

Finding Vivian Maier: A brief comment ...

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Finding Vivian Maier is opening in New York City, Los Angeles, Toronto and Montreal on March 28, and will open in other theaters across North America over the next four to six weeks. We wrote briefly on this intriguing documentary about American “street photographer” Vivian Maier at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival.

The subject of *Finding Vivian Maier* is a fascinating one, which has aroused a great deal of public interest in recent years. When this documentary, co-directed by Charlie Siskel and John Maloof, makes its way into the movie theaters we will probably have more to say about it.

The story in brief is this: in 2007 Maloof, engaged in writing a book about his Chicago neighborhood, bought a box full of negatives. He was struck by the images and began to investigate the woman who took them, Vivian Maier. More than 100,000 photographs packed away in storage lockers and such eventually came to light, along with Super 8 film footage. (See: “Vivian Maier Photographe”)

Maier (1926-2009) has come to be recognized as a remarkable artist, specializing in what is condescendingly referred to as “street photography.” Someone in the film notes that “she identified with the poor.” Certainly she took many photos of the marginalized, sometimes the down and out.

Maier worked as a nanny for upper middle class families (including, at one point, for talk show host Phil Donahue) for several decades. Various members of the families for whom she worked are interviewed in the film.

The big question, which has aroused the public’s natural curiosity, is why did she never show her photographs? The filmmakers do not offer an answer, other than that she seemed to have suffered from some psychological trauma that set her off from other people.

Maier, at times, used an alias and was known to tell people “I’m sort of a spy” and “I’m the mystery woman.”

Aside from personal difficulties, is it possible that historical and social influences also played a role in Maier’s seclusion and artistic self-suppression? One obviously has no idea, but it is at least suggestive that someone with her apparent social perceptiveness and sensitivity began to take photos in the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War and anti-communist hysteria, and chose to keep them hidden.



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