

LEICA CLASSIC

Sabine Weiss

PHOTOGRAPHIE HUMANISTE

Capturing life in all its facets: Sabine Weiss has long been considered the Grande Dame of humanist photography – yet the 93 year-old photographer’s work continues to be re-discovered around the world.



It was not only in Paris, but also on her many travels that Sabine Weiss found her distinctive subjects: Boy at play, New York City 1955 (top) and Pennsylvania Station, New York City 1962 (right)





Weiss's main interest was to portray her contemporaries and capture the fleeting moments of everyday life: Children fetching water, Paris 1954 (top); Couples in love, Place de la République, Paris 1954 (top right); Lady in a lobby, Philadelphia, USA 1962 (right); Young miner, Lens 1955 (right page)

"I take photographs to hold on to the ephemeral, capture chance, keep an image of something that will disappear: gestures, attitudes, objects that are reminders of our brief lives," is one of the photographer's credos









Men watching a race, hoping for a better view (Larchant 1950). Precise compositions are among the hallmarks of the photographer's work: her chosen angle imbues an ordinary scene with an element of absurdity and humour



Weiss has an exceptional ability to capture chance encounters in perfect, mesmerising compositions – exemplified by her image *Little girl, small tree* (top), a horse at the Porte de Vanves in Paris, 1952 (top right), observation of a jumping cat at the Nga Phe Kyaung monastery in Burma, 1996 (right)

A sensitive portrait study of the artist Alberto Giacometti, taken in his studio in Paris, 1954 (opposite page)





Visiting Sabine Weiss in her secluded home in Paris is an unforgettable experience. As you enter the peaceful courtyard in the city's Auteuil quarter, the noise of the boulevard falls away; concealed within is a small house — safeguarding the life's work of a great artist. From the moment you step through the door, you are fully immersed in your hostess's world: piles of books, walls and shelves filled with paintings, mementos, objets trouvés, small votive offerings — and, of course, countless photo books. The photographer's own archive has been neatly organised on the upper floor. Only her assistant (and the cat) have unrestricted access to that treasure.

In the almost seventy years Weiss has been living in this house, countless famous visitors have passed through its doors. Among her many stories is a memory of Edward Steichen, who visited her studio in 1955 — when this was still a single-storey building with no heating or running water. “You are way too young!” the American curator exclaimed — but he took his time to go through her portfolio, and ended up selecting three prints for his legendary *Family of Man* exhibition in New York. The reason Steichen was aware of the young photographer's work was that Weiss had, even at this early stage in her career, established connections in the US — including frequent publications in major American magazines. Born in Switzerland, Weiss completed her photography training in Geneva before moving to Paris in 1946. At that time, Europe's leading-edge metropolis was home to a flourishing new movement in photography: the ‘école humaniste’ made waves not only in Europe, but also in the USA. It was not long before Weiss counted among its best-known representatives, along with Robert Doisneau, Willy Ronis, Édouard Boubat, Brassai and Izis.

“Humanist photography has both a moral purpose and a distinctive

subject matter,” photography historian Peter Hamilton wrote in his essay for the *100 Years of Leica* catalogue. “It is inclusionary and universalistic, stressing equality and the primacy of the fundamental institutions of liberal society, and in particular their solidaristic connotations. It celebrates the ordinary, the everyday, the unremarkable. While promoting the importance of simple, unretouched, realist representations, it also places particular value specifically on their poetic construction.”

Sabine Weiss particularly exemplifies these elements within her work. Her photographs are characterised by brilliant compositions and condensed depictions of everyday life. A deeply sensitive storyteller and close observer, she is exceptionally skilled at identifying the remarkable within the everyday. It is unsurprising that Weiss's subjects included many of the era's most notable figures: the photographer and her husband, the American painter Hugh Weiss, moved within the creative circles of post-war Paris, mixing with writers, actors and musicians, as well as artists such as Georges Braque, Joan Miró, Alberto Giacometti, André Breton and Ossip Zadkine. Her true calling, however, was street photography. Working autonomously, she captured her subjects with great empathy and rapport. “A good picture arises of its own accord,” is how she describes her seemingly straightforward approach.

Despite the great diversity of subjects, all of her images bear their author's distinctive mark: they are dynamic, sincere, and never mundane. Weiss's career continues to be extremely active to this day. Following last year's exhibitions in various cities including Chicago and Berlin, another three showcases are scheduled in Orléans and Olivet for the coming year. This summer, her work will also be displayed in a major presentation at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It is certainly heartening to know that this extraordinary body of work continues to reach an ever-wider audience. ULRICH RÜTER

SABINE WEISS

Sabine Weber was born in Saint-Gingolph on Lake Geneva, on 23 July, 1924. After her three-year apprenticeship at the renowned Atelier Boissonnas in Geneva, she moved to Paris in 1946, working as an assistant for fashion photographer Willy Maywald before going freelance in 1950. In the same year, she married the US artist Hugh Weiss (1925–2007).

In 1952, she joined the Rapho photo agency, subsequently working for numerous French and international magazines. Her early black and white oeuvre has been increasingly rediscovered since the 1970s, accompanied by new works created on her many travels around the world.

Last year the photographer, who has long since become a French citizen, was honoured by the Swiss Photo Academy for her life's work.

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BOOKS: (selection) SABINE WEISS (*Jeu de Paume*; Coédition La Martinière, Paris 2016); SABINE WEISS - L'OEIL INTIME (*Escourbiac*, Paris 2014); SABINE WEISS (*Éditions de la Martinière*, Paris 2003)