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Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty Among Artists of the '30s
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Eudora Welty does not need context to gain recognition. Welty, a Jackson, Mississippi native who died last July at age 92, is well-known regionally and nationally—for her fiction, mainly, but also for her photography. But at The Mississippi Museum of Art last spring, curator Rene Barilleaux, with guest curator Patti Carr Black, former director of Jackson's Old Capitol Museum, sought to put Welty's photographs in context in *Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty Among Artists of the '30s*.

It was a good move. Placing Welty's works alongside those of other artists of her time helped not only to contextualize her images in terms of history and style, but also, perhaps more importantly, to show the unique character of her work.

Welty's photography, like her writing, is spare. She is, as the title announces, a passionate observer, but she is also a kind observer. At the times her photographs are a bit cool or

removed, it's as if she's nodding, "Yes, I understand, I've seen, I'm moving on." In almost all instances, she captures the moment at which the images resonate on a personal level, and gives them to us with the click of her camera's shutter. Her art is her keen observation, curiosity, and compassion.

The photographs included in this show are of the South during the 1930s—the Great Depression—when Welty worked as a publicist for the Works Progress Administration. They were a personal undertaking; she shot them for herself, compelled by a sense of personal curiosity and sensitivity for the human condition. What better place to do this than the South, during one of the times that tried souls?

The exhibit included work by other major female photographers of the time: Margaret Bourke-White, Doris Ulmann and Berenice Abbott. It also includes work by contemporary Mississippi artists who recorded the American scene: Helen J. Lotterhos, Karl Wolfe, William Hollingsworth, Marie Hull, Walter Anderson, John McCrady, Dusti Bonge, Caroline

Compton and Richmond Barthe. The exhibit was divided into four main sections: "The American Scene of the 1930s," "Eudora Welty and Jackson," "Art around Mississippi," and "Welty and FSA Photographers." Two corollary components were "Woman Photographers of the 1930s" and "Federal Murals in Mississippi."

The exhibit provided a well-rounded look at the art produced during the 1930s with a special focus on the South and, of course, Welty's work. Thanks to the presence of more than 100 pieces of her contemporaries' work, the exhibit demonstrated Welty's unique perspective on the world. Black and Barilleau presented the viewer with artistic foils to enhance the contrasts between Welty's photographs and the art of her peers. In one juxtaposition, for example, Marie Hull's painting of Melissa (her housekeeper) depicts tired eyes, a hardened expression, and a general sense of been-beat-down-but-still-going; a sense of perseverance. Hanging beside Hull's work are two of Welty's portraits.

The first is of a storekeeper in Rankin County, the second is her portrait titled "Woman of the Thirties." All the works sensitively describe, in the faces of their subjects, the depressed condition of people, particularly African-Americans, during the 1930s. Welty's photographs, though, seem more hopeful than despairing. She portrays people in their indigenous environments, tired and down as they may be, but she catches something defiant in her subject's eyes that just does not come out in similar work of the same period.

It is a hopefulness, then, and a way of seeing the positive that characterize much of Welty's work. For example, her photograph *Saturday Off*, a portrait of an African-American woman in a white dress leaning over a brick post, offers a languid presence, suggesting that life is more than the sum of its trials, a sense missing from much of the work of the era. Welty is not overly optimistic, patriotic, nationalistic, or sentimental. She is a keen observer, though, with radar set for detection of hope. Her "Tomato Pickers' Recess" shows people gathered around, having a good time, listening to a guitarist. She records the hard times, but she doesn't miss the good ones.

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