

*Harry Callahan: The Photographer at Work*

The Art Institute of Chicago, June 24-September 24, 2006

by Carla Barger

The current exhibition *Harry Callahan: The Photographer at Work* at the Art Institute of Chicago includes previously unseen work of Harry Callahan's (1912-1999), such as proofs and contact sheets, in an attempt to unveil his process. Callahan, one of the twentieth century's most influential and famously reticent photographers, was a quiet man who is often described as someone who preferred to make art rather than talk about it. Eschewing exotic locations and subjects, he captured the abstract beauty of nature in his immediate surroundings and the detachment and isolation of city dwellers as they walked the streets. He is quoted over and over again as saying he worked entirely by intuition.

Brett Salvesen curated the exhibition at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona. Salvesen also produced a catalog of the same name on Callahan, and it is the originals that we see in this book that are on display in Chicago. Elizabeth Siegel curates the show at the Art Institute, and she organizes Callahan's work in much the same way that Salvesen did.

Salvesen and Siegel show us a fair number of Callahan's street scenes. We see several contact strips of women's faces in tight close-ups, shot through a telephoto lens, alongside his more famous landscape photographs, nature studies, and portraits of his wife, Eleanor, and daughter, Barbara. Though the studies of women caught unaware, isolated even while they are surrounded in an urban setting, are poignant, they fail to carry the emotional heft of the nature photographs. The simplicity of the lines, extremely close focus, and stark contrast of, for example, *Weed Against Sky* communicates a sort of transcendence, an isolation of subject that is profound. A psychological element is present even though the subject is not human.

That psychological element is, of course, that of the artist. Many of Callahan's landscapes portray a split; the photographs are plainly divided in half. Several of the photographs set in Chicago are neighborhood houses split by a gangway set squarely in the center of the image. It seems to be this liminal space that interests him, or the division that it causes. Like the majority of Callahan's work, it is the separateness that he photographs regardless, it seems, of the subject.

Between 1947 and 1960, his wife Eleanor and, to a somewhat lesser extent, his daughter Barbara (born in 1950) occupied a great deal of Callahan's work, becoming the fulcrum of many of his studies of Chicago and the subject of a series of 8X10 portraits that he referred to as merely "snapshots." Perhaps it was only natural, considering Callahan's personality, that he would eventually come to use Eleanor and Barbara as subjects. But the photographs are not so much portraits of the two as much as they are pictures of the emptiness that surrounds them. The simplicity and loneliness of Callahan's earlier landscape work carries over to these portraits in a magnified sense. The common thread in these photos is the insignificance of the human beings and the overwhelming void that surrounds them.

Salvesen offers us our own telephoto lens by laying bare what the artist never meant to show. Callahan's failures and rejections are offered up to the public with no demands made other than the ticket price. One cannot help feel that Callahan, who most often refused to discuss his process, would

feel much the same about this exhibit as one of his female subjects caught grimacing while walking the streets would feel about his photograph of her. The privilege of studying a great artist's process is valuable and, since the Art Institute is intrinsically tied to the School, fitting. But I cannot help feel Callahan a bit defamed by the whole thing.

*Harry Callahan: The Photographer at Work* is at the Art Institute of Chicago, 111 South Michigan Avenue, in Galleries 1-4 through September 24, 2006.

Sample