

**Michel Lambeth Photographer -
Photographe**

Michael TOROSIAN

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***The Photographer as Wandering Photo
Booth***

With memories of images taken in the fifties and sixties hovering behind my eyes, I looked at the catalogue of photographs by Michel Lambeth. There was rarely the swiftness of a Cartier Bresson, the aggressiveness of a William Klein, the insatiable humour of a Robert Doisneau, the social conscience of a Helen Levitt, the critique of a Robert Frank. But is it fair to compare Lambeth to others? He had his own vision. However, context is important: visual, social, political and personal contexts. Lambeth was part of a generation which had been at war. They saw and experienced events which we can only imagine and they survived. A diary entry for 1943 reads:

Come along with me and I will fill your ears with the clamorous sounds of war. You don't look as if you have ever been involved with the worst of the four horsemen, you don't seem to have that green mustard tinge pressed into the creases round your mouth. Let me tell you something about the development of gangrene in festered limbs. You say that you have never seen a dead man? Not in your whole life? Well let me tell you what happens when a man steps on a mine. You have never seen that either? Come along then, you have a lot to learn and I am going to write it all down; you'll know about it then. ¹

If experience affects one's work, then Lambeth's style of photography may have been, in part, influenced by the war years. In fact that might have been the case for many photographers working in the 50's and 60's. The dark, murky images of Super XX film developed in straight Dektol and the aesthetic flip from precise framing and fine print to hip shots, blur and grain signalled a shift in emotional intensity and a desire for change. A subjective interpretation of the existing environment was not always camouflaged by the pretense of objectivity in photography.

Judging by the number of texts written by Lambeth about the medium, ² he was aware of contemporary work and carried the visual baggage of his time. His visual language was also informed by his love of European cinema, particularly the New Realism then prevalent in Italian films which validated daily life and condemned war.

Returning from Paris to Montréal in 1953, then Toronto, where he worked briefly in film, Lambeth set himself the goal to produce "a meaningful one-man photographic document of Canadian life." ³ Less grandiose than August Sander's "People of the Twentieth Century," his objective was nevertheless epic. The meaningful phrase is perhaps "one-man," for Lambeth's photos are coloured by his passion. In a short statement on photography, he wrote:

Feeling as expressed in emotional freedom with photography becomes at once a diary of and a monument to the particular unique existence of one man or woman. ⁴

It's not difficult, especially given written support material, to read Lambeth's images as both observations of the existing world and reflections of his preoccupations.

Three introductory photos reveal both Lambeth's use of light and organization of the frame, and his personal sense of drama. In the first photo on the cover of the catalogue, a group of three, presumably a family, stands in a darkened entrance. Only the young boy gazes at the photographer; a woman in dark clothing and in shadow, facing right, holds onto his hand. A young girl in white and light faces left, alone. The woman from the first image is echoed in the second and Lambeth introduces himself in the third. In the mirror of a photo booth, one half of his face obscured by shadow and his camera, he takes his own photo. This set of three images keeps revolving back on itself: portrait/self-portrait/closeness/distance/darkness/light.

With the exception of the portraits of various artists in the midsection of the catalogue, Lambeth is like a wandering photo booth taking pictures of people at parades, museums, markets and gardens: places where crowds congregate, where it is easy to mingle, where it is possible to feel a community of spirit. But behind the camera, the photographer is isolated. This is an inherent contradiction in this genre of photography; the camera is both the barrier which separates one from involvement and the tool which facilitates engagement.

The photos are witness to a certain sector of Toronto, Mexico and a few other cities and countries, but they accentuate emotional content rather than the site-specific environment. Framing reinforces this intensity. For the most part, the protagonist(s) is located in the centre and support material creeps in around the edges. This is not an unusual strategy for the user of small, rapid 35mm cameras and the advocates of the snapshot aesthetic. In plate 8, two women, one playing an accordion, the other singing, could be local street musicians in New York, barely eking out a liv-

ing. But a sign "Blind," squeezed into the upper left corner, identifies a more urgent and heart-wrenching scene. Or the setting may be the Queen arriving at City Hall in Toronto, 1959 (Plate 10), but the drama is an adolescent sprawled in arabesque against a dark wall and a trio at the bottom, crying, speaking and gesturing to the photographer. This intensity of expression is perhaps more appropriate to an instant in time than to the event which is the pretext for the photographer to seek out those significant moments and capture them on film. Lambeth possessed a keen sense of choreography and used visual tools to assure emotional impact.

The drama or "message" is further heightened by the juxtaposition of images in the catalogue. For example, plate 6 is a picture of a garage with an adult's car and child's car in their places. On the facing page, a group of boys plays in a sand pit. Framing is similar, distance equal, interrelationship clear: kids play in an adult world. This set follows two images which have more complicated implications. In plate 4, a woman in a white lace sun dress, ruffled organza at the bottom, is positioned with her arms outstretched. In fact, her hands are tied to a cross-like structure. She smiles. A man looks over her left shoulder, other women are in the background. A sign on the left reads "High Art Cover Girls in Person;" the caption identifies the place, the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. Presumably this is a sideshow. The woman is the object of attention. Perhaps the man will magically release her or perhaps she will escape by herself. The adjacent page figures two women dressed in coats, flat shoes, standing on a car bumper. A child sits in a stroller in front of the car. All look in the same direction, toward the Grey Cup Parade, the quint-essential male event. The juxtaposition of the two images emphasizes

the contrast: a male sex symbol (I guess) versus the mother, the difference of the apparel, the significance of the gaze. This is editorial license, a meaning imposed by the sequence and selection of work from over 16,000 negatives by Lambeth in the Public Archives collection.

Further on, four images taken at the Royal Ontario Museum dovetail with portraits of artists Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Robert Hedrick, Yosef Drenters and James Reaney: these are more premeditated photos and ultimately less engaging. The catalogue closes with photos from the Mexican portfolio, the last series Lambeth took with conviction before ending up on skid row. While he enjoyed success as a photojournalist working for the major Canadian publications in the 60's, there must have been a contradiction between producing work for his personal epic and doing assignments for others, some of which were as lightweight as "Adults in Toyland."

Michael Torosian, editor of the catalogue and curator of the show which was mounted at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in 1986, is to be commended for his fastidious research. On the other hand, while the restraints of publishing books of photographs are acknowledged, 33 images from such a large collection seriously limits our understanding of the work. Here is where we run into the problems of posthumous selection and editing. It is tricky business to imply the intentions of the photographer when s/he no longer has the last word.

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Notes

¹ Michel LAMBETH, "Combat Service in Western Europe Theatre as tank gunner in Governor General's Foot Guard, 21st Armoured Division," Michel Lambeth Collection, The Public Archives of Canada, quoted in Michael TOROSIAN, *Michael Lambeth Photographer - Photographe*, Public Archives of Canada, 1986, p.56.

² The Catalogue Bibliography lists 25 articles on photography written by Lambeth including his own "Statement on Photography."

³ Michel LAMBETH, "The Editors Speaking," *Canadian Metalworking*, no. 23, 1960, p.6, quoted in TOROSIAN, p.59.

⁴ Michel LAMBETH, "Statement on Photography, 1966," Michel Lambeth Collection, The Public Archives of Canada, quoted in TOROSIAN, p.60.