

AMERICAN CONNECTION

Obsessed with the vast landscapes of the American West, **Ingeborg Gerdes** dedicated half a century to documenting it through the eyes of a foreigner. Susan Burnstine celebrates her unique body of work.



Untitled (Boombox, Mission District, 1993)



Untitled (Couple, Mission District, 1984)

Ingeborg Gerdes was a rare talent who has been described as a 'trend setter, rule breaker and rebel', as she was the first person ever to earn an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1970. She was also exhibited at SFMOMA only five years later. Notably, she had a distinct singular perspective of America and Americans and she displayed the unique ability to capture memorable narratives of American oddities, irregularities and everyday incredulities integrated with both heart and humanity.

This past June, Ann Jastrab, executive director of the Center for Photographic Art (CPA) in Carmel, California, curated an exceptional retrospective exhibit of Gerdes' work from a remarkable career that spanned 50 years. Jastrab first became

acquainted with her work in 2008, when she was the director of Rayko Photo Center. After their initial meeting, a close friendship formed which continued until her death at the age of 81 in June 2020.

While Gerdes was not considered a household name, she earned two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, had countless international solo exhibitions and inspired a generation of students and peers, teaching at UC Santa Cruz for over 25 years. The first time Jastrab exhibited Gerdes' work was when the San Francisco Arts Commission invited her to curate a year-long exhibit titled *Westward*, featuring women photographers in its City Hall exhibition space from May 2018 to May 2019. 'Ingeborg told me that when she first encountered

the Western landscape, she fell in love. It was like no place she'd ever seen and she became obsessed with it,' she says. 'When she wasn't teaching or travelling back to Germany, she was driving around the West and documenting it like no one else could. I think that's the gift of being a foreigner: she could see our country through a different lens.'

Jastrab also included Gerdes' work in multiple shows at Scott Nichols Gallery in San Francisco, where she was gallery manager before moving to the CPA in 2019. During that period, Jastrab visited Gerdes at her home, viewed countless boxes of her stunning silver prints and realised she had to do a retrospective show of her work.

In the spring of 2020, Jastrab was invited to curate a show at

the Veteran's Memorial Gallery through the San Francisco Arts Commission in 2021. She immediately told Gerdes that it would be the ideal time for her retrospective and they began to curate selections from every collection in her massive international archive. They continued to meet and curate their work, but when the pandemic hit galleries and museums closed and everyday life was put on hold. 'Ingeborg still sent me more files via WeTransfer, I'd edit, send back. Spring turned into summer. She told me she felt like she was running out of time. I said, "Nonsense, you just turned 81. You've got a few decades left. We'll do this." She passed away in her sleep three weeks later.'

Jastrab knew they could not wait for the Veteran's Memorial Gallery to reopen to honour



Truck Repair, Ovando, Montana, 1996

Gerdes and since the CPA had resumed exhibitions, she arranged for a show to open on the one-year anniversary of her passing in June of 2021. When considering the wide breadth of work Gerdes created, she had to make some difficult decisions to curate a smaller collection for the space and opted to focus on work made in California and the West. 'This is how the show at CPA became *Out West*, a story in pictures about the part of the United States that she

loved the most. The series that we included were *San Francisco in the 70s*, *Out West Across the Basin*, *Out West in Color*, *Eastern Washington*, *Mission District*, and *Autobiography*. Many of the pictures in the show were ones that Ingeborg and I selected.'

With assistance from Owen Gump, a friend and artist colleague of Gerdes's now managing her archive, Jastrab was able to gather all the vintage and contemporary prints exhibited at the CPA. The show

then travelled to the Blue Sky Gallery in Portland, Oregon, for an exhibit in August 2021. This work will be placed in the Special Collections of the McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where her archives are housed. And early next month Gerdes has an exhibition slated to open at the Museum für Photographie Braunschweig, curated by Barbara Hofman-Johnson.

▣ ingeborggerdes.com

▣ photography.org



Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, 1974-5

EXHIBITIONS USA

BROOKLYN

Klompching Gallery

From 15 September to 30 October

Fresh 2021

▣ klompching.com

CHICAGO

Getty Center

Until 10 October

In Focus: Protest

▣ getty.edu

COLLINGSWOOD

Big Day Film Collective

From 1 November to 18 December

Joe Clementi: NYC 1970s-1990s

▣ bigdayfilmcollective.com

NEW YORK CITY

Catherine Edelman Gallery

From 17 September to 4 December

Lea Lund & Erik K

▣ edelmangallery.com

ClampArt

From 17 September to 30 October

Mikael Owunna: Cosmologies

▣ clampart.com

Museum of Contemporary Photography

From 10 September to

20 February 2022

American Epidemic:

Guns in the United States

▣ mcp.org

RICHMOND

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

From 25 September

to 2 January 2022

Ansel Adams: Compositions in Nature

▣ vmfa.museum

SANTA BARBARA

Santa Barbara Museum of Art

Until 5 December

Inge Morath

▣ sbma.net

STANFORD

Stanford Libraries

Until 29 March 2022

Exquisite Reality: Photography and the
Invention of Nationhood, 1851-1900

▣ events.stanford.edu