

CV Photo

Robert Frank, *HOLD STILL — keep going*. Film/photoworks, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, June 22-September 12, 2002

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Robert Frank

HOLD STILL – keep going. Film/photoworks

Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography

June 22–September 12, 2002

Organized by the Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany,

in cooperation with the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain.

One of the greatest pleasures of this exhibition was to see Robert Frank's photoworks in the context of his moving images and to experience the transformation of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography gallery space through this enlivening presentation. In the darkened foyer exhibition-space, a compilation film, *Fragments* (9 min, 2000), was projected onto a hanging screen. I was mesmerized by one section, *New York, 28 April 1972*, which showed the compelling movements and gestures of a man dodging traffic and cleaning car windows. This man was not simply a homeless person. He was a jester or toreador of the street, jousting and dancing an agile tango of bravura and defiance. He was also a metaphor for Frank himself, and for all men who face the oncoming traffic of life with courage, humour, and grace.

Frank's solo exhibition, which could be subtitled the "Poetics of Truth Seeking," included a non-chronological intermix of single photographs, series, early bookworks, films, and photo-text montages dating from 1948 to 2000. This integrated display, emphasizing the thematic connections between early and later works, and particularly between the films and photoworks, presented the thesis of the curator, Ute Eskildsen, on the creative interrelationship of Frank's principal media. Eskildsen's exhibition is the first to screen Frank's films continuously in the galleries, side by side with his photographs.

Robert Frank has been hailed as the creator of a new vocabulary and approach within the social-documentary tradition, and his renowned publication *The Americans* (New York, 1959), bears witness to his approach. Frank's Swiss birth and upbringing allowed him to view American society with an outsider's eye. His photographs record the hypocrisy and racism, the brutality and violence, and the immense power of the socio-political system in the United States. His early style could be called anti-documentary, as it plays with the inherent duality of photography: recorder of the exterior world and reflector of the personal and the subconscious. These early images capture the specifics of a gesture, a moment, a place – for example, *From the Bus, New York, 1958* – and also pivot upon the poetic possibilities of juxtaposed shapes, as in *Tickertape, NYC, 1951*, or frames within frames provided by bus windows, as in the cover image of *The Americans*, or hearse doors, as in *London, 1951*. Frank eventually turned from the social environment at large to the events and happenings of his own life as the chief source for his work.

From the third gallery, the soundtrack of a longer film, *C'est vrai (One hour)* (1990, 60 min.), spilled out and animated the aural space with frenetic and chaotic New York streetscape sounds and the ravings of a male voice – creating a heightened atmosphere that was appropriately distracting and grating. Six shorter films, such as *Conversations in Vermont* (1969, 26 min.) and *Life Dances On* (1980, 30 min.), were shown sequentially on a video monitor with attached headphones. *Life Dances On* was made as a memorial to Frank's beloved daughter, Andrea, who died in a plane crash at the age of twenty in 1974, and to his close friend Danny Seymour, who disappeared from his boat in 1973.

As I viewed *Life Dances On*, I had a moment of recognition. An animated version of the upper part of Frank's photograph *Sick of Goodbys*' (1978), seen in the same gallery, appeared on the screen – a windup toy skeleton's legs were seen running inanely, enacting a dance of death that mocked the pain of the bereaved. *Sick of Goodbys*' is a haunting work that uses an inventory of Frank's poetic devices/phrases and photographic and painterly metaphors. The divided yet united image – of here and of there – the layering of space through mirrors, frames, and reflected light, the contrasting lines and smudges of the wrenched pho-

tographic emulsion, and the tearful drips of the hand-painted words – all echoed the anguished emotions of the text and title. In both halves of this photograph, an electricity pole can be discerned hovering as a monument to those Frank has lost. Frank has adopted this particular pole as a significant symbol, and it appears from time to time against the familiar view of sea and sky seen from his Mabou, Nova Scotia, home. In other images, it endures as a totemic presence, as in *HOLD STILL – keep going* (1989) and *End of Dream, Mabou* (May 1992).

Frank's visual vocabulary comes not only from film, but also from the language of painting movements such as abstract expressionism, in which deep emotions are expressed through fluid gestures and rough textures. Frank knew many abstract expressionist artists intimately, according to the documentary film *A Portrait of Robert Frank – Fire in the East* (Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 1986), screened in the CMCP's small didactic exhibition space. He also adopted the next generation's (pop art) strategies of metaphorical reference to the medium – using both painting and photography – as a device to express his inner feel-



Tools – For My Mother and for W.E.
Four gelatin silver prints from two Polaroid negatives
38.5 x 59.9 cm each
1999–2000
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

ings. For example, the paint drips in James Rosenquist's mixed-media assemblage of found objects *Capillary Action II* (1963) metaphorically refer to pollution and environmental damage. In *Sick of Goodbys*, Frank used words "sick of good By's" – painted with drips that reference tears or blood – to emphasize his deep-felt emotions.

Although there is an underlying sense of personal tragedy in many of his works, Frank mitigates and survives these dark aspects of his life by using an ironic humour. "Humour helps you go through life, and saves you from sadness. . . . It comes by accident in the work, and I play with it, especially in the Polaroids" (Robert Frank, from a conversation with the author, 21 June 2002). This humour includes visual puns and bizarre images such as the running toy skeleton's legs. It also includes images such as that of *Doll, N.Y.* (1949), in which a child's toy in a plastic bag becomes a consumer-culture image of an encapsulated baby pleading to be released.

Deeply rooted in the autobiographical, Frank's art forms an extended journal that seeks to define and confront often troubling inner truths mediated through objects and views of the exterior. "I am always shooting the same images. I am always looking outside, trying to look inside. Trying to tell something that's true. But maybe nothing is really true except what's out there. And what is out there is always different" (Text from Robert Frank's film *Moving Pictures* [1994]). **Judith Parker**