BOOK REVIEW

Lee Friedlander, *The New Cars 1964*. San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2011.

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For over fifty years Lee Friedlander has been among the leading photographic artists. Best known as a member of the generation of New York street photographers of the 1950s and 1960s, much of the work for which he first made his reputation of a handheld 35mm camera to probe the dynamic urban world that had emerged in the years after the Second World War.

From the start, however, Friedlander's style was quite distinctive. Whereas some of the photographers working within this milieu adopted an aesthetic that emphasized spontaneous response to that environment, Friedlander's work, although not lacking a sense of spontaneity, tended to be more formal, more considered, and even more explicitly intellectual in its concerns than that of his contemporaries. For example, a 1963 print from New York's Museum of Modern Art extensive collection of over 300 Friedlander prints uses the windows facing a storefront doorway to vertically split an image in two, the left half portraying a woman walking down the street staring into the camera while the right portrays her reflection in reverse symmetry. This symmetry, which is also carried by the background street, is, however, disrupted by a mannequin head, seen in profile, that is placed in the store display depicted on the right, a sideward 'gaze' contrasting to the turn of the head of the passing woman. While certainly the sort of chance urban encounter favored by many street photographers, there is something calculated, almost puzzle-like about this image that contrasts with the sense of reality grasped on the fly that was favored by a number of his contemporaries. (http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=50609).

Friedlander, in any event, was never entirely a street photographer and throughout his career he has applied his fertile visual intelligence to any number of extensive projects, which form the basis of his many books: these projects self-portraits using shadows and reflections, televisions in motel rooms, public monuments, landscapes, store windows, cityscape, architecture, portraits, nudes, letters, among others. While engaged in these personal projects, Friedlander also took on a number of commercial assignments, most notably making use of his deep interest in music in taking photographs of musicians, often uncharacteristically in color, for use as album cover art.

The New Cars 1964 was a product of such an assignment. Fashion magazines, particular *Harper's Bazaar* under the art directorship of Alexy Brodovitch, played a surprising role in the development of the experimental street photography aesthetic that formed one basis of Friedlander's work. The interest in experimental art continued with stylized illustrations of the year's new model cars by Andy Warhol, just then emerging as a

leader of the pop art exhibition. In 1964, art director turned to Friedlander for the next year's innovative automotive photo spread, providing the photographer free access to the automobiles and allowing him to approach the subject as he saw fit. With his extraordinary interest in glamour, Warhol was a natural candidate for a feature article that spotlit a centrally symbolic product of this still optimistic era. Whereas Friedlander produced album cover photographs that were extraordinary yet remained within the conventions of the genre, he kept to the style of his personal photography in this one, showing the cars, often in the background or compositionally fragmented, in a decidedly unglamorous manner, putting, as he said, the cars "out in the world, instead of on a pedestal". Almost inevitably, the editor-in-chief of the magazine rejected this concept and the photographs were stored away by Friedlander are first being publicly seen in this book and its associated exhibit.

In a way, the lapse of nearly a half-century provides an interesting perspective on the photographs and the objects they depict. Just reading the names of the car models included – "Marauder", "Wildcat", "Bonneville", "Imperial", "Continental" – suggests an automotive, and social, world that is far from the one that existed in 1964. These are cars that asserted their own power, the power of their owners, and the presumed power of the nation that produced them. The shift in a sense of that power that began with the Kennedy assassination the year before and which would continue to be eroded as the nation experienced the morass of the Vietnam War (hinted at in a photograph in which the car is placed next to a military recruitment sign), the dislocation of racial conflict (in particular the civil disturbances that left 43 people dead and 467 injured in Detroit, the American automotive capital in which these photographs were taken), and the alternate values of the counterculture was not yet reflected in the process of automotive design, yet perhaps can be sensed in the difficult compositions of these photographs, which, as in Friedlander's landscapes, often provide a difficult entry for the viewer. At the very least, these photographs provide an alternate view of these iconic objects of their era.

Friedlander is quoted in the introduction to the book as saying that "the car gene . . . passed me by" and suggesting that he cannot remember the model of the Volvo he now drives. Perhaps his lack of interest can explain his refusal to provide the expected marketing-friendly images of the car, but it must also be noted that cars have played and continue to play an important role in his work. The 1963 photograph discussed above has as its primary subjects the passing woman and the mannequin head, but an important role is also played by a large white convertible car that is seen directly and in reflection in the background, its great length both emphasizing the pictures horizontal orientation and, in retrospect, firmly placing it into the era of the next years new cars that were photographed in the book under review. In recent years he has produced, perhaps because his health makes walking difficult, *America by Car*, which depicts the country through the windshield of a rental car and *Sticks and Stones*, a large exploration of "architectural America" for the most part also taken from a car. As much as he may resist identifying himself as a member of American car culture, he is deeply, even if reluctantly, part of that culture.

The iconic luxury cars of the 1960s portrayed in *The New Cars 1964* were as much

objects of contemplation as they were tools for transit: much of their ornamentation was decorative and little of the bodywork could be seen from within the car. What Friedlander does in the photographs in the book is to distract the viewer from focusing exclusively on the vehicle. This is explicit in the first photograph in the body of the book, a photograph that also appears on its cover. Again we have a bifurcated frame, the right part of which is the side of a slightly out of repair commercial building and left part is the open space of a parking lot behind that building. Shot from below and receding sharply along a curb is presented a Chrysler 300, a powerful luxury car. The low viewpoint, however, makes it difficult to evaluate the automobile's size and its shadowed front gives it a somewhat less than perfect, almost used, look that certainly would be less apt to be a selling point for an expensive new car. The status of the vehicle is also called into question by the mundane commercial environment in which it sits and the electrical cable poles that are seen above its windshield. Placed in this environment, we seem almost to be looking at a generic sedan rather than an object of consumerist dreams of power. As in many of the photographs, the seems to be not quite the center of attention of the picture. And yet at the extreme left side of the image we have a fragment of a sign, whose letters "omer king" clearly can be completed into "Customer Parking" with an arrow pointing to the sky above the car's roof. And in a window on the right we have a rather crude depiction of a somewhat disreputable man in a suit looking in the direction of, but not specifically at, the car. These details more or less suggest that the car is the central object yet also refuse to carry through on that suggestion. The central space in which the car sits is indicated as providing a space for the main subject but the attention of the view is as apt to settle on the image of the man in the window rather than on the vehicle itself. Rather than acting as a clear focus for a desiring gaze the car seems to sit forlornly in a very unglamorous empty space.

The use of objects that seem to gaze in the direction of the automobile is found in a number of photographs, seemingly suggesting that these are as much icons to be gazed at as vehicles to be driven. In a photograph which provides perhaps the clearest and most traditional view in the book, an extremely long white Lincoln Continental convertible is parked perpendicular to the camera along a curb while not only the camera but also a statue of St. Francis, of a jockey, of several deer, and also, implicitly, of a Virgin Mary enclosed in a shrine, all look out at the wondrous that stand before it. Having this chorus of miscellaneous statuary join the camera's gaze does make somewhat comical the attention being paid to what must be admitted is a rather extraordinary looking automobile. This picture again confirms that the picture is as much about seeing as it is about the object of sight.

There are also pictures in which the car is occluded to the point where one would not identify it as the main subject of the picture if one did not know the topic of the book. The eight picture seems to be a depiction of a nondescript office with a cheap black plastic chair and a window and glass door through which one can glimpse fragments of a similarly black Buick Wildcat. A white car with a person standing in front of it can be seen above the Wildcat and the legs of a walker is in a corner further confuse the visual situation. Whereas a traditional marketing image would fore-

ground the car within a spectacular urban or rural space, here Friedlander places the car in the background of a banal commercial space. Whatever role the photograph might have as social commentary of the role of the car in American culture, its artistic value is to be found in its structure as a photograph, not on the basis of automotive subject matter.

These then are characteristic Friedlander images as much as they are about any particular subject matter. Throughout the book we can see motifs that occur throughout the photographer's career: pictures taken from inside of cars, telephone booths, and other visually obstructing objects, cars shown in reflection or through a window that contains reflections; a dominating reflection of the photographer; and a car placed within a cluttered urban environment. These motifs, as well as characteristic formal compositional strategies used by the photographer, connect these commercially commissioned images to the overall body of Friedlander's work, but the scope of the work is limited enough so that the extended explorations of a particular theme is not fully carried through. Because of this lack of depth the work contained in this book cannot compare with any of Friedlander's larger series. Although it may in the end be a minor work it is also one more indication of the varied contexts in which Friedlander could successfully exercise his visual imagination.
