

IMAGES OF THE 1930s



"First Communion" New York, 1937

BY NATHAN LERNER



"Sleeping Man" San Francisco, 1936

The images reproduced here were all made in the 1930s, and I have been asked to write about some of my memories of this time. But it is difficult to reflect back to this time without comparing it with the present. Looking back, I am struck by two conditions that I believe have special meaning for the photographer.

I am conscious that more than just time has passed. There seems to have evolved over time an invisible membrane around people that isolates them from each other. It seems evident that a humanistic quality involving feelings for others has greatly diminished.

This growing away from social feeling to self centered concerns, has culminated in a "I am No. 1" attitude.

It is interesting to compare this to a time when such an attitude would have been scorned, when there still existed the feeling that each person had a responsibility for others. The rigors of the economic depression in America in the 1930s ravaged millions both physically and spiritually. Few were spared some kind of involvement



"City Forms" San Francisco, 1936

either as sufferers or witnesses. Awareness and compassion for this suffering were visible everywhere.

In the Farm Administration Program under Paul Stryker's leadership, photographers ranged the country producing images of an America suffering and in despair. The now famous photographs by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and many others, remain important and lasting because they are deeply and honestly felt. I hope that my photographs reproduced here show some of the concern and an awareness for the conditions of the times.

What I felt was the enervating sense of hopelessness . . . of men standing around, aimlessly waiting . . . often sleeping to forget. The pride of a poor immigrant father guiding his child to the rapture of a first communion . . . The dark isolation of a fractured swimmer in water . . . and a bitter-sweet hope looking at the children of an emerging society.

The other change, I see, is deeper, having to do with an increasing acceptance of a condition over which we seem to have little control. It involves being a spectator of life

instead of living it, which has a relationship not only to our loss of feeling for others, but has resulted in a loss of feeling in ourselves.

It is interesting to speculate how this is happening and its relationship to the photographer.

In our time everything is prepared for us. We live in an age of convenience. We are bathed daily with the convenience of ready-made things. Ready-made foods, drinks, clothes . . . everything. Unfortunately, especially since the advent of T.V., it also includes ready-made images and ready-made opinions. Images by the thousands. We are not given the time to study an image, to involve ourselves, and to ask ourselves what does this mean to me. How can we react emotionally to something that we see momentarily and then it is gone? And what images they are! We are shown shocking images of birth, death, pain, love, sex, each following the other relentlessly, without pause, without any control by us. How can we have any feeling for these images? Except finally, boredom, indifference, and apathy. A pin prick of our finger



"Children on Ford" Maxwell Street, Chicago, 1936

causes us more pain than watching a replay of a bombed village. We have finally slipped into the convenience of substituting words and images for the real world of personal experience.

What has this to do with creative photography? Everything. As in the Farm Administration work mentioned before, photographs of importance were made by people who responded to the real world with real feeling. A creative image is not only what the photographer looks at, but what he sees, and what he himself thinks about what he sees.

We all have special areas that move us deeply. It may be a special feeling for nature, the pathos of a slum area, the intoxication of a market place, or watching how light magically changes our world. These feelings are deeply personal. How can we pluck a convenient image from a memory bank of synthetic T.V. postcards, to use as a model for expressing how we feel?

The camera is a remarkable instrument. But it is only an instrument. It cannot feel, think, or make decisions. The camera, like the pen, clay, or paint, waits for someone



"Men against Wall" Maxwell Street, Chicago, 1936

to use it, to give it form, and to say something with it.

These decisions must be made by you, and you alone. But if your mind is neatly stacked with already formulated images, you will tend to use these images, instead of expressing yourself in a personal way. Later, you ruefully wonder why the image does not evoke the strong feelings you had when you made it.

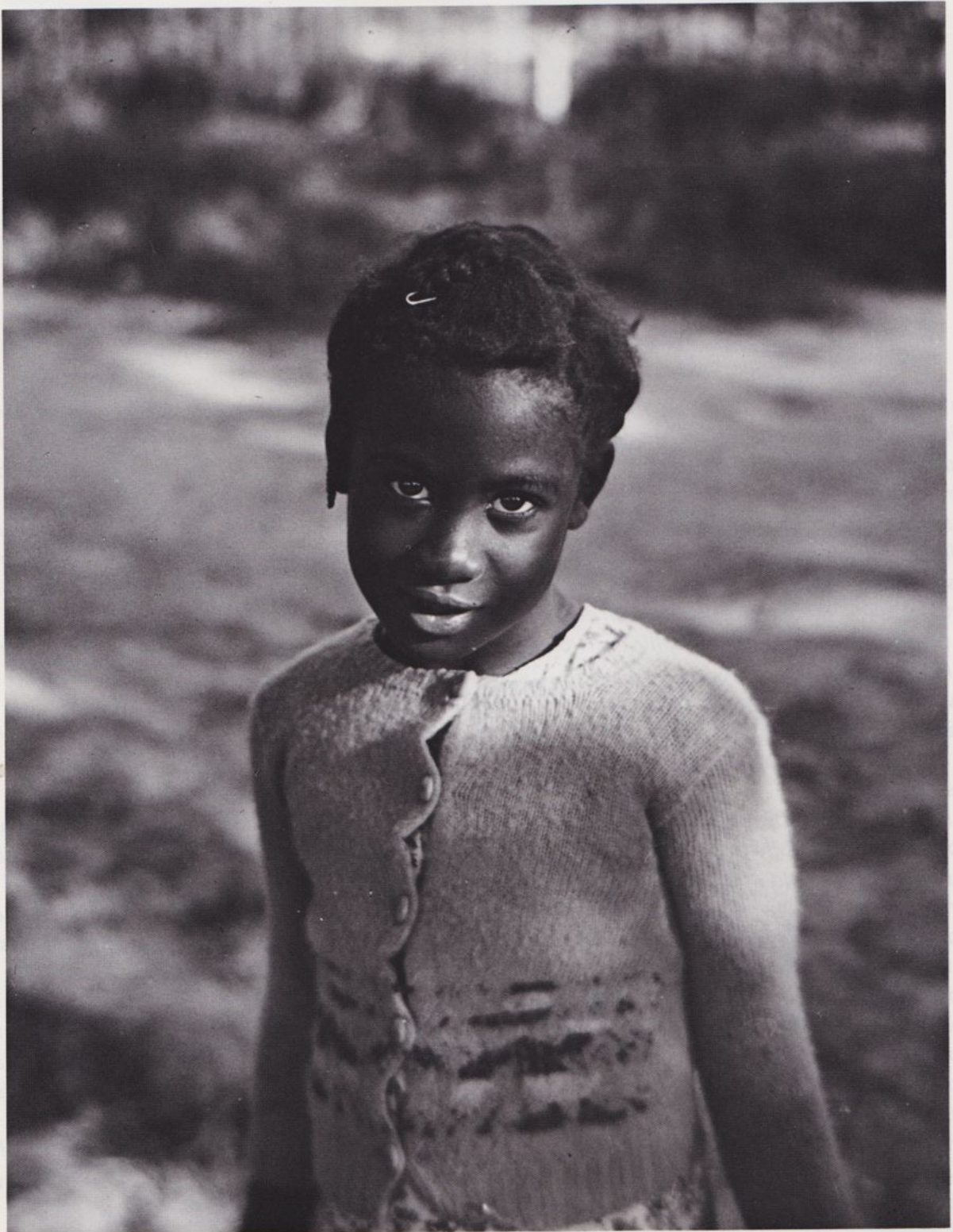
What then can the photographer do? I believe he must try to recognize his problem for what it is. The tendency to be seduced into making conforming images.

I know it is easy to say, 'see and think for yourself', but there seems to be no other course. Just as there has never been a choice for the serious artist in any medium. Showing society what it looks like is not a gift the artist bestows on society. It is an obligation he fulfills.

You, the photographer, try to see as deeply and clearly and without influence as you can. What you see and the feelings you express must be of your own world. Express your own feelings and ideas. There is an artist in all of us. Set him free.



"Blind Musician" Maxwell Street, Chicago, 1936



"Beautiful Girl" Maxwell Street, Chicago, 1937