

Weegee's World: Life, Death,
And the Human Drama
Worcester Art Museum
April 5 to June 2

Review by Michael Cochran

Rarely do we have an opportunity to see a lifetime of someone's work who has had such a profound influence on both the worlds of photojournalism and fine art photography. Organized by the International Center of Photography in New York City and drawn from the ICP's extensive Weegee Archive and Collection, the Worcester Art Museum (WAM) has mounted an exciting and sometimes disturbing view into the life and "vision" of an extraordinary New Yorker. With over 100 photographs, "Weegee's World" traces the photographer's career from his earliest work from Acme News Service to his freelance work, later work in Hollywood and the abstract manipulated photography with which he experimented during the last twenty years of his life.

According to Miles Barth, ICP curator of Archives and Collections, and curator of Weegee's World, "Few photographers of his generation could keep up with his pace or stamina for the night after night photographs of corpses. Covering four to six separate stories in one night, he was relentless and sometimes ruthless when it came to getting his photographs, often making over one hundred dollars a week, which during the last years of the Great Depression, was considerable." However, the exhibition is not gory. Police photos were only a small aspect of his enormous oeuvre. Weegee divided his own work into categories: Fires, Entertainment, Police The Bowery, Harlem, Wartime, Sammy's, Coney Island, and Times Square, as well as Personalities and Distortions.

As an immigrant himself, Weegee understood the difficulties of tenement dwellers and he photographed them with empathy and compassion. Born in the Ukraine, he moved with his family to the Lower East Side in 1910. He left school at the age of 14 to help support his family, working at various odd jobs, including photographing children in the park on a rented pony. In 1917 he worked as a cameraman's assistant which led to his employment at The New York Times as a darkroom technician. His colleagues nicknamed him, "Squeegee Boy" as he was constantly wiping dry hundreds of rolls of negatives each day. Later he changed his nickname to Weegee due to his self-proclaimed "psychic" ability to be at a crime/news scene before the arrival of the police. His darkroom skills got him a position at the Acme News Service (which later became United Press International) where he began filling in photographic assignments when other staff photographers were unavailable.

He converted his 1938 Chevy into a makeshift office, filling the trunk with film and flashbulbs. With one of the first civilian police radios in his car, he drove the New York streets late into the night in his characteristic rumpled suit and cheap cigar hung permanently from his mouth. With his photos, he revealed the inequities and contrasts in New York's society with faces of anguish and grief and many times joy and elation, always capturing his subjects at peak emotional moments. His style helped invent the "gazette" look with its emphasis on urgency, spectacle and voyeurism. Weegee once wrote, "I caught the New Yorkers with their masks off... not afraid to laugh, cry or make love. What I felt I photographed, laughing and crying with them."

After a brief stint in Hollywood where he explored a career as an actor, he returned to his beloved New York where he spent his final years experimenting with kaleidoscopic lenses and mirrors creating manipulated and distorted images. In his lifetime he compiled a unique and compelling body of work and the Worcester Art Museum has an excellent sampling of his archive. Included in the exhibit are also two very informative and entertaining ten minute films titled, "Weegee's Life and Art" and "Weegee in Hollywood" in which he is the narrator.

This is a vast exhibition in scale and content. Each image is compelling and filled with emotion and viewers should allow enough time to fully absorb the nuances of the subject matter. As Weegee stated, "In shooting these pictures, I had also photographed the soul of the city I knew and loved."