

Color Pioneer

Nearly three decades before MOMA conferred institutional legitimacy on color photography in the fine arts, Saul Leiter was shooting distinctly painterly, subtly modulated Kodachrome slides.

BY STEPHEN MAINE

A native of Pittsburgh, Saul Leiter moved to New York City in 1946, at the age of 23, to become a painter. Through his friendship with Richard Pousette-Dart, he was invited to meetings of the Club, the legendary, contentious gathering of downtown artists. There he presented his paintings, as well as the photography with which, following Pousette-Dart's loan of a camera, he was concurrently experimenting. The photos Leiter showed were from a series called "Garbage Pictures," and they got him in trouble with the Club, a garrulous group. "I was accused by some of arranging the garbage," he recalls. "They were arranged nicely, I guess."

Highly visible in fashion photography of the 1950s and '60s, and a pioneer of color in a fine-art context, Leiter is well known to a specialized audience but still far from a household name. A recent opportunity to assess his contribution was provided by Howard Greenberg Gallery, which presented "Saul Leiter: Early Color" earlier this year. The Greenberg show included 29 recent color prints from Kodachrome slides shot between 1948 and 1960. In addition to its distinctly romantic, painterly sensibility, Leiter's early oeuvre is distinguished by a wistful eventlessness quite unlike the jarring, confrontational manner adopted by such contemporaries as Diane Arbus and William Klein. A set of opposing diagonals activates the lower section of *Shirt, New York* (1948). The garment, a radiant slab floating in the bright sunlight of a display window, offsets the greenish cast of the yawning shadows behind it. This bold, unglamorous shot was taken nearly three decades before John Szarkowski organized "Eggleston's Guide" for MOMA, the "watershed" show of William Eggleston's work that is generally regarded as signaling the long-delayed institutional acceptance of color in fine-art photography.

In *Walking, New York* (1956), a range of grays in a café window is interrupted by thin stripes of mauve molding, painted blue flowers and a red hat reflected in the glass. It is one of a number of pictures in which windows conflate space, confusing what is upon, beyond and reflected in the glass. *Window, New York* (1957) is bifurcated by a shallow diagonal. Above is the deep blue of reflected sky; below, enigmatic objects behind the murky glass blend with reflections of buildings across the street.

But in *Reflection, New York* (1958) mirrors break up space, framing flat, overlapping shapes that yield to expanses of subtly modulated colors. The compositional device is familiar from some Japanese prints of the 18th and 19th centuries, and was adopted by Bonnard and Vuillard, both of whom Leiter reveres. The spatial disjunction in *On the El* (ca. 1958) is so localized that it looks like a collage at first. Amid a near-abstract arrangement of deep blues, blacks and a beautiful eggplant shade are legible details, like a dangling chain and a folding gate, which do little to ground the soft-



On the El, ca. 1958, Fujicolor print, 9 1/4 by 13 1/2 inches. All photos this article courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York.

focus streetscape that seems to emerge from the mass of a passenger's overcoat.

Among the 13 black-and-white photographs included in the Greenberg show, mostly vintage gelatin silver prints from the late 1940s and early '50s, is *Untitled, New York* (ca. 1950), which captures the fleeting reverie of a young girl in a crowded street. Rushing, faceless adults only emphasize the stillness at the center of the image. At about this time, W. Eugene Smith introduced Leiter to Sid Grossman, whose Photo League was an important venue for street photographers. Grossman arranged a two-person show of Leiter and Robert Frank, but the Photo League closed before the show was mounted.

Strong formal structure, delicacy of tone and interest in pattern are also present in *East Brooklyn* (1953). The picture dates from the year that Edward Steichen, then director of the photography department at MOMA, included Leiter in the exhibition "Always The Young Stranger." Leiter allows that he was not then aware of the importance of being in the show. "I have treated my successes lightly and with indifference," he has said. Like many another photographer, Leiter supported himself doing fashion work, notably for *Harper's Bazaar*, where Henry Wolf became art director in 1958 and gave Leiter steady assignments. Through the 1960s Leiter also worked for *Elle*, *Show*, *British Vogue*, *Queen* and *Nova*. But unlike many other photographers, he never felt the need to disown his fashion work: "Some people who are very impure embrace purity

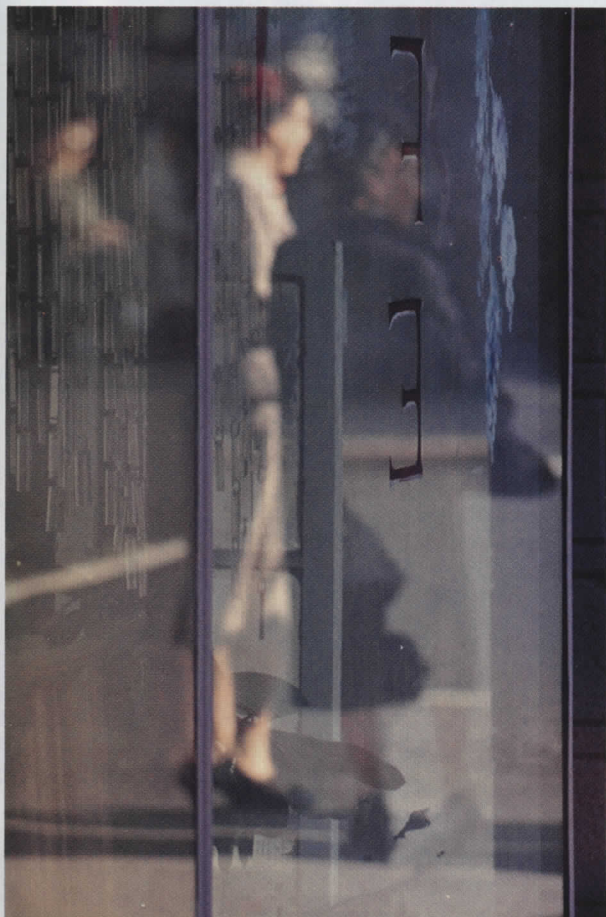
after a certain amount of time," he simply observes. A friend of Lou Fauer and an admirer of his work, Leiter recalls sadly that Fauer was "tormented" by the time he spent on fashion, at the expense of his personal work. Leiter enjoyed the differing creative challenges and rewards of commercial and "art" photography.

Regarding his artistic antecedents, Leiter is unequivocal in his uncertainty. "I will never figure out who influenced me. I have been interested in so many things without ever feeling that the interest had any effect on my work." Leiter does acknowledge a special affinity for Eugene Atget and André Kertész, two photographers whose work frequently has a sense of poised stillness. He is also drawn to the efforts of Willy Ronis, and he is a great admirer of Helen Levitt's color prints.

Leiter's unrepentantly skeptical attitude was formed early in life, by the time he turned away from the rabbinical training that, as a son of a towering figure in Talmudic studies, he was expected by his family to follow. "I never studied anything. My education consisted of sitting in the library at the University of Pittsburgh all day, looking at art books. I was delighted with what I saw. No one had to explain anything to me." □

"Saul Leiter: Early Color" was on view at Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York [Dec. 9, 2005-Jan. 21, 2006] and will travel to the Milwaukee Art Museum [Sept. 28, 2006-Jan. 7, 2007].

Author: Stephen Maine is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn.



*Far left, Saul Leiter:
Walking, New York,
1956, Fujicolor print,
18 $\frac{7}{8}$ by 12 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches.*

*Left, Tanager Steps,
1955, Cibachrome
print, 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 8 $\frac{7}{8}$
inches.*

*All prints this article
from Kodachrome
slide originals.*

*Right, Reflection,
New York, 1958,
Ilfochrome print,
13 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 9 inches.*

*Far right, Shirt,
New York, 1948,
Fujicolor print,
13 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 9 inches.*

