Passionate Observer
Photographs of Eudora Welty among Artists of the Thirties
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According to Rene Barilleaux, Deputy Director for Programs at the Mississippi Museum of Art, like any good novel, "This show has many plots, but the main plot is an attempt to establish her as a visual artist."

The show is "Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty Among Artists of the Thirties," which opened this weekend at the Museum.

Eudora Welty, the Jackson-born Pulitzer Prize-winning author is already established as one of the leading American writers of the twentieth century. Yet Welty was also a visual artist who worked in pen and ink, watercolors and, most significantly, photography.

During the Thirties, Welty worked with the Works Progress Project Administration as a writer and as a publicity photographer. Yet during the time she worked with the Administration, she brought her own camera along and took what she called "snaps," photographs that were displayed in two New York City exhibitions—one in 1936 and the other in 1937.

The first show consisted primarily of depictions of black life in Mississippi. In them, said Welty scholar and Millaps professor Dr. Suzanne Marrs, "Weltys shows the poverty that affects individuals, the white icons given to black children, the exhausting work that is the weekly lot, and the relentless spirit that typifies life in Mississippi."

The second show was of "poor white" pictures. "Welty certainly was concerned with the plight of poor, white Mississippians," said Marrs, and she grants them the same individuality, complexity, and humanity she had established in her black photographs.

Tombstone photographs were also included in this collection. Welty might have had these photographs in mind when she said, "In the most unpretentious snapshot, lies the wish to clamp fleeting life. Framing a few square inches of space for the fraction of a second, the photographer may capture, may rescue from oblivion, fellow human beings caught in the act of living. He is devoted to the human quality of transience."

By 1943, Welty had moved away from photography with the publication of her first book of stories, A Curtain of Green. Still, her fiction reflected her love for the visual; in One Writer's Beginning, she reminds writers to "always be aware where the moon is, a testament to her own powers of observation."

But it is in her photographs that her powers of observation are perhaps more obvious, and perhaps even as powerful.

Photographer and gallery owner James Patterson, who worked with Welty on her photographs while she was alive, said, "She has a handful of images that stand up to any other photos in the world. And that's amazing. And it's not because they're old; some of them are relevant even today. You look at that woman in her Fourth of July outfit, and you can think to yourself, 'I know that woman.'"

"I think her things have dignity," Patterson added. "But they also have a sense of humor. And I think the fact that they fit in perfectly, not just because of the subject matter, but because of the observations of that period. They fit in real well with the works of artists like Thomas Hart Benton and Edward Hopper. And when you see her photos of New York during the Depression, you'll see the Modernist view, long shadows, stuff like that, so she was definitely influenced by the time as well as what she saw as well."

"And that's another central thesis of the show," said Barilleaux. "In order to emphasize Welty's talents as a visual artist, her work needs to be seen in the context of visual art."

"She definitely had some art training," Patterson said. "There are actually some paintings and drawings that she did in the show. One of the points of the show is that it shows her connection, I mean, she knew William Hollingsworth and the Woffes, Helen Lauderhouse. She had a lot of friends who were artists, so she had to be influenced locally in Jackson. I think she had aspirations to be a photographer as much as a writer, it's just that writing came easier."

"Most of the photos we have of the South during the Depression were done by white Northern men coming in for the Farm Security Administration," Patterson explained. "Like Walker Evans, also some women like Dorothea Lang, but mostly people travelling through and not making connections."

"That connectedness, as according to both Patterson and Barilleaux, was what distinguishes Welty as a photographer."

"Welty was from here, and she knew to approach people," Patterson said. "And though she has photos of people in abject poverty, they're not accusing, and they do transcend that poverty to show the soul of the people as opposed to just pointing out poverty."

"Her Mississippi work has an insider's perspective," Barilleaux said. "It's not intrusive, there is a respect for the subject. She was a knowing observer."

And she was a passionate one. Of her photographs, Welty said, "A better and less ignorant photographer would certainly have come up with better pictures, but not these pictures."

"Passionate Observer" will be on display at the Mississippi Museum of Art through June 30.

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