

Photos of inner realities

by Valerie Patten

"Fine photography is literature, and it should be," photographer Walker Evans once said. Evans' photo stories are represented in a Stanford Museum exhibit of modern photography. The show displays work by some of the important names in the evolution of photography, alongside more recent photos by younger artists.

The photos are dated from 1925 to the present and represent a wide range of movements and attitudes within the medium. Included are Ansel Adams' straightforward, intense look at the natural world; Minor White's mysticism and formalism; Robert Doisneau's humorous, anecdotal moments; and Imogen Cunningham's compositional approach to natural forms.

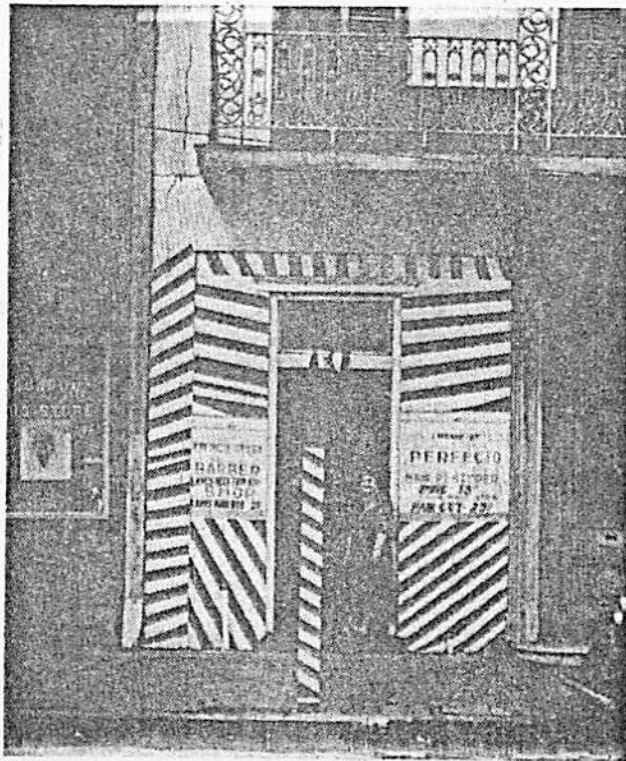
Also shown are documentation photos, personal and impersonal portraiture, ironic social commentary and the extrapolation of visual facts to the level of the surreal. There's something of almost everything here.

Walker Evans' 1935 photo *Sidewalk and Shop Front, New Orleans* shows his ability to frame visual drama while recording the real and the ordinary. Evans demanded of himself not only technical beauty but a narrative, human element in his work. Many of his pieces have been seen as social critique, but he claims that people have projected these politics onto his work. Speaking to an art class at the University of Michigan in 1971, Walker stated: "The unappreciated artist is at once very humble and very arrogant too. He collects and edits the world about him. This is especially important in the psychology of camera work. This is why a man who has faith, intelligence and cultivation will show that in his work."

Diane Arbus' *Tattooed Man at a Carnival, Maryland* is a striking example of her will to photograph human beings who have been tampered with by life or their own genetic structure.

Her approach to portraiture is radical in its ability to create vulnerability and misapprehension in the viewer. Arbus' *House of Horrors* draws attention to the underpinnings of the horror house and to our collective aberrations and pursuit of odd thrills.

Arbus exposes us to things and people that we would



Sidewalk and Shopfront, New Orleans by Walker Evans (1903-1974), from the exhibition of modern photographs at the Stanford Museum of Art.

rather not notice. We are repulsed by her focus and, at the same time, drawn into a new relationship with the visual facts she records.

James Alinder's piece *Picture Spot, Great Meteor Crater, Arizona* deals with a kind of humor in art that could only have emerged in the post-pop United States. This "picture spot" calls attention to the conditions of photography, as well as the absurdity of a vacationer's concept of a "good view."

Posed in front of an empty space in a brick wall built to frame part of nature, Alinder's wife and child constitute the main focus, the only vertical in a horizontal composition. But their presence dissuades us from experiencing anything personal or profound by the casual superficiality of their posed snapshot attitude—which consists of saying "cheese."

Among many other pieces of interest is Laura Volkerding's 1982 series of small, perfect photos, call *The Warden's Folly*, each of which is a composition in itself, as well as a part of the group composition. The title exists as a kind of commentary on the photo, which heightens the viewer's awareness of the meaning or ironic intent of the image.

The tension that exists between the technical considerations in photography, the camera's apparent objectivity and the conscious and subconscious intentions of the photographer creates the excitement in this exhibit, in which widely different attitudes toward these elements are juxtaposed.

The Stanford Museum of Art is exhibiting a survey of its collection of 20th century photography, covering the period of 1925 to the present. The exhibit runs through Aug. 14.