

REVIEWS

The workhouse views

Milton Rogovin/Working People

at the Charles Burchfield Center, Buffalo State University College, Buffalo, N.Y.
Dec. 5, 1982-Jan. 30, 1983

and the Braithwaite Fine Arts Gallery, Southern State Utah College, Cedar City, Utah
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A DISPLAY OF paired photographs and several sets of three, "Working People" shows heavy industry workers in Buffalo, Philadelphia, and West Virginia on the job and at home. In each setting the workers face the camera and the pose is formal but casual. The photos taken at workers' homes are rich in the background details of furniture and decor and often include the workers' families. These pictures reveal a great deal about the workers' private worlds, yet the photos seem strictly documentary. From the subjects' relaxed, matter-of-fact attitudes one can infer that Rogovin contrived nothing about subject or background, but merely asked the subject to pose comfortably.

As a way of gaining acceptance by a community of subjects, Rogovin makes a practice of giving people he photographs copies of their portraits. Workers have told him that they are grateful for a picture showing them on the job. In some cases this has given other family members—who have never seen them in their workplace and who may not have realized the difficulty and danger of their working conditions—a chance to witness the impressive shower of sparks, multi-ton cranes, or solid rock walls of subterranean coal mines. More than just gaining acceptance or ingratiating himself, though Rogovin gives them their portraits as a way of saying and showing that they are the subjects—not the photographic objects—of his art.

The work proceeds from a simple and straightforward documentary aesthetic committed to humanitarian concerns and respect for the working class. The primary purpose is documenting that class without comment. Two earlier photographic series by Rogovin dealt with storefront churches in Buffalo and the Black, Puerto Rican, and Native American residents of a six-block area of Buffalo's Lower West Side, one of the city's poorest sections. As in "Working People," the informing aesthetic in these—the absence of an ironic attitude on the part of the photographer

toward his subjects and his refusal to employ verbal commentary—enabled Rogovin to enter worlds to which he might otherwise have been denied access. In the earlier work as in the latest series, the photographs are alive with an awareness of social class and copious details which indicate particular tastes and values without condescension. For Rogovin, the basic point has consistently been the inherent dignity of the subjects conveyed through a fundamental attitude of dignity in the photographer.

Rogovin has been working on the "Work-

Rogovin got permission to photograph in factories and began taking pictures of people at work, but he changed his concept of the project when he saw a magazine photo of a man feeding ducks. The caption identified him as a steelworker. That inspired the double portraits.

As his predecessor, Rogovin cites August Sander, the photographer who attempted to catalogue human types in the '20s and '30s. The main difference between the two is that Rogovin is cataloguing individuals, not types, as representatives of socio-economic

individual values, outlook, and vision. In one picture of a factory worker at home we notice a collection of pictures of Jesus on one wall, maybe not before we look at the gaunt, middle-aged man in front of them but certainly before we look *carefully* at him and see the haggard, mystic, visionary cast in his face and eyes. It's the same as in his factory portrait, but without the living room photo we might have missed the full significance of his face in the factory.

More general contrasts in the diptychs include such things as industrial scale of the work environment versus human scale at home, and community at home versus anonymity and isolation in the workplace. But even these obvious contrasts aren't so simple. The over-elegant, overabundant furniture and decorations in some of the homes make the vigorous workers seem out of their element, subdued, caged. Ironically, though furnishings and decor are meant to suggest an identity, as mass production items they bring industrialism into the home and thus reinforce anonymity. As for the evident isolation, there's artistic selection involved. Posing the workers alone, against their workplace background but out of the context of their actual work activity and relationship with fellow workers, makes them seem more isolated than they may in fact be. (The third photo in the occasional triptychs shows the worker actually working.) Perhaps the most significant contrast is an implied one—between workers at home as property owners, and workers as themselves property of the factory or industry which employs them. But in some cases—because of the ambiguous effect of the visible contrasts—the workers seem more capable, more in control, in the work setting than in their homes.

Two features that undercut the documentary character of the series, however, are the absence of captions and the fact that so many of the pictures are taciturn, with minimal individualizing detail. The information added by the fact of dual photos to some extent substitutes for a verbal context. But at times, something other than a documentary principle seems to take over—social critique of the industrial system for creating and sustaining such radical dualism. It's as if the polemical concept justified skipping details. Concepts are never quite enough, however.

A sad irony of these pictures is that they're already historical. Many of the workers depicted are now unemployed. The Buffalo-area factories where most of the photos were taken—Republic Steel, Bethlehem Steel, the Hanna Furnace Company, etc.—are now closed or almost closed. A bleak economic future was visible when the pictures were taken, and no doubt colored the images. The older workers have an air of tired resignation, the younger an air of defiance. The difference in attitudes has a parallel in the younger workers' greater reliance on visible symbols—expensive homes, furniture, and clothing—to challenge and defy social categories. It seems as futile as trying to defy economic depression.



Two diptychs from "Working People," by Milton Rogovin.

ing People" series during the past four years. After finishing the Lower West Side project, he got the idea for it from Bertolt Brecht's poem "A Worker Reads History":

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?
And Babylon, so many times destroyed,
Who built the city up each time?

... Young Alexander conquered India.
He alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Was there not even a cook in his army?

... Each page a victory.
At whose expense the victory ball?
Every ten years a great man,
Who paid the piper?

categories. Indeed, in the U.S. in recent decades, socio-economic categories are not readily discernible from appearances. That is overalls don't necessarily indicate a worker; fancy duds don't necessarily clothe a person of leisure. Thus the utility of Rogovin's comparative settings. Though Rogovin may not comment on the people he photographs, the series is also in the social commentary tradition of Lewis Hine's industrial labor photos. His title "Working People" explicitly recalls Hine's "Men at Work," without the gender reference. And necessarily so—Rogovin depicts both men and women in the most grueling industrial jobs.

With great variations between subjects, the photographic diptychs are often filled with correspondences and contrasts that reveal