Everyday Grace

The intimate lens of photographer William Gedney

February 1, 2000 By Thomas Roma

The first time I saw Bill Gedney's pictures, I was sitting at the kitchen table in his cold-water flat above a store on Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn. I was 22 then and deeply impressed by both his photographs and his lifestyle. He lived as near to a monk's existence as I'd ever seen, surrounded by books, records, the materials to make and store his photos, and little else. I'll never forget him proudly telling me how he defeated the IRS by producing receipts for every purchase he made one year. He'd declared so little income that IRS agents came to his apartment to see for themselves how he lived. Bill became a role model for me. He created a life in which he could spend a minimum amount of time earning a living so that he could be free to do his work.

Untitled, Kentucky, 1972William Gedney

And that is the life he lived for nearly 40 years, producing an extraordinary and original body of work in India, Europe and the United States. Yet, although his work was known to many photographers (he taught at New York City's Pratt Institute and Cooper Union), very little was ever published. Fortunately, with the recent publication of *What Was True: The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney* (W.W. Norton), along with the exhibit, *Short Distances and Definite Places: The Photographs of William Gedney*, opening January 21 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, that lack has been redressed.

After Bill died of AIDS in 1989 at 56, all of his photographs and writings were donated to Duke University by his executors, Bill's friend Lee Friedlander, the photographer, and Bill's brother Richard. There, photographer Margaret Sartor, working as the book's editor, undertook the daunting task of reading this enormous amount of written material (Bill was an inveterate pack rat and a prolific, quirky note-taker) and looking through decades of Bill's eloquent photos. *What Was True* gives form to both his remarkable sensibility and his considerable achievement.

Untitled, San Francisco, 1966-1967William Gedney

Bill was considered an eccentric and even a kind of recluse, by some. He kept his sexual life hidden from most of his friends, and he concealed his HIV status for as long as he could. His dear friend, the late photographer Raghubir Singh, wrote, “William Gedney, what a strange man! Yet the strangeness of alienation and loneliness deeply informed his art. Loneliness and the sensuality of the human figure, tied to the sublime, were his true subjects. In this context, he was a master with few peers. He coiled his controlled hysteria into poetry through a sure knowledge of self.... His best art is a dirge to loneliness.”

As a photographer, Bill Gedney made profound connections with the people he photographed. Whether in Haight-Ashbury, eastern Kentucky or India, we can see he was fully engaged with his subjects, with their lives played out in and around cars, porches, bedrooms, backyards and on the street. The sensuality in his pictures reminds us of our sameness and, in fact, what is beautiful about our sameness.

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