

# The Seattle Times

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## An amateur photographer's compelling life's work

A review of the first Seattle show of photos by Chicago housekeeper-turned-photographer Vivian Maier, at Photo Center NW through March 23, 2013.

By [Gayle Clemans](#)

Special to *The Seattle Times*

When Vivian Maier died in 2009, she left behind boxes and boxes of prints, negatives, and undeveloped film. During one of her most productive periods, from the 1950s through the 1970s, she took photographs almost every day, capturing the intricacies of everyday life in the neighborhoods of Chicago, where she worked as nanny and housekeeper.

It's unknown whether she showed her photographs to anyone. Certainly, no one could have predicted that her work would become so well-known and respected shortly after her death.

Two very different Chicago-based collectors have been key figures in the discovery and promotion of Maier's work: John Maloof, an entrepreneur who unknowingly bought her work and came to admire it, and Jeffrey Goldstein, who had heard rumors of a talented amateur street photographer and sought out her images.

In 2007, Maloof purchased a box of her negatives at a storage-locker auction. Apparently, Maier had been unable to make payments and the contents had been seized.

Goldstein has been buying her work from other collectors since 2010 and now owns about 19,000 negatives, 1,000 prints, 30 homemade movies and numerous slides.

Maier's images and story, broadcast on the Internet by Maloof and others, have piqued interest around the world. Her reputation as an artist has been rapidly bolstered through two books and multiple exhibitions, including the current show at Photo Center NW, which features images from Goldstein's collection.

These photographs were printed recently, after Maier's death, prompting questions about intention, originality, and the distinction between personal expression and public display. Goldstein and skilled technicians have produced beautiful, 12 x 12 inch silver gelatin images that are true to the original negatives and the printing processes of their time. However, it's unknown what Maier's intentions for her negatives and undeveloped film were. It's unknown if or how she would have chosen to print or exhibit her work.

Still, the photographs have been released into the world and I, for one, have been moved by many of them. These are compelling images.

Maier chose everyday scenes that are simple and familiar, but also deeply evocative of narratives and moods. For years, she used a Rolleiflex twin-lens reflex camera, creating complex compositions and highlighting sharp details which underscore the drama of daily life.

Her acquaintances and the families for whom she worked (she seemed to have no close family or friends) spoke of her eccentricity and the omnipresence of her camera. Her subject matter — people going about their business, self-portraits, shop windows — suggests that the camera was her vehicle for framing and perceiving.

The exhibition is organized around themes taken from the book "Vivian Maier: Out of the Shadows" by Richard Cahan and Michael Williams. We see photographs taken at the beach, at night, or on Chicago's Maxwell Street, straightforward groupings of time and place that emphasize her presence behind the camera. You can just imagine her walking around, looking, framing and taking photographs.

She was immersed in these scenes, close to the action, but detached, too, partially hidden behind a trash can or someone's legs. Even her self-portraits are deflected, refracted. She is seen through a shadow or reflection or her eyes don't meet the camera.

It is possible that Maier simply — and tragically — did not have the means to create prints, as her living circumstances toward the end of her life would suggest. Or was observation more important than documentation? She witnessed life through the lens and now we can see her unique perspective.

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PHOTOS BY VIVIAN MAIER PHOTOS /COURTESY OF PHOTO CENTER NW AND JEFFREY GOLDSTEIN COLLECTION

A beach scene captured in a photograph by Vivian Maier.

### EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Vivian Maier: Out of the Shadows'

11 a.m.-10 p.m., Mondays-Thursdays; noon- 8 p.m. Fridays-Sundays through March 23, Photo Center NW, 900 12th Ave., Seattle (206-720-7222 or [www.pcnw.org](http://www.pcnw.org)).

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