



International
Center of
Photography

The International Center of Photography Presents
American Job: 1940-2011

The International Center of Photography | 84 Ludlow Street, New York
On View January 23-May 5, 2025
Opening January 23, 5-8PM



Mickey Pallas, *Sugar Striker, Reserve, Louisiana*, 1955. International Center of Photography, Gift of Mickey Pallas, 1987 (601.1987)
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The International Center of Photography (ICP) is pleased to announce *American Job: 1940-2011*, curated by guest curator **Makeda Best**, photography historian and Deputy Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Oakland Museum of California.

Drawing from works by more than 40 photographers in the ICP collection, with the addition of exhibition prints from contemporary photographers, *American Job: 1940-2011* highlights the collection's breadth and contemporary relevance by surveying the photographic response to labor organizing and strike activity; race and gender discrimination in labor; organized labor's role in politics; labor and activism and the intersection of labor and the social changes wrought by the economic restructurings of the twentieth century.

Organized chronologically in five sections, the exhibition explores the transformation of work in America and with it the rise of activism and new forms of solidarity in pursuit of humane working conditions and economic equity. Included are over 130 photographs, along with photobooks and a wide range of ephemera that underscore text and image based storytelling. *American Job: 1940-2011* introduces lesser-known images from the ICP collection, provides new contexts for celebrated bodies of work, illustrates the contributions of professional photojournalists and community-based documentarians to the historical record of the twentieth century and demonstrates the breadth of ICP's collecting of works from across the country.

Makeda Best, Deputy Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Oakland Museum of California stated, "For the first time, *American Job: 1940-2011* brings together a significant strain of ICP collecting, foregrounding the connection between labor and human rights and presenting a dynamic perspective on the role of labor in American documentary photography."

Beginning with photography's ongoing engagement with both trade union and strike activity in the 1940s and 1950s, the first section includes photographs by, among others, Arnold Eagle, Otto Hagel, W. Eugene Smith and Todd Webb. As the American economy boomed in the immediate post-war period, a fast-changing society complicated labor's connections to politics and media, as seen in images by Cornell Capa, Robert Frank, Danny Lyon and Bill Wood. This section reaches its conclusion in its exploration of the connections between labor and the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s through the photographs of Gordon Parks, Dan Weiner, Charles Moore and more.

The following section, featuring photographs by Bettye Lane, Freda Leinwand, Susan Meiselas and Sophie Rivera, is centered around the mass entry of women into the workforce in the 1970s. Driven by the confluence of economic necessity with the evolution of social norms and the activism that helped bring about that very evolution, the photographs attest to the visible role that women played in organizing and fighting for labor equality. A special emphasis on photobooks and ephemera from this period demonstrates photography's contribution to discussions around and advocacy for occupational health through photographs and ephemera by Earl Dotter, Builder Levy and Ken Light.

The exhibition then focuses on the expansion of the country's collective understanding of work in response to the rise of 'service' labor of the 1970s and 1980s. Photographs by Per Brandin and Barabara Norfleet broadly interpret this new sector of the labor force, highlighting people at work in restaurants, corporate jobs, factories and civil service, with each example introducing a new context for future activism and organizing.

Moving into the 1990s, photographers such as Chien-Chi Chang, Joseph Rodriguez and Dylan Vitone show us the broader social consequences that occur when large numbers of unemployed and underemployed people are concentrated in specific communities. In contrast to previous sections that emphasized work as a catalyst for personal and collective action, these photographs document the destabilizing effects of the absence of work.

Featuring exhibition prints from Accra Shepp, the final section brings the exhibition into the recent past with a specific focus on the long shadow cast by the financial crash of 2008. Photographs from the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement show protests in response to the economic crisis and the resulting unemployment faced by millions of Americans. The collective struggle in these photographs underlines the narrative thread in *American Job: 1940-2011* and reminds viewers that work, who does it and under what conditions has always been—and will continue to be—the source of both conversation and contestation.

For more information, visit icp.org.

About Makeda Best

Makeda Best is an award-winning curator and scholar specializing in American photography. Her previous exhibitions include *Please Stay Home: Darrel Ellis in Conversation with Leslie Hewitt and Wardell Milan* and *Time is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin's America* (Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University); and *Devour the Land: War and American Landscape Photography Since 1970* (Harvard Art Museums). Her most recent curatorial project was *Framing Freedom: The Harriet Hayden Albums*, exhibited at the Boston Athenaeum in 2024. With Kevin Moore, she curated the 2022 FotoFocus Biennial exhibition *On the Line: Documents of Risk and Faith*. She has contributed to numerous exhibition catalogs, writing on topics ranging from vernacular soldier photography and Ben Shahn's images of small-town commercial districts to Imogen Cunningham, Bettye Saar, environmental photobooks and photography and the Black Arts Movement. Her scholarly writing includes *Elevate the Masses: Alexander Gardner, Photography and Democracy in 19th Century America* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020). She lives in the Bay Area, where she oversees the curatorial, collections management and production departments in her capacity as Deputy Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Oakland Museum of California, in addition to working on her book projects. She holds a PhD from Harvard University and an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in Studio Photography.

Exhibition Support

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About The International Center of Photography

The International Center of Photography (ICP) is the world's leading institution dedicated to photography and visual culture. Cornell Capa founded ICP in 1974 to champion “concerned photography”—socially and politically minded images that can educate and change the world. Through exhibitions, education programs, community outreach, and public programs, ICP offers an open forum for dialogue about the power of the image. Since its inception, ICP has presented more than 700 exhibitions, provided thousands of classes, and hosted a wide variety of public programs. ICP launched its new integrated center at 84 Ludlow Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side in January 2020. ICP pays respect to the original stewards of this land, the Lenape people, and other Indigenous communities. Visit icp.org to learn more about the museum and its programs.

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