

Capturing the meaningful from the everyday rush Paulin's first L.A. show at Duncan Miller is a thoroughly gratifying presentation. And more.

By Leah Ollman, Special to The Times

Frank Paulin made at least several compelling photographs in Los Angeles while visiting from New York in 1956. Those pictures never made it back out here, but several dozen others, taken about the same time in New York and Chicago, comprise Paulin's first L.A. show, a thoroughly gratifying presentation at Duncan Miller.

Roughly 40 images, some from France and Spain, can be flipped through on racks in the gallery. A tightly edited selection of Paulin's best hangs on the walls. Each is a terrific distillation of a moment in time, impeccably composed by life itself and adeptly seized by Paulin's lens. He credits Henri Cartier-Bresson (and the notion of the "decisive moment") as his greatest influence, but he was also schooled at the legendary Institute of Design in Chicago after the war, where he studied under László Moholy-Nagy and Harry Callahan. Paulin (born in 1926) assimilated their teachings well, developing a style both graphically crisp and tenderly humanistic.

"Wild and Wicked" is typically entrancing, a Times Square scene of two carousing young men and a woman, amusingly

captioned by the marquee overhead. Like Walker Evans, Paulin incorporated signage frequently in his work, to identify, reiterate or play off whatever else occupies the frame. A 1952 photograph made in Chicago affords a view into a coffee shop. A lone customer sits to one side, and a waitress attends to her work near the center. The trusty props of the diner are spread out behind and around them. Paulin frames the scene through the angular, cutout shape of a window, as if setting this precious gem of ordinariness within a sturdy clasp. The word "lunch" hovers overhead in slim neon letters, declaring the term that the image defines, according to its common usage in that place and time.

Paulin was drawn to the vernacular, the texture of a place, the feeling of a moment. In another photograph made at Times Square, he shows a Cadillac stretched out at the curb. Across the street, a bank of businesses beckons with such signs as "Playland" and "Paradise Bootery," extending the car's promise of the good life.

Tensions deriving from class and race are alluded to throughout Paulin's work, but his agenda, if he had one, never dominated. The life of the street captivated him,



'Lunch': Paulin's lens peeks into a Chicago coffee shop in 1952. The angular, cutout shape of a window frames the scene of a waitress and a lone customer. Paulin's photos are at Duncan Miller Gallery.

especially the telling juxtapositions that occurred as everyday life orchestrated itself. In one picture, a girl roller-skates joyfully across a street near a doll that has been abandoned on the pavement like roadkill, one of its eyes fixed on ours in what feels like an indicting stare. Many of Paulin's photographs revel in the simple manifestations of a common humanity, but others, like "Doll on Street," murmur a warning about disconnection and its costs.

Alienation figures into images of two men on a New York street, one inside the shelter of a subway entrance, one passing just outside it, but in poignantly disparate worlds. Another picture places a lone older man in the nexus of the crisscrossing streets of Times Square. Rain puddles in the foreground reiterate the clutter of signage, and steam from the subway grates behind him floats a granular white mist into the dank air. The loneliness and anonymity of the city are palpable.

Paulin's empathetic eye may have developed out of his first photographic assignment, recording displaced people at Nuremberg at the end of World War II. He continued to photograph, and had a show in 1957 at the Limelight Gallery in New York, but not much of a solo exhibition record over the years. He made his living as a fashion illustrator, drawing ads for department stores. This show, then, serves as a late introduction to a fine talent. As the genre of street photography was hitting its stride in the U.S. in the '50s and '60s, so was Paulin, crafting significant photographs out of the rush of the ordinary.

Duncan Miller Gallery, 10959 Venice Blvd., (310) 838-2440, through Jan. 25. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.duncanmillergallery.com



'Wild and Wicked': Frank Paulin's photograph of two carousing men and a woman in Times Square in 1956. The photographer frequently incorporated signage as an element of his images.