



International Center of Photography

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news release



Unknown Weegee

On view from
June 9 through
August 27, 2006

Media Preview
June 8, 2006
9:30 - 11am

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Weegee
Cinderella Ball, 1941
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Despite his sometimes comic persona, Weegee made his mark as a documentary photographer. Between 1935 and 1945, Weegee established a unique documentary style, typified by stark and dramatic photographs of crime scenes, burning buildings, and accidents, as well as his images capturing the daily life of New Yorkers, from the beach blanket lovers of Coney Island to the social elite at the Metropolitan Opera. Drawing on the depth of the Weegee Archive at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street), *Unknown Weegee* will present over one hundred of Weegee's lesser known but equally captivating images, June 9 through August 27, 2006.

Addressing racial tensions, economic strata, war-time rations, and Hollywood-infected notions of glamour, Weegee brings us from a roughed-up New York coming out of the 1930s Depression and into an anxious, post war society. Beyond just the iconic images we've come to know him for, Weegee's photographs portray a photographer who, within the constraints of a working photojournalist, was uniquely able to cultivate his own humanist style and vision of the city that is unapologetically his own. He combined use of the hard flash, typical of tabloid photography of the day, with a subjective viewpoint, often engaging with his subjects or turning away from the action to witness the viewers' responses to an event, to forge his documentary approach.

Weegee's subject was New York and its inhabitants. He spent at least twenty years documenting the city, driving around at all hours of the day and night, working diligently to take the most original shot and being the first photographer to publish images of a given event. Not just a chronicler of death and destruction, Weegee captured New Yorkers in diverse parts of the city: Harlem, Chinatown, the Bowery, and Times Square. They lose themselves at concerts, attend patriotic parades, and hang out in bars and cafes. Babies, animals, nightclub dancers, criminals, and uniformed officers are all players for Weegee's camera. Many of his photographs during

this time depict his subjects' struggle to survive, whether as they lie dying following a gruesome accident or dealing with being homeless. Without sentimentalizing their plight or softening the reality, he turns directly to his subject and records the moment.

Many of Weegee's images first appeared in *PM*, a New York daily newspaper. It was conceived as a liberal newspaper, intended to fight against oppression, bring forward the rights of unionists, Jews, and blacks, and infuse political discussion back into American life. Weegee joined the photographic team working as a freelance photographer, and over the run of the newspaper (1940–1948), hundreds of his images were published. *PM* was an ideal forum for Weegee to develop his perspective of the city through photo essays and personal columns. Not only did he chase crime scenes, but he documented the endless endeavor to exist, succeed, and entertain oneself within the perils of urban living.

Another important influence on his development as a documentary photographer was his involvement with the Photo League, the influential photographic organization that promoted politically committed pictures, particularly of the working classes. In the late summer of 1941, Weegee installed two back-to-back exhibitions in the League's headquarters. This visibility not only helped promote Weegee's growing reputation as a news photographer, leading to the acquisition of his work by the Museum of Modern Art and inclusion in two group shows in 1943 and 1945, but helped to define his direct photographic style that did not shy away from raw subjects and playfully engaged the excesses of comedy and tragedy.

In Weegee's autobiography, *Weegee by Weegee* (1961), he presents himself as an underground roguish hero, never playing by the rules, but still always landing on top, despite or because of his outsider status. Born Arthur Fellig in 1899, the second of seven children, Weegee arrived in New York from Lemberg, Austria (now part of the Ukraine), in 1910. Leaving school at fourteen, then four years later leaving home, Weegee began a series of jobs starting as a children's photographer, and later working with *The New York Times* and Acme Newspictures in the darkroom. He moved to Hollywood in 1947 after he sold the film rights to his wildly popular *Naked City* (1945). Although he continued to photograph New York upon his return in 1952, many of his later images of the city and celebrities used distorting techniques achieved by incorporating homemade melted plastics and kaleidoscopic objects.

This exhibition is drawn entirely from the collection of twenty thousand original prints at the International Center of Photography. The Weegee Archive was bequeathed to ICP in 1993 by Wilma Wilcox, Weegee's long-time partner.

Unknown Weegee is organized by guest curator Cynthia Young and is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with essays by the curator and Luc Sante, published by ICP/Steidl.