

A Look Back at a Life in Pictures: Photographs by Gordon Baer

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On a Sunday afternoon midway through October's FotoFocus the backroom at Baker Hunt was at capacity to hear photographer Gordon Baer talk about his work and the exhibition A Look Back at a Life in Pictures: Photographs by Gordon Baer. The exhibition could be seen on the surrounding walls and in two or three adjoining rooms of the old Covington mansion that has become an art and cultural center..

The audience was studded with photographers, among them Melvin Grier, William Messer, Jon Hughes, Foto Focus founder Tom Schiff and Michael Wilson, who had proposed the show and curated it himself. Baer, gallantly surmounting the physical problems that have curtailed his life and his photography for a number of years, answered questions about individual works and about his career from its start when he was a boy growing up in Louisville, to newspaper work, free lance work and more. He made admiring references to the photographers present, turning attention from himself to them, but found it turned back to him when Mel Grier spoke out firmly to say, about his own early days at the Cincinnati Post, "I was the wanna be and you already were."

Wilson, whose own photographs may be seen in the Foto Focus exhibition. **Let's Face It** at Kennedy Heights Arts Center, says that with the exception of perhaps five works he himself processed from Baer's negatives, the show is exclusively Baer's own vintage prints. The works date from 1963 into the 1980s, when digital photography as yet did not dominate..

By the late 1960s Baer was in the military and photographing in Korea. In the exhibition we see the Koreans themselves, holding together as best they can their interrupted lives. There are photographs from Japan, and also works from a 1980's New York exhibition, *The Battle Comes Home*. The exhibition's photographs of Vietnam veterans, made during a nineteen month period, became a book, *Reflections of Vietnam*. The book itself can be seen in the exhibition. Published in 1982, Baer's early recognition of what we have come to know as post traumatic stress syndrome now exists in only a few copies, available at Baker Hunt.

Although, as a news photographer, Baer often photographed the famous, Wilson chose to include only two of these subjects for the show: James Baldwin at Bowling Green State University in 1978, his hands to his head, and Larry Flynt lounging on the bank of the Mississippi in New Orleans, with a bible and quasi-religious picture at hand. Neither of these portraits is a standard record of its well-known subject.

What Baer has always loved to capture are the moments when people appear as one with their surroundings. We see a child dancing on Pleasant Street in Over-the-Rhine in 1981, a white triad of reaching hands against the gray expanse of the Vietnam Memorial at its dedication in 1982, the splendid silhouette of Slat's, the "candy butcher," who sold popcorn and porno at the Savoy burlesque theater, Louisville, 1963.

Baer is endlessly interested in people, in their interactions, in their unconscious grace. He records all this in pictures that are testaments to his own unerring eye and to the richness of black and white film. Asked if he had ever ventured into color, this accomplished and respected photographer said that to his mind "nothing is as credible as a beautiful black and white photograph." Hand clapping and a small cheer was the response of the audience, wholly won over by the examples at hand. I can't think these people will all give up color, will throw out their digital cameras, will vow never to take pictures with their cell phones again, but they will retain an appreciation for the results of black and white film.

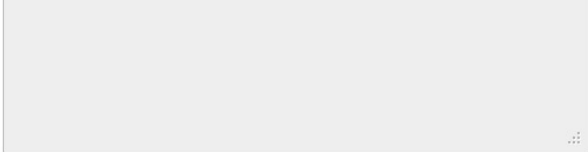
A Look Back at a Life in Pictures is on view at Baker Hunt Art and Cultural Center, 620 Greenup Street, Covington, through October 31, 9:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m., Monday – Friday.

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