



VIVIAN MAIER
29.05.–19.08.2018

Opening 28.05.2018

The discovery of Vivian Maier's photographs hit the photo world like a bomb in 2009. The story of the hitherto completely unknown photographer, who had made a living as a nanny throughout her lifetime and whose archive of predominantly negatives had been acquired rather incidentally by a young collector at a foreclosure sale, captured the public's imagination well beyond the traditional photo audiences. "It's a once-in-a-century find – and a story you can't make up", says WestLicht founder Peter Coeln. The Viennese photo museum brings the works of the US-American photographer with Austrian roots – her father was born in the former dual monarchy – to Austria for the first time.

Vivian Maier became a star almost overnight, ranked among the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander or Diane Arbus and represented by the most respected galleries. In 2013, the Hollywood-like tale was made into a non-fiction movie, which was shown in cinemas worldwide and nominated at the 2014 Academy Awards for an Oscar as Best Documentary Feature. Maier herself didn't live to see her late success. She died in 2009 in a nursing home from the effects of a fall, two years after her negatives, prints, 8mm films and audio tapes had been auctioned off when she couldn't pay the rent of her storage anymore, and just days before the collector finally managed to track her down.

"The widely circulated story – fascinating as it is – of a 'Mary Poppins with a camera' should not distract from Maier's actual work. She has earned her place in photo history due to the quality of her photographs", WestLicht Chief Curator Rebekka Reuter points out. Many of her pictures taken in the streets of New York City and Chicago since the 1950s feel like instant classics. With her exquisite eye for the moment and for composition, Maier firmly claims her place in the traditionally male-dominated pantheon of street photography. Her numerous self-portraits in mirrors and shop windows in urban space defy the usual narration of the genre, which oftentimes is constructed along conventional role models and archaic schemes of hunter and prey.

On view at WestLicht are more than 100 works from the early 1950s to the late 1970s – Maier's classic black-and-white pictures, mostly taken with a Rolleiflex, and additional colour photography taken with a Leica.

Vivian Maier, born 1926 in New York City to a French mother and an Austrian father. According to the sparse records, she spends her childhood and youth between France and New York. Possibly early contact with photography through portrait photographer Jeanne Bertrand, who temporarily lives with Maier and her mother in New York. First photographs from late 1940s France taken with a Kodak Brownie Box. Returns to the USA in 1951 and works as a nanny with a family in Southampton, NY. First Rolleiflex in 1952. Moves to Chicago in 1956. Sets up a darkroom in the bathroom. Until the early 1970s works as a nanny with the family Gensburg in the Chicago suburbs, from 1967 also with the family Raymond. Round-the-world trip in 1959/60. Various employments as housekeeper and nanny during the 1970s. Turns to colour photography and a Leica IIIc. Most of her films remain undeveloped from this time on. Her financial situation grows increasingly tense during the 1980s and 1990s. Stores her archive in a rented storage unit. Since she is living alone and has no family ties, support comes mostly from the sons of the Gensburg family. In 2009, Vivian Maier dies from the effects of a fall in a nursing home in Chicago.

Due to unpaid rent, the storehouse company sells the content of Maier's storage at an auction in 2007, more than 100,000 negatives, several thousand prints, tape recordings and 8 mm films. John Maloof, a young real estate agent, at that time working on a book about the neighbourhood on Chicago's Northwest Side and searching for historic images, buys a first box of negatives unseen for 400 USD. Starts to work on the acquired material. In 2009, Maloof publishes some first pictures on his blog and links it to flickr where the photos go viral. He successively acquires additional parts of Maier's archive and today holds the major share of the photographer's estate.

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The exhibition Vivian Maier is jointly organized with diChroma photography, Madrid

