

**Bill Rauhauser at 93: flâneur of Detroit**

*Take care of all your memories... for you can not relive them. -Bob Dylan*

From poetic and humorous recordings of family life and urban landscapes to his surprising tabletop conceptual works, Bill Rauhauser's photography has always been stamped with clarity of thought, a gentle beauty and an eye for composition. His decades long love affair with Detroit, modernism, photo history and the organization of forms and their refinement is an inspiring tale. He is at the age of 93, still questioning, developing and recreating himself as an artist.

There's nothing sentimental, passive or decorative about Rauhauser's street work yet they contain a romantic and passionate core, all beautifully rendered black and white images, each a small poignant story. Some of his best work is risky, unconscious, snapshot driven yet carefully composed, implanted with his memories and a respect for the city and its culture. The urban landscape and the forces of chance are the main stars in a Rauhauser photograph.

Detroit has become a favorite location for photographers in the recent past, chosen as the symbolic and literal center of the post-industrial wasteland. Many current books have documented its magnificent

ruins. Rauhauser's investigation was a prelude to the ruins, a map before the crime-scene, familiar territory for anyone brought up in Detroit in the 1950s-60s.

There is something fatally romantic about an urban photographer in the mid-1950s wandering freely throughout Detroit. Rauhauser's practice coincided and mirrored the beat era mythology that grew around the wandering figures of Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac, whose *On the Road* was published to a sensational response in 1957. Being anchored to Detroit in the 1950s was a much less fashionable and frenetic situation for Rauhauser, but perhaps a more truthful one. He was solidly stuck in the quintessential American city, the crucible and furnace of Fordism, where the struggles of race, class and capitalism are played out in daily life.

After describing a visit to Henri Cartier-Bresson's exhibition at MOMA in 1947, as a "revelatory" one, Rauhauser quickly realized that his life's passion and career path would soon be devoted to photography. The idea of eternity frozen in a photograph – life organized and contained in a single 'Decisive Moment' rang true for Rauhauser, and the same camera used by Cartier-Bresson.

In 1955, a photograph by Rauhauser (*Three Figures on a Bench*) was chosen by Edward Steichen for his "Family of Man" exhibition, one of the most successful and viewed photo exhibits in history, seen by over nine million people. Rauhauser took that as an encouraging sign and continued his street work with renewed vigor. 1955 was also the same year Robert Frank began his cross-country photo project that would result in "The Americans" – another milestone in photo history. Frank's snapshot aesthetic held a fascination for Rauhauser, who was already practicing those methods himself on the streets of Detroit.

Rauhauser has often referred to himself as a flâneur, a wandering observer, sampling and documenting the rhythms and pace of the city. The flâneur was a term popularized by Charles Baudelaire to describe the slow city-gazing, 19<sup>th</sup> century window-shopping dandy of his time – the romantic wanderer of the urban landscape. Baudelaire admired photography's documentary nature but also despised and thwarted its fine art applications. In his essay *On Photography* of 1859, he describes the dual nature of photography and where he saw it headed, "If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally. It is time, then, for it to return to its true duty, which is to be the servant

of the sciences and arts... Let it rescue from oblivion those tumbling ruins, those books, prints and manuscripts which time is devouring, precious things whose form is dissolving and which demand a place in the archives of our memory—— it will be thanked and applauded.”[i]

The book *Bill Rauhauser 20<sup>th</sup> Century Photography in Detroit* is a treasure trove for what it preserves of Motor City life, especially the era following World War II when the streets were still filled with vendors, shoppers and energetic activity of all kinds. Rauhauser concentrated his walks along Woodward Avenue, Mid-town (Wayne State University), the riverfront and Belle Isle. Later he took to documenting small working class homes and the city’s architectural gems. The vibrancy of those affluent times marks a stark contrast to how the fortunes of the automotive capital would slowly unravel.

[i] Charles Baudelaire, *On Photography*, Salon of 1859