



International Center of Photography

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media release



Bill Wood
[Promotion at Bill McDavid Pontiac Co.], 1959
© Billye Cooper and Connie Bruner
International Center of Photography
Promised Gift of Diane Keaton

Bill Wood's Business

On view from
May 16 through
September 7, 2008

Media Preview
May 15, 2008
11:30am - 1:00pm

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Bill Wood's business was photography—and he produced tens of thousands of images over the course of his career. The variety of subjects and situations he captured provide an in-depth photographic record of life in a post-World War II American city just hitting its stride. From May 16 through September 7, 2008, the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street) will present *Bill Wood's Business*, a document of the encyclopedic range of his work. The exhibition is organized by Diane Keaton and Marvin Heiferman.

Bill Wood (1913-1973), a tall, slender, hard-working family man with a penchant for bow ties, was born, lived, and died in and around Fort Worth, Texas. An image maker and a businessman, Wood photographed Fort Worth during a remarkable period of transformation. His photography played a central role in how his clients chose to see and portray themselves and their city.

From 1937 (the tail end of the Great Depression) through the boom years that followed World War II, the Bill Wood Photo Company supplied local snap shooters and amateur photographers with cameras, flash bulbs, accessories, and quality photo finishing. In addition, the business provided commercial photographic services. Using large format cameras, and shooting mostly black-and-white film, Wood offered studio portraits and professional photographs, taken on location. His job was to create crisp, shadowless visual documents of whomever and whatever people felt the need to picture and remember—and the images in this exhibition show how good he was at doing this. They also celebrate photography's inherent and uncanny ability to turn reality into something quite special, to present (as Susan Sontag described it) "everyday life apotheosized."

Bill Wood took pictures for the businessmen, community organizations, and residents of Fort Worth. His photography was driven, for the most part, by his fellow citizens' desire to record, use, and leave behind a visual record of their actions and accomplishments. He shot portraits of proud executives and small-business owners engaged in all aspects of their work, and recorded a variety of public relations events. Wood's photographs also functioned as marketing tools—raw materials used to meet his clients' communication needs and strategies in an increasingly visual culture. He captured exuberant window displays, shiny new cars in showrooms, and the modern buildings going up all around town. His images became integral components of signage, advertising, and illustrated reportage in the local media.

In addition to his business clients, Wood was hired by individuals to provide portraits of loved ones and lasting records of the benchmarks in their lives: anniversaries, baptisms, family reunions, holidays, parties, recitals, and weddings. The citizens of Fort Worth commissioned him to record their participation in and support of the many local civic, social, and charitable organizations. We see the city's movers and shakers celebrating their traditions, politics, faith, and largesse at functions ranging from luncheons and cocktail parties to award ceremonies and fundraisers.

Wood's photographs represent the "good times" and mainstream lives of middle- and upper-level income groups in Fort Worth. The individuals, organizations, and businesses Wood was hired to photograph had to be prosperous enough to afford his services. When members of low income or minority groups are represented in the photographs, it is the work they perform for those with the means to commission the images that is evident.

Straightforward as they seem, Bill Wood's photographs are subtle and revealing, reflecting the values and forces that drove progress in his community. Revisited now and seen from a broader historical perspective, they highlight the central role photographic images played—and continue to play—in describing and defining the shape of everyday American business, life, and culture. *Bill Wood's Business* portrays a time of social and cultural transition when people's faith in the magic and truth of photography was strong. His clients' unquestioned belief in what images were for and their varying levels of sophistication about how they worked explains, in part, what makes these photographs mesmerizing to contemporary viewers.

Curators

The extraordinary range of Bill Wood's images, and a shared appreciation of archives and the construction of photographic realities are what drew Diane Keaton and Marvin Heiferman to this project. In their earlier collaborative publication and museum exhibition *Still Life* (1982), they explored the surreality, fantasies, and economic motivations percolating below the surfaces of the glamorous color publicity photographs Hollywood studios orchestrated, produced, and distributed in the mid-twentieth century. Since then, Keaton (in her film and book projects) and Heiferman (in his curatorial, writing, and publishing work) have continued to explore the quirks of American culture, icons, and images. Keaton purchased the archive of Wood's negatives twenty years ago, and they are now being donated to the ICP Archive. In *Bill Wood's Business*, Keaton and Heiferman team up again to look at photographs, to see what they are expected to depict and what they actually reveal.

Publication

Bill Wood's Business features approximately 300 of Wood's photographs, and essays by Keaton and Heiferman that pay respect to the skills Bill Wood (and professional photographers like him) brought to the business of photography.

Sponsors

This exhibition is supported by grants from The Joseph and Joan Cullman Foundation for the Arts and The Dorothea L. Leonhardt Foundation, and with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

