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ARTS REVIEW: WEEGEE - 'MURDER IS MY BUSINESS'

Legendary Photographs at the International Center of Photography

By: [Roslyn Bernstein](#)
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Usher Fellig, a.k.a Arthur Fellig, a.k.a Weegee, got his big break in early 1937 when *Life Magazine*, then only one year old, hired him to shoot pictures showing how criminals were processed. Endowed with a natural flamboyance and the genius of a master marketer, Weegee made the big decision to use himself as a stand-in for the criminal. Fascinated by his style and by his penchant for working late at night glued to a police radio that stood on his bed stand, *Life* not only ran the photos Weegee had shot, but also ran a profile on him, thus advancing

Weegee's reputation as an eccentric photojournalist who lived in a little apartment on Center Market Place, across from the old Police Headquarters building, and was often the first at the scene of a crime.

What followed were hundreds of assignments from tabloid newspapers and magazines (there were twelve dailies in NYC in the 1930s) whose readers, largely working class and ethnic, rode the subway with newspaper in hand. What better subjects for the morning commute than murder and mayhem accompanied by graphic, high contrast black-and-white photos that dramatically illustrated the bumping-off of small-time hoodlums like Dominick Didato? Photos that also focused on the spectators' voracious appetite for crime? Children, outside a school, confronting "Their First Murder"? Onlookers peering from rooftops at bloody street scenes below?

Weegee's timing was perfect. After years perfecting his photographic skills in darkrooms as an assistant, his shift to becoming a photographer at age 37 or 38 came at a





When the field of photojournalism was just emerging, Weegee's often sensationalistic images transformed photojournalism. They made the front cover of *The New York Post*. They ran in several page spreads in *Life*. They were featured in *The Daily News*. And from 1940 on, they filled a new daily, *PM*. *PM* was a progressive newspaper and its photo editor, Ralph Steiner, published images of some of the great New York photographers: Lisette Model, Morris Engel, and Helen Levitt. In *PM*, Weegee not only photographed the stories, but he wrote them too.



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Weegee's work quickly found fans, and he was especially admired by the documentary photographers of The New York Photo League, who invited him to show two exhibits in August and September. Entitled "Murder Is My Business," the shows were highly eclectic affairs. Photos were presented unframed, jumbled together with tear sheets. There were homemade signs, and Weegee even enhanced the exhibits by using red nail polish for dripping blood.

A guest book from the Photo League show, included in the ICP exhibit, illustrates viewers' reactions. A viewer wrote: "Are there any schools teaching how to be Weegees?" Another wrote, "How can I too become a Weegee?" One guest actually suggested that Weegee publish the photos in a book. It was the inspiration for *Naked City*, which came out in 1945.

In a prologue essay to *Naked City*, Weegee wrote, "For the pictures in this book, I was on the scene, sometimes drawn there by some power I can't explain, and I caught the New Yorkers with their masks off...not afraid to laugh, cry, or make love."

Sirens scream as one walks through the ICP show. In the corner of one gallery, we see a reconstruction of Weegee's bedroom: his green metal single bed, clippings taped to the wall as his "hall of fame," his shiny black pointed shoes on the floor, his desk with a mini Corona typewriter, his Speed Graphic camera, and several heavy leather camera cases with film packs and flash bulbs neatly arranged in them.



Never one to miss an archival moment, Weegee took lots of shots of the clippings and over 1,500 portraits of himself at work, including one peering down at a corpse, an assassination that was the work of the Jewish gang, Murder, Inc., that was neatly tied up and stuffed in a trunk. The image was so graphic that *The New York Post* refused to run it, and Weegee, who ICP chief curator Brian Wallis described as a "darkroom magician," eliminated the body. This was, of course, before Photoshop!

Although the ICP show focuses on Weegee's news photography from the decade 1936-1946, it ends with a monitor screening a clip from Weegee's 1948 *Coney Island* film. Shot in color, the lively footage shows close-ups of people dancing, and zooms in on their fancy footwork and their shaking torsos. We see young and old,

glamorous and toothless. We experience Weegee at work snapping the pleasures of New York City. Elsewhere, at The Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea, a companion Weegee exhibit is running until February 25th. The Kasher show includes over 125 Weegee prints, and features prints from Weegee's basic subjects: song and dance, drink, party, spectacle, circus, love and sex, crime and disaster, citizens, celebrity, art, and Weegee himself. The Kasher show also features audio and film recordings of Weegee's voice which the gallery describes as "One of the great guttural Jewish NewYorkese hybrids of spoken English."

Is the current Weegeemania, with three shows ongoing -- two in New York City and one in Los Angeles -- a sign of the times? "Perhaps," says Brian Wallis of ICP. "It's possibly due to the popularity of TV shows like *CSI*. But, according to ICP curator Wallis, whose museum has been actively sharing the Weegee archives, "Even in the '30s, people liked news of murders."

"Weegee - Murder Is My Business" runs from January 20th through September 2, 2012 at the International Center of Photography.

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