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SFMOMA PRESENTS HENRY WESSEL: PHOTOGRAPHS

From January 27 through April 22, 2007, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present the exhibition *Henry Wessel: Photographs*. Organized by Corey Keller, associate curator of photography at SFMOMA, the exhibition provides a retrospective look at the career of Henry Wessel, one of California's most original photographers.

For nearly 30 years, Bay Area photographer Wessel has observed and documented the brilliant light, vernacular architecture, and social landscape of California. Wessel first gained critical attention in the 1970s as part of a generation of young photographers who questioned and expanded two seemingly fixed categories of photography: landscape and documentary. Since that time, he has continued to draw his inspiration from the aesthetics of the everyday, turning the least monumental of subjects—traffic lights, advertisements, and suburban homes, among others—into a kind of personal poetry. His keen-eyed observations share the spontaneity and honesty of snapshots, inflected with Wessel's own brand of wry humor.

Henry Wessel: Photographs features approximately 80 black-and-white and color photographs, spanning Wessel's entire career and including several early works never before exhibited.

Says Keller, "Henry Wessel has been a key member of the Bay Area photography community—not only as an artist, but also as a teacher—since his arrival here three decades ago. I am thrilled to be able to present this long overdue look at his remarkable career. It also makes me happy to be able to honor our local talent; though Wessel is an internationally recognized artist, we are proud to claim him as our own."

Henry Wessel was born in 1942 and raised in Ridgefield Park, New Jersey. He attended Pennsylvania State University and graduated in 1966 with a BA in psychology. While still a student, he started using a Leica camera that belonged to his girlfriend's brother. He became fascinated by what the camera could do and began to look more closely at photography. At the bookstore where he worked he came across *The Photographer's Eye*, the catalogue for a show organized by John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the pictures in it led Wessel to seek out



Henry Wessel, *San Francisco, California*, 1973; Collection SFMOMA, gift of Maggie Keating; © Henry Wessel

the work of such photographers as Eugene Atget, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Wright Morris, and Garry Winogrand. His new interest led Wessel to give up the professional pursuit of psychology and to open a commercial photography studio.

In 1967 Wessel began to travel around the country taking pictures, and in 1968 he went to New York to show some of his work to Szarkowski, whose encouragement and advice were instrumental in helping Wessel to develop his own vision as a photographer. He went on to pursue more formal training at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. In 1971 Wessel received a grant from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation to document the “U.S. highways and the adjacent landscape,” which enabled him to spend another nomadic year photographing around the country. When Szarkowski saw Wessel’s Guggenheim pictures, he suggested a presentation at MoMA in 1972—Wessel’s first solo exhibition. Wessel discovered that the best of his Guggenheim pictures were made in California and New Mexico, and decided to relocate to California permanently. He loved the West Coast’s light and climate, which afforded him the opportunity to photograph every day.

In 1975 Wessel was included in an important exhibition at George Eastman House, *New Topographics*. The exhibition brought together nine photographers whose work addressed the concept of landscape photography: not the pristine landscapes of Ansel Adams, but straightforward and unflinching depictions of the built environment. Moreover, the photographers in this exhibition embraced a seemingly styleless, uninflected mode of description—a vision that had more in common with real-estate pictures than with art and that helped to open a critical dialogue about the definition of documentary photography.

The twin themes explored in this exhibition in many ways informed the sustained and private inquiry that has occupied Wessel for the last 30 years. His deadpan explorations of American car culture, and of Northern and Southern California suburbia are also sophisticated compositional plays on the relationship between subject and void. In his earlier work, Wessel often organized his pictures around a central element—a sign, a pole, a tree trunk—to clarify the layering of other things, such as fences, lawns, and sidewalk clutter. In later pictures, he shifted his focus to the emptiness itself. His 1970 series of photographs taken in the Inglewood section of Los Angeles, near the airport, for example, employed descending airplanes to organize the vast empty spaces of parking lots and telephone wires. In the mid-1970s he began to organize his pictures more traditionally, putting his subjects in the center, much like a portrait—though his subjects were modest houses, odd-looking or dead trees, or manicured shrubs. This kind of “portrait” relates to portraits Wessel took of the backs of people: a man in a suit standing on the beach and looking at the sea (*San Francisco, California, 1973*), or a woman who has just emerged from a pool; these were a kind of abstracted portrait open to investigation. As in his pictures of open lands, the unoccupied space in his compositions serves less as critique than statement of fact. In the 1990s he began working in color, making pictures of nondescript suburban homes and shooting from his car parked in the middle of the street to ensure a straight-on view of his subject. Most recently, he has undertaken a series on the artificial interiors of Las Vegas.

Wessel lives in Point Richmond, California, east of San Francisco, and is resident faculty at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Simultaneous with SFMOMA's presentation of *Henry Wessel: Photographs*, Steidl will publish a monograph entitled *Henry Wessel*, a 211-page volume featuring 133 plates and an essay by Sandra S. Phillips, senior curator of photography at SFMOMA.

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Museum hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:45 p.m. Summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day): Open at 10 a.m. Closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: New Year's Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas. The Museum is open the Wednesday between Christmas and New Year's Day.

Koret Visitor Education Center: Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:30 p.m. Summer hours: Open at 10 a.m.

Admission prices: Adults \$12.50; seniors \$8; students \$7. SFMOMA members and children 12 and under are admitted free. Thursday evenings after 6 p.m. admission is half-price. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by Muni, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans, and Caltrain. Hourly, daily, and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415.348.0971.

Visit our Web site at www.sfmoma.org or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is supported by a broad array of contributors who are committed to helping advance its mission as a dynamic center for modern and contemporary art. Major annual support is provided by the Koret Foundation Funds, Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, and Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund. KidstART free admission for children 12 and under is made possible by Charles Schwab & Co. Inc. Thursday evening half-price admission is sponsored by Banana Republic.

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