starting point for the construction of a body of work which, while aware of tradition, breaks away from it with the same intelligence and intuition as Parker and which similarly took Friedlander towards new approaches of enormous significance for the history of the medium. His images, which can in some cases seem failures if compared to the norms of photographic language, are capable of reinventing our way of seeing, taking us back to the origin of all perception in order to see the world as it is.

Most of these photographs are published in three books that pay tribute to Friedlander's passion for jazz, its musicians and the city of New Orleans which he has visited on numerous occasions: *The Jazz People of New Orleans*, 1992; *American Musicians*, 1998; and *Playing for the Benefit of the Band*, 2013.

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In the 1960s Friedlander burst onto the small world of art photography like a whirlwind of inventiveness and newness. He had observed and assimilated the formal and conceptual innovations of photographers such as Walker Evans and Robert Frank, but this young artist would complete the direction pursued by the previous generation in order to break away from the traditional models of representation and interpretation of reality, thus contributing to a renewal of our vision of the world.

During that decade, a remarkably creative and productive one for him, Friedlander started to lay the foundations for a monumental body of work that represented an intellectual renovation of photography's functions, subverting prevailing practices. A clear example is that of his portraits in which there is an evident break with tradition, resulting in an overturning of the very meaning of the genre. Some of his early images of this type reveal a curious density defined by the power of the blacks and the tonal contrast, combined with a more conventional viewpoint that reaffirms the presence of the objects in restrained settings (such as the ingenious *The Little Screens*) and making use of that ambiguity, humour and juxtaposition of ideas which locates him in Dadaist and Surrealist orbits. It is in his street photographs, however, that we begin to discern that universe fragmented and reconstructed in the photographic image in which each element maintains its identity and fights to be recognised: shop windows, reflections, truncations, obstacles, etc. This is a complex vernacular landscape, impersonal and at times chaotic, which brings the artist closer to Pop Art.

Friedlander earned a living at this period from commissions from illustrated magazines but he also started to assemble a large holding of "personal" photographs that distanced him from the repetitive world of commercial photography. Almost all the themes on which he focused over the following decades thus emerged in this parallel manner and he used them as a tool to investigate photography's possibilities as a medium.

In 1963 Friedlander held his first solo exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. During the next year a Guggenheim fellowship allowed him to travel around Europe with his family and some of the images that he took in Spain are presented here for the first time. The artist's participation in solo and collective exhibitions was very significant from this period onwards, notably *Toward a Social Landscape*, also held at the GEH in Rochester in 1966, and *New Documents*, in which his work was shown alongside that of Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand at the MoMA in New York in 1967.

# *The Little Screens*

In 1963 Lee Friedlander first published his photographs from *The Little Screens* series in *Harper's Bazaar* with a short accompanying text by Walker Evans who defined him as “one of the most gifted and incisive of the new generation of American photographers”, describing Friedlander’s images as “deft, witty, spanking little poems of hate”. This was considerable praise for a photographer who was just starting to present work not directly produced for the commissions that were his source of income, principally for illustrated magazine and jazz albums. Friedlander had started to set aside the images that he considered interesting or “personal”, to use a term of that time. Interestingly, a photograph from this series, entitled *Philadelphia, Pennsylvania* (1961), was his first sale, bringing him 25 dollars and greatly surprising him that someone wished to acquire it.

In the early 1960s a television set was only just beginning to be a standard piece of household furniture in Spain but it was already another member of the American family; “someone” who required constant attention with its incessant, omnipresent discourse. Once accepted into the family, the television was not content to merely share the domestic space but rather demanded a leading role and became the connecting link between the family and the world, and icons of popular culture, politicians and minor celebrities now took their place in the living room thanks to the new guest. It is not surprising that Friedlander made use of television screens as a subject: almost nothing in our domestic experience occupied such a prominent position as the television and no other object obliged us to look at it as it did, even if only distractedly. As Flaubert said, it only requires an intense gaze on an object to make it interesting: what lies before us but which our eye seemingly does not perceive, takes its place in space at the moment when it is observed in an individualised manner. This sudden preeminence can create powerful images and give rise to interesting associations with the surrounding context of a fleetingness that only photography is capable of revealing.

# Philadelphia

1961

Set in an everyday space and constructed from simple elements, this image appears to us as a marvellous still life made up of perfectly arranged objects. The woman looks at us with a natural expression, seemingly from the room itself rather than from the world “transmitted” via the screen. She gives the impression of waiting for us to sit down for a chat, sharing with her this environment that produces a peculiar sense of unease precisely due to being simultaneously empty and filled with her dominant presence, the presence of someone who is not actually there. This ambiguity gives a certain sense of solitude and melancholy to this image and the others in *The Little Screens*, in which the figures on the screens are part of the construction of the image and the principal element in the scene. As Susan Sontag observed: “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree” which is open to the most rigorous scrutiny and which continues to exist, unlike the other. Like these screens, the photograph is a strange object; something that is fully present without really being so.



# Self Portraits

Friedlander published *Self Portrait* in 1970. This was his second book but his first monograph and the volume that launched Haywire Press, the publishing house that he had founded to make it possible. In the introduction he wrote: “These self-portraits span a period of six years and [...] happened as a peripheral extension of my work. They began as straight portraits but soon I was finding myself at times in the landscape of my photography. I might call myself an intruder. [...] I would see myself as a character or an element that would shift presence as my work would change in direction. At first, my presence in my photos was fascinating and disturbing. But as time passed and I was more a part of other ideas in my photos, I was able to add a giggle to those feelings. I suspect it is for one’s self interest that one looks at one’s surroundings and one’s self. This search is [...] indeed my reason and motive for making photographs. The camera is not merely a reflecting pool and the photographs are not exactly the mirror, mirror on the wall that speaks with a twisted tongue. Witness is borne and puzzles come together at the photographic moment which is very simple and complete. The mind-finger presses the release on the silly machine and it stops time and holds what its jaws can encompass and what the light will stain. That moment when the landscape speaks to the observer.”

Through his self-portraits Friedlander has continued to investigate the possibilities of photography as a medium and it is these images that involve the most significant rupture with its rules: the conventional function of the self-portrait loses its meaning due to the negation of any narcissism. The large body of works of this type which span Friedlander’s career represent a challenge and a reinvention of the genre that has nothing to do with the tedious and embarrassing world of the present-day selfie, nor with the classic self-portraits of the history of painting. They are always more than a self-portrait as the place where they are taken is as important as the image of the photographer. The images are traces of his passage through life and through its landscapes in its most everyday and real aspect, and he is one more incidental element in the creation of the image, into which he obliges us to introduce ourselves and see it through his shadow or reflection from a privileged vantage point that fuses us with him.

*Self Portrait* was republished with some additions in 1998 and 2005. A new series of self-portraits, this time taken with the Hasselblad, appeared in 2000.



# Spain

## 1964

In 1964 Lee Friedlander and his family travelled around Europe thanks to a second fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. On this occasion they visited Spain for the first time: Madrid, Barcelona and also the south (Malaga, Fuengirola and Mijas) where they had friends. It is clear that where Friedlander is most comfortable is in the social landscape on which he has focused his interest for decades, knows best and identifies with, and the density and intensity of his photographs are linked to his habitual environment. When investigating his archive, however, in the boxes of photographs labelled "Spain" we found a group of fine images that are in fact "very Friedlander" and which could have been taken almost anywhere. Form and meaning go hand in hand in his work. While the reality that we see in many images seems fortuitous nothing in this artist's photography results from chance and defining elements of the culture of the place are always present. In this photograph, taken during that second trip to Spain, a shop window reflects the photographer's own image and this self-portrait blends into the reflection of the street behind him but the viewer can also look into the interior of what is probably a real estate office. While Friedlander's photographs of shop windows taken in the United States include Coca-cola bottles and portraits of Mickey Rooney and J. F. Kennedy, here we see the model of a block of apartments for sale at the start of the sun and beach tourism boom. This was a promotion by Sofico, a company supported by the Francoist regime that went bankrupt a decade later after years of fraudulent practice: an example of Spain's social landscape.



# Canyon de Chelly, Arizona

1983

This is not an easy photograph although it is in fact simply a self-portrait created by the photographer's shadow of the type we always aim to avoid in our photographs. The result is quite amusing, although less so than other self-portraits in which Friedlander presents himself playing numerous different roles with a notable lack of interest in his own image and with great humour and irony. What makes this image so appealing? The body organs represented by the stones that fill the shadow and the dry grass like locks of hair on the head and groin; the perfect silhouette that identifies the photographer, camera in hand and rucksack on his back; the desert ground that looks like a Pollock painting; the clear, harsh light of the desert contrasting with the dappled shadow; or Friedlander's beautiful greys? All of this in fact, and more. The image is both ethereal and emphatic, strange and simple, elaborate and spontaneous and totally devoid of artifice; one of those moments when we get remarkably close to the photographer. This is a self-portrait that forms a bridge between the early ones of the 1960s and those of recent decades, which are lighter and have more tonal continuity. It is less contrived and ironic than the previous ones and more "serious" and reflexive, as those of the following decades would be, although it maintains the seductiveness of the early ones. Taken in Apache County in northern Arizona, this image is one of Friedlander's first explorations of the desert, a landscape to which he frequently returned in the following years.



# Portraits

Friedlander's approach to portraiture, one of the most established artistic genres, again reveals a type of disjunction in relation to both the tradition of art in general and the medium of photography.

Although he produced hundreds of portraits his activity in this genre does not reveal any cataloguing intent of the type of August Sander, nor an aestheticising or romantic gaze. Rather, his practice is closer to the unpretentious family album and with the exception of a few commissions to photograph personalities from the world of jazz and a few casual street photographs, his subjects are generally friends and relatives. Although involving his experienced eye, the high definition of his lenses and his dazzling technique when developing the prints, most of Friedlander's portraits describe a known ritual. In this sense, as Peter Galassi has humorously noted, a portrait by the artist is "the same song any of us might sing in the shower, but Sarah Vaughan fulfils more of its latent potential." Well known and anonymous people are not differentiated by Friedlander's camera and the importance of the subject is subordinated to the image that creates it. These portraits are located in simple family settings but they are taken using unusual viewpoints and lighting, with fleeting expressions and informal poses that enrich the context.

In one of his first books of portraits, *Lee Friedlander: Portraits* of 1985, unknown individuals appear alongside famous writers, musicians and photography colleagues such as Walker Evans, Diane Arbus and Friedlander's close friend Garry Winogrand, to whom the book is dedicated. Another subject, the painter Kitaj, who would be the subject of book some years later, wrote in the introduction: "These faces are imprinted vestiges of Friedlander's brushes with life, little fossil imprints, natural like that, without the many interventions caused by hand-art."

Over the following decades Friedlander's work in portraiture maintained this direction although in the 1990s his change from a Leica to a Hasselblad with its impressive descriptive capacity has given greater eloquence to the subjects' presence.

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With surprising coherence and conviction, by the 1970s Friedlander had already begun to lay the foundations for his future work while making use of the strategies that he would continue to develop over his lengthy career. It was in the American social landscape that he encountered the complexity, richness and contradictions of the contemporary world. The widely used 35 mm Leica, which allowed him to capture his subjects with the agility of his own gaze, would become the perfect ally for creating an original landscape that was in fact the same one seen by other photographers or by the public in general but which he photographed in a way that others did not. In Friedlander's images the world possesses its intrinsic naturalness but this puzzles the viewer precisely due to the freedom with which the artist captures it, offering us a world that differs from the one we are accustomed to seeing "codified" in the work of art. His intervention is minimal and he maintains the greatest respect for what he sees. The innovation here lies not just in the chosen themes but also in the manner of describing them and is focussed on giving a powerful formal sense to the disorder of the sometimes desolate landscape filled with disruptive elements such as overhead electricity cables, traffic lights and advertising signs.

The pronounced tonal contrast of the images from the previous decade diminishes and what was previously dense is now lighter. Everything becomes more legible in a scale of greys; a more fluid description in which the photographer's presence passes almost unnoticed. Friedlander's obsessions continued to evolve while he added other, new ones. We continue to find effects of collage, truncations and obstacles although there is now a greater flexibility and new depth in the description of the motifs. This is evident in *The American Monument*, one of the most important series within his oeuvre and within 20<sup>th</sup> century photography as a whole. This work offers varied and unexpected viewpoints and surprising compositional structures, with more information than might be thought necessary. The publication of 1976 based on this series is undoubtedly one of the great photography books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Friedlander is a master of his profession and during these decades he refined his technique in the darkroom, exploiting his camera's possibilities to limits that only he has reached. It was at this period that he increasingly focused on his own, non-commercial work and only accepted particularly interesting commissions, for example those that led to the project *Factory Valley*, the first of his numerous books on the subject of American workers. Exhibitions, fellowships and awards followed in large numbers while Friedlander's passion for books was reflected in his founding of the Haywire Press which published some of his early volumes, such as *Self Portrait* in 1970 and *Flowers and Trees* in 1981.

# Albuquerque, New Mexico

1972

Friedlander does not make use of the “decisive moment” characteristic of Cartier-Bresson’s vision or the fleetingness inherent in the photographic act that had yielded such outstanding results for Helen Levitt and for his friend and colleague Garry Winogrand. In those two photographers’ work the viewer has the sensation that everything happens in an instant and that in the blink of an eye what we see will be different and nothing will repeat itself in its present form. In contrast, when Friedlander takes a photograph such as this one of *Albuquerque* we feel that a second later everything will be the same, but we also know that the image will cease to be what it is if one of the elements in it disappears. For Friedlander the “decisive moment” is not the key but rather the “decisive framing” and his work focuses on how the world before the camera becomes photography. *Albuquerque, New Mexico* is a simultaneously simple and complex image. Traffic lights, posts, buildings, vehicles: there is nothing special to be seen in the photograph but it is totally coherent, a miracle of design. This proliferation of elements takes shape as a complicated jigsaw in which everything fits together perfectly. If we remove the dog or the traffic light or the water stanchion the photograph becomes unbalanced. This is because the image is created from a confluence of small, almost instantaneous decisions through which the photographer constructs the final results. It is the framing selected by him from among many possible ones that emphasises the elements, making them come alive, creating a new relationship between them and ensuring that each one has equal significance without any hierarchy. All of them acquire astonishing presence in the created image.



# Family Photographs

Photography in a family context represents a key chapter within Friedlander's oeuvre. However, his approach to this "theme" is quite different to that in the other areas of his work and thus locates us in another place as viewers. The sense of alienation that we generally experience from his images, derived from the somewhat ironic distance that the artist adopts in relation to the subject, is not to be felt with these photographs. As with the greatest musical performers, here Friedlander disappears in order to offer us a direct relationship with the work. There is absolutely no artifice: the photographer starts from his own experience and has no need to invent or transform but simply to look. The first photographs of the artist's wife Maria are more intimate or more classic, it might be said. They are followed by their children Erik and Anna and finally their grandchildren Giancarlo and Ava.

While it could be said that these images are close to a family album given that they capture everyday moments common to all parts of the world, it should be noted that in addition to conveying spontaneity and emotion they possess a crucial formal elegance. In other words, they clearly correspond to the realm of art even though they are not intentionally artistic. What they share with a normal family album is their intention: following the passing of time and snatching shared moments from it in order to preserve them in our memory.

Romanticism and sentimentality are absent from these images but what they do convey is admiration, particularly in the portraits of Maria which recur throughout Friedlander's oeuvre. She appears in the role of mother, grandmother, wife, travel companion (in a real and figurative sense), the head of the household, of their finances and of their children's education but also lying in the sun or dozing in bed. In addition to being the dedicatee of many of the artist's books and the subject of one of them of 1992, Maria is a prominent presence in two others: *Family* of 2004 and *Family in the Picture 1958-2013* of 2013.

# Maria, Las Vegas

1970

This is one of Friedlander's most beautiful photographs of Maria. It is also in fact a self-portrait as the photographer has superimposed his shadow on his wife's body. They share a relatively unusual degree of intimacy with us: the unmade bed, Maria, leaning half-naked against the wall, and the presence of Lee who blends into her. Lee and Maria DePaoli met in 1957 and married the following year when he was twenty-five and she was twenty-four. Friedlander embarked on his remarkable collection of photographs of his wife at that date and has continued it ever since. In them, reality has the sense of memory, of thought made visible; a density that elevates and enriches them both in themselves and with regard to their meanings. The artist narrates his story in the first person while at the same time diffusing himself in order to transform his autobiography into a universal portrait that we can all identify with. In comparison to images taken by other great photographers of their partners, Maria is nothing like the distant and idealised Eleanor captured in the evocative poses of a classical Muse by Harry Callahan, nor are there parallels with Emmet Gowin's intense and poetic portraits of Edith. Closer to Nicholas Nixon in his photographs of Bebe, Friedlander presents a real woman, making no use of sentimentality but with a profound sense of appreciation and respect.





# *The American Monument*

Published in 1976, *The American Monument* is one of the great photography projects and books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This second monograph by Friedlander was the one that fully revealed the scope and vitality of his work for the first time. The title sounds emphatic, serious and transcendent but the images as a whole, the majority taken between 1971 and 1975, go beyond the narrow margins of documentary photography and locate themselves in the field of artistic expression. Eugène Atget continued to be Friedlander's guide but what he created were photographs, not documents. Using his own, distinctive language and rising above the trivial nature of the themes, in *The American Monument* Friedlander offered a new perspective on the already familiar iconography of American art, while his seemingly more spontaneous approach connected with art movements of the day such as Pop Art, with whose artists he shared a new way of reflecting on the visual world of commonplaces.

Friedlander dignified these simple monuments with his photographs but, as with his self-portraits, he incorporated irony and humour and the juxtaposition of ideas and objects, strategies already inherent in this new gaze on the world. Each monument is one more element in the landscape and is treated with the same deliberate indifference, just as we would see it if we walked past it every day. The variety of compositional structures and viewpoints is surprising; in some cases the monument is half-concealed between trees or buried in fragmentary visions between the street signs and advertising that fill our cities.

Despite our familiarity with the American landscape due to the work of various generations of photographers it remains slightly alien to us, at times incomprehensible and at others surprising. We appreciate these monuments not for what they commemorate but for this irreverent and sceptical vision of American culture that we also possess and with the same distance in relation to the theme as Friedlander. His coherence and permanent risk-taking are aimed at this renewal of earlier models which participates in the dialectic between the real and its representation.

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# Workers

Although he ceased to work for magazines in the 1970s, Friedlander undertook various commissions over the following decades, among which the projects devoted to the world of workers particularly interested him. He first approached this subject in 1979 when the Akron Art Museum invited him to photograph one of the country's most important industrial centres, the Ohio River Valley. For this project, which gave rise to the book *Factory Valleys* of 1982, Friedlander travelled to Ohio and Pennsylvania over the course of a year, photographing their suburbs, industries and workers. The latter are the true protagonists of the photographs as however impressive the partly visible machinery, the dense framing and use of flash isolate the figures and the individualised treatment of them distances the work from social documentary photography. In this project, as in the following ones, the workers are oblivious to the photographer and acquire greater prominence as the camera gradually moves closer towards them.

Two projects that followed *Factory Valleys* relate to the world of computers. *Cray at Chippewa Falls*, published as a book in 1987, was commissioned by Cray Research, a maker of supercomputers for large companies based in the Wisconsin countryside. The viewer moves from the insides of computers to their users in front of the screens in another project, on this occasion funded by the MIT which invited Friedlander to work on technology. The last of the five projects on the theme of work was created in a telemarketing call centre in Omaha. Here the images overflow with close-up shots taken with the Hasselblad that give an imposing look to the heads of the telemarketers, who nonetheless remain concentrated on their sales talk.

All these projects were brought together in the book *At Work* of 2002. The almost 200 photographs taken over sixteen years constitute a lucid and penetrating portrait of the modern American social landscape. This is a body of work that differs from any other with a similar focus due to its creator's inventiveness and acute perception.

# Desnudos

Si Friedlander nos sorprende en sus retratos con esa naturalidad ajena a toda convención, su actitud es mucho más crítica con la tradición en el caso de los desnudos. Juega en ellos con la forma y el encuadre, pero su manera de mirar, lejos de la del *voyeur*, es directa. Tampoco las poses de las modelos son convencionales y no encontramos atisbo alguno de erotismo. De nuevo, son imágenes que esencialmente nos invitan a mirar la creación de una imagen fotográfica que obvia los estereotipos y desmonta nuestras ideas preconcebidas a la hora de enfrentarnos a un desnudo, un territorio especialmente trillado en fotografía.

El inicio del fotógrafo en esta temática se sitúa en 1977, cuando un colega de la Rice University de Houston, donde enseñaba un semestre, invitaba a modelos a posar para sus estudiantes. Friedlander se dio cuenta pronto de que prefería fotografiarlas en el entorno cotidiano de sus casas, rodeadas de fragmentos de sus vidas que aportan una información desconcertante: lámparas, mesas, sillones o alfombras juegan un papel importante en la construcción de la imagen. La pose, el entorno, la iluminación, frecuentemente artificial, o la perspectiva son elementos a un mismo nivel que crean unas formas extrañas pero fascinantes en clara ruptura con la tradición del género. La fascinación de Friedlander por la realidad diluye toda la belleza esperada en un desnudo para hacerla aflorar en la propia creación de la imagen. Claramente, en sus desnudos no son las modelos lo único que importa; que una de ellas sea una joven Madonna, antes de ser famosa, no deja de ser una anécdota simpática.

El volumen *Nudes*, publicado en 1991, reúne quince años de trabajo sobre este tema y, bajo el título *The Nudes: A Second Look*, apareció en 2013 una revisión del mismo.

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After more than three decades using his 35 mm Leica, in the 1990s Friedlander reinvented himself with a new camera that would become his faithful companion from then on, a Hasselblad Superwide with a negative four times larger than his previous camera and an outstanding Zeiss lens that he loved. At this period we encounter the same themes in his work alongside a new one that motivated this change of equipment: the natural landscape. In the early 1990s Friedlander began to work intensively in the Sonora Desert in Arizona and the limitations of the Leica became apparent when he attempted to capture in depth the complexity of that dense place under blinding sunlight. After completing this project, *The Desert Seen* (1996), Friedlander decided to continue using this new camera which captures motifs in both the foreground and the background with remarkable fidelity.

The American social landscape has been the central theme of Friedlander's photography and has continued to be so in recent decades. This is in fact more evident in the series presented in this section of the exhibition, such as the well known *America by Car* and *Sticks and Stones*. Here we encounter an updating of that landscape which is also a summary of the obsessions that the artist has shared with his viewers for so many years: natural spaces, monuments, advertising slogans, metal barriers, portraits, self-portraits, etc. This has offered a constantly changing and ever more appealing terrain for the Superwide as used by Friedlander due to its ability to take full advantage of both the astonishing landscapes of America's national parks and the desolate settings to be found across the country: parking lots, roadside restaurants, humble buildings and skyscrapers; even the trailers of pickup trucks offer interesting jumbles of different objects to be investigated. Everything is there, before our eyes, and with the same density and presence thanks to the remarkable focus and voracity of Friedlander's camera, while this new gaze also imbues the portraits with an almost sculptural volume.

Lee Friedlander's photography is thus a profound gauge of his country's social landscape and its at times bizarre identity. This continues to be the case in his most recent work, which is the consequence of that same intelligent gaze with its ability to be surprised and to surprise us with each new image, enriching our vision of the world. As Nicholas Nixon writes in the catalogue of this exhibition: "When you squint at one of his pictures, the shapes, spaces and overall energy seem inevitable; balanced but full of force - and often joy. Everything in his frames matters. The form lifts the subject towards meaning."

# Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland 2011

While taking the photographs for the *Stems* series, Friedlander began a new series of self-portraits, a genre which despite being among the most fruitful within his career he had largely set aside (with a few exceptions such as *Canyon de Chelly, Arizona*, 1983) since his first monograph of 1970. His new gaze is less “mischievous” and he abandons his previous interplay of lights and darks: “Yes, it isn’t as witty. It’s another phase. I kind of wanted to see what I looked like [...] the biggest difference with *Self Portrait*, you’re older here, and more self-reflective.” As always, the photographer points the camera at himself and maintains his sense of humour but his gaze on life and photography is, as he says, cooler and more reflexive. In this new series, taken with the Hasselblad, we see him at the moment of pressing the shutter, a gesture he has made thousands of times; thoughtful in front of his own shadow and his camera’s projected on the wall; waking up in yet another hotel on one of his constant trips around the country; affectionately looking back on his life through old identity document photographs and keepsakes of his children and grandchildren; and focusing his gaze on his eternally elegant and attractive travel and life companion. We also see him in this surprising image, recently discharged from intensive care and congratulating himself for staying alive, or rather for being able to continue recording the visual richness of the world around him. This is one of Friedlander’s most recent self-portraits. The previous ones were compiled in another book published in 2000.



# Landscapes

It was not until the 1990s that Friedlander focused intensely on the theme of landscape although in previous decades he had taken photographs of landscapes and nature both within the United States (some reproduced in one of his first books, *Flowers and Trees* of 1981) and abroad (flowering cherry trees in Japan). The artist had taken the descriptive powers of his Leica to the limit in an unparalleled manner over the previous decades but he now found it insufficient for capturing the blinding landscape of the Sonora Desert. He thus reinvented himself three decades later and tried out a new camera, the Hasselblad Superwide, which had lenses of exceptional precision and depth of field.

An extensive selection of these photographs was published in 1996 with the title *The Desert Seen*. This book includes one of Friedlander's most interesting texts on his work. It includes the passage: "The desert from a distance is as tranquil as any other landscape, except for the light. As I get close, the place becomes wild. Everything in sight is up-tempo and jumping with a thousand branches, a million thorns shaping the edges of cholla, saguaro, and ocotillo, and mesquite and palo verde, altogether becoming a maze of order new and crazier in every turn, bathed in light that defies description. I spent almost every day out working, and my eyes would become sore from the light." Friedlander had to recalibrate his printing style in order to adapt to this exceptionally brilliant, almost painful light. His new camera was able to vividly transmit the complexity of the scene and the square format was perfect for including a lot of material within the frame. He intensified the high level of luminosity through the use of flash on an already dazzling landscape, reinforcing the details of the shadows and helping to illuminate the foreground. The result was so positive that he continued using this camera for other subjects over the following decades.



# *America by Car*

*America by Car*, published in 2010, is one of Friedlander's most interesting books and projects of recent years. He had previously photographed from his car and the use of the wing mirror was also not new (it is present in memorable photographs from the 1960s and 1970s) but the framing is now much wider. Located in front of the plastic dashboard of a hired car, the viewer assumes the photographer's viewpoint. These images are often divided into two by the structure of the car itself: the windscreen on one side and the driver's window on the other, like two frames within the framework of the photograph. In addition, there is a sub-frame within the window in the form of the wing mirror. This adds complexity to the scene due to the view through it, which is not related to what lies in front of the viewer. This simple compositional scheme is repeated in most of the photographs.

Despite the emphatic presence of the dashboard and the car's interior in these images, the viewer initially looks in the direction that the driver would be looking and it is the framed landscape that we look at in image after image. When driving we are either looking in the wing mirror or through the windscreen or at the dashboard and this is all we see; the rest is there, floating, but we sense rather than see it. The square format and powerful lens of the Hasselblad Superwide that Friedlander was using by this date means that distortion is reduced to a minimum and any loss of light is considerably reduced. Unlike our normal vision when we are really inside a car, in these photographs everything lies simultaneously before us and with the same degree of definition.

As a whole, this project represents an updating of the American landscape in the tradition of the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century photography books. It is also a survey of the themes present in Friedlander's oeuvre: landscapes, monuments, advertising slogans, portraits, self-portraits, etc. An inexhaustible, varied and always fascinating survey, like a dazzling collage in which everything has weight and presence.

# *Western Landscapes*

“The West to me is where the landscape is”, Lee Friedlander wrote on the landscape of the American West where he grew up and to where he returned on numerous occasions from the 1990s onwards. The nearly 200 photographs in the *Western Landscapes* project (published as a book in 2016) not only reveal the grandeur of these landscapes but also Friedlander’s devotion to them and his remarkable and refined technique which makes them impeccable. Following the project of the early 1990s that took him to the Sonora Desert where he began to experiment with a medium format camera, Friedlander reached the height of his achievement with these landscapes which are characterised by the pleasure of showing the specific and the ethereal, the most intimate and the most expansive.

In this sense, as the artist observed: “That is something I learned to do, deal with the foreground [...]. And that particular lens (38mm Biogon) was so good at it. It has great depth of field and allows you to have a real crazy foreground, which I like. Probably my addition to landscape is foreground.” The great landscape photographers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century left us extraordinary views of Yosemite and Yellowstone, with Muybridge and Watkins overcoming any physical obstacle in order to show the public these places for the first time. In the modern age, when the tradition of landscape seemed to have come to an end with Ansel Adams and then to have returned in a more restrained and cool manner with the gaze of New Topographics artists such as Robert Adams, Friedlander defied that tradition which we associate with the landscapes of the American West, presenting on a single plane the famous and majestic mountains and the tangle of foreground vegetation in an incredible variety and number of planes, play of light and dark and effects of proximity and distance. Everything takes on new life. In some cases we visually grasp the scene in one glance while in others the image challenges our eyes with a whirl of intricate forms that complicates its reading. The Hasselblad Superwide means that both the photographer and viewer locate themselves inside the image, at the centre of it, in order to reconstruct the laws of perspective.

# Publications

For Lee Friedlander books are a natural form of expression. This is evident from the total of more than fifty volumes of his photographs which have been published since the first to appear, *Work from the Same House* (with prints by Jim Dine) of 1969. Furthermore, this number rises to nearly ninety if exhibition catalogues and collective books are included. *Self Portrait* of 1970 was the artist's first monograph and the origin of Haywire Press, which he founded to self-publish his work. In 1976 Friedlander published his third volume, *The American Monument*, considered one of the most important photography books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which the artist transcends the limits of documentary photography to fully locate itself in the terrain of artistic expression. It was followed in 1978 by *Lee Friedlander Photographs*, which includes most of his best known early images alongside the emerging body of themes that he would develop over the course of his career and which are often grouped together in respective monographs: nature, the family, portraits, television screens, nudes, workers, etc.

In 2019 saw the publication of *Friedlander First Fifty*, a volume that offers a survey of the artist's first fifty books with commentaries on them and interesting conversations (with Lee and Maria Friedlander, their daughter Anna and their grandson Giancarlo) about their content and how the projects originated. Further books have appeared since then and more are currently in preparation.

