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Eudora Welty: Writing Wasn't Her Only Focus

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In the spare and shadowy photograph "Child on the Porch, 1935-1936," a fair-haired, fair-skinned girl in a flowered dress balances on a wooden rail, her arm wrapped around a post. Her serious young face has all the simplicity and promise of a Eudora Welty short story.

For good reason: The photograph is one of more than 50 featured in the exhibition "Passionate Observer: Photographs by Eudora Welty," at the National Museum of Women in the Arts tomorrow through Feb. 29.

You can see that the young lady in the cotton dress and the narrator of Welty's oft-taught story "Why I Live at the P.O." were brought to us by the same eye. Welty, who died in her native Mississippi in 2001, is considered one of 20th-century America's classic storytellers.

She also took pretty good pictures.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning writer "is less known as a photographer," says Women in the Arts museum Director Judy L. Larson, "and yet I see definite parallels between the writing and the photography. These were snapshots."

Welty's photos are personal and human-scale. They are often shot at a slight angle, in the somewhat slant way she wrote stories. A sideshow poster of the "Mule Face Woman" is shot from beneath. A New York staircase is shot from above.

Most of the photographs in the exhibit were taken during the 1930s. "Union Square, New York City" shows people in overcoats gathering on a cold day. A cart offers apples for three cents apiece. "These people of the Great Depression kept alive on the determination to get back to work and to make a living again," she told interviewers in 1989. "I photographed them in Union Square and in the subway and sleeping in subway stations and huddling together to keep warm, and I felt [that] . . . recording the mass of them did constitute a plea on their behalf to the public."

Studies of her home state -- black-and-white photos of black and white people -- "really captured a certain spirit, vitality, energy that was Mississippi in the '30s," Larson says. "It was a very important historic period."

"Dolls, Jackson" shows two young black girls, faces turned from the camera. They are dressed in simple dresses and sweaters, and each is cradling a marshmallow-white baby doll. The dolls in Welty's title are both the girls and their dolls. And somewhere in the portrait of black kids holding white dolls is the fragile irony that over the next few decades would grow intolerably powerful in Mississippi and throughout the country.

In "The mattress factory, Jackson," two women and a man sit on a wooden floor, taking in the breeze from an open door. The man, his elbows propped on raised knees, is lost in thought. The women are looking away from the camera, seemingly unmoved by Welty's presence.

There are portraits of everyday characters -- a matronly political delegate, a strong-faced woman in the fields, a trio of well-dressed women strolling down the sidewalk.

Words crop up in a wealth of Welty pictures. "Courthouse town, Grenada" depicts working-class men in hats and ironed shirts sitting on benches and on the edge of a fountain. Across the street, a horizon-line of signs above a strip of stores includes the fanciful combinations: Keeton Cotton and Jitney Jungle. Was Welty playing with language, even with her camera?

By looking closely at the sun-drenched shot of the outdoor stairway in New York City, you can see a sign for United Cigars. In the one of a bustling Union Square, you can see a huge advertisement for Kitty Kelly shoes.

Welty, who was born in 1909, spent most of her life in and around Jackson, Miss. She started writing at a young age, but her father was a shutterbug and she played around with cameras from the time she was a kid. She moved from a Kodak (with bellows) to a Recomar to a Rolleiflex.

She took photos of the Junior Auxiliary in Jackson, and she worked for a few months as an underling flack for the Works Progress Administration. She tried to peddle a book of photos of African Americans called "Black Saturday." At one point, before she became a successful fiction writer, she even tried pairing her photos and stories for a collection. In the end, her stories were more successful and needed no illustration.

In 1936 she had a photography show -- of 45 prints -- at a gallery in New York. In 1937 she showed at another New York gallery. Life magazine used Welty's camera work to illustrate two Mississippi stories in the winter of 1937-1938 and Welty had reason to believe she was on her way to becoming a professional photographer.

Meanwhile, her short stories were beginning to sell. In 1936, "Death of a Traveling Salesman" -- her first published story -- appeared in a little magazine called Manuscript. Others cropped up in literary reviews. An editor from Doubleday was visiting Jackson around 1940 and phoned Welty. She invited him to her house and showed him her stories. Her mother made waffles. The editor was impressed by Welty's vision -- and victuals -- and advised her to get an agent.

She signed on with Diarmuid Russell and her literary career took off. In 1941 the Atlantic Monthly published two of her stories and Doubleday published a collection, "A Curtain of Green."

About this time, Welty pretty much laid down her cameras and turned her full-time attention to fiction. "She gave up the idea that she would be a professional photographer," says Suzanne Marrs, a Welty scholar and professor at Millsaps College in Jackson.

The photos are fascinating, mostly because we want to know what they tell us about Welty the writer.

The pictures she chose to shoot, Marrs says, "show people who are poor, whose clothes are tattered, whose houses are unpainted. But the people aren't defeated. They have a kind of resilience that is admirable."

Welty's pictures draw attention to the world outside the frame of the camera, Marrs says. "There are people gazing beyond the limits of the photograph."

Mary Alice Welty White, Welty's niece, says the photos reflect her aunt's personality. "They are beautiful and compassionate pictures," White says. "Eudora was a very compassionate and caring person."

But when it comes to sorting out the relationships among Welty and words and photos, the writer was her own best critic. "I had to go on to fiction from photographing," she once said. "That's the only way you can really part the veil between people, not in images, but in what comes from inside, in both subject and writer."