

# LEISURE & ARTS

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## ... And Two Gallery Shows Of Works by Robert Frank

BY WILLIAM MEYERS

**T**he Robert Mann Gallery has 24 pictures up by Robert Frank (b. 1924), a fraction of the number at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition celebrating his book "The Americans." There is an entire, lengthy chapter in "By-stander: A History of Street Photography" in which Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz discuss the brilliant editing of "The Americans." They analyze the way recurring visual leitmotifs and social themes provide a context in which the 83 individual pictures acquire additional meaning and impact: The images are displayed at the Met in the same sequence as in the

1959 book. The pictures at Mann are naked by comparison, and it is consequently easier to consider each of them as individual works of art.

The pictures date from 1948 to 1962 and include eight that are in "The Americans." The earliest works taken between 1948 and 1951 in New York, Paris and London tend to be static but show the young photographer struggling to absorb the influences that would affect his better work. "Washington Square, NYC, 1948," a picture of a row of people on benches in the snow-covered park, is reminiscent of André Kertész's pictures of the same park, but lacks his stronger sense of design. Two pictures titled "London, 1951," one showing the

### Robert Frank

Robert Mann Gallery  
210 11th Ave.  
Through Jan. 9, 2010

front of a posh hearse and the other an equestrian statue in the fog, suggest ways Bill Brant would deal with issues of class. The first picture that demonstrates an ability to capture a street scene on the fly is "Paris, 1951-52," a sweet picture of a young man holding a tulip behind his back while an older man trudges by smoking his pipe: Is the attractive blonde in the distance the one for whom the tulip is intended? The image puts one in mind of Robert Doisneau, but "Mary and Pablo, Feb. 1952," a picture of Frank's wife nursing his infant son, seems entirely his own. The two random cats, the dramatic natural light, the sprocket holes included in the print are *echt* Frank.

The picture one sees first on entering the Mann Gallery is from "The Americans": "Chicago, 1956," a man on the ledge of a building with upraised arms and clenched fists. He is screaming and has a campaign poster with a portrait of Estes Kefauver, who ran as the Democratic vice-presidential candidate with Adlai Stevenson, on his chest. Against the grid of the windowpanes, and above the placid classical head in the carving below the ledge, he seems either dangerous or loony. In the book (and at the Met) this picture follows two others on political themes, which makes what the man is doing seem less spontaneous, more ritualized. It is evoked later on by a picture of a tuba player wearing an Adlai sticker, by Eisenhower posters, and by other representations of political activity. But this is a very dramatic image in itself, something of a classic because of its inclusion in "The Americans," as is true of the seven other pictures from the book in the show.

We can learn more about "Chicago, 1956" at the Pace/MacGill Gallery, whose exhibition includes eight contact sheets from "The Americans." After being developed, rolls of 35mm film are usually cut into

Pace/MacGill Gallery  
32 E. 57th St., 9th fl.  
Through Dec. 5

strips of five or six frames each so that all 36 pictures can be included in a single contact sheet of 8½ by 11 inches. Since each frame is only 1 by 1½ inches, the photographer ordinarily studies them with a loupe. In preparation for a lecture, Mr. Frank selected strips of negatives, each of which contained an image that was included in "The Americans," and enlarged five or six strips together on sheets that are 20 by 16 inches. The individual frames are large enough to be read with the naked eye. One of these frames is "Chicago, 1956."

**T**he man on the ledge appears in five succeeding frames. In the first two his arms are at his sides, in the third he begins to lift them, the fourth is the picture we know, and in the last the upraised arms are no longer symmetrical. Mr. Frank picked the strongest image, the one in which the action had reached its decisive moment, for the book. The strip with "Elevator—Miami Beach" shows that Mr. Frank moved in closer to the weary elevator operator in successive shots, and then cropped the frame he chose to concentrate the image on her. Other strips reveal similar series, although in several instances there is a single shot of a subject. "Barber shop through screen door—McClellanville, South Carolina" is one of those.

Pace/MacGill also has up all 10 pictures of "From the Bus, New York, 1958," a project whose images are individually less interesting than those of "The Americans," and have no cumulative effect. There are three medium-format works from 1985, 1987 and 1999-2000 that are conceptual in nature, and for all their cleverness are not compelling images.

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