

## CLOSE ENOUGH: PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID SEYMOUR (CHIM)

By Terry Gips, for the University of Maryland Art Gallery Exhibit, 1999

On November 11, 1911, David Szymin<sup>i</sup> was born in Warsaw, Poland. In the same year, James Henry Hare directed his camera toward the Mexican Revolution as it played out along the Rio Grand River in Texas; Eugene Atget, engaged by a number of commercial clients, documented the streets, storefronts, parks, and interiors of Paris; Jacob Riis photographed immigrants in New York City slums; Lewis Hine photographed child laborers in a glass factory in Alexandria, Virginia and, in 1914, coined the phrase “photo story.” A year later, André Kertész photographed three impoverished Hungarian boys reading a book and made pictures of World War I Polish soldiers on the march. In 1916 Paul Strand recorded a blind woman begging on New York streets. Hare’s photographs of World War I appeared in *Mid-Week Pictorial* in 1918. Hine photographed war refugees in Serbia in 1918 and an Italian soldier in an Austrian prison in 1919.

In 1925 the 35mm Leica camera was introduced, thereby enabling professional photographers to work rapidly in the midst of unpredictable and moving events. Berenice Abbott worked as Man Ray’s assistant in Paris that same year, purchased 5,000 Atget prints in 1928 and, in 1929, brought them back to New York where she began photographing for *Fortune Magazine*. Meanwhile, David Szymin was reaching adulthood. He arrived in Paris in 1932 at age 21, took up photography, and began recording political parades, workers groups, and anti-fascist events for magazines such as *Vu*, *Regards*, and *Paris Soir*. He soon met French native Henri Cartier-Bresson and the Hungarian, Robert Capa, who came to Paris in 1934. The three became friends while they simultaneously embarked on their photographic careers—thus setting the stage for an enduring friendship and a professional partnership which evolved into the organization known as Magnum Photos, Inc.<sup>ii</sup> Coincidentally in 1934, the London *Weekly Illustrated* ran picture stories about Mussolini by Felix Man and about Paris by Brassai, and in

1936, *Life* magazine was founded in the US by Henry Luce, who was also the publisher of *Fortune Magazine* and *Time*. Thus the picture story, documentary photography, and the “concerned” photographer<sup>iii</sup> gained prominence in the public sphere of communication at the same time that Szymin adopted the camera as *his* means of communication.

At this auspicious moment in world history, and immersed in French life and language, David Szymin became known as “Chim.” In the company of one man who became famous for recording the “decisive moment” and another who said, “if your pictures aren’t good, you aren’t close enough,” Chim committed his life to the profession of photography. As Inge Bondi carefully describes in her informative volume, *Chim: The Photographs of David Seymour*,<sup>iv</sup> he was equally dedicated to photography *and* to the people before his camera. Photography was not an end in itself but a means to tell the stories of people, places, and events. Cartier-Bresson said that “Chim picked up his camera the way a doctor takes his stethoscope out of his bag, applying his diagnosis to the condition of the heart. His own was vulnerable.”<sup>v</sup> Bullfinch Press, 1996<sup>vi</sup>

Chim was not a bystander, a term often ascribed to the “innocent” and the presumed objective documentary “street” photographer—for bystander<sup>vii</sup> implies a kind of passivity. Some photo historians distinguish the “documentary” photographer from the “street” photographer—the former motivated by a social agenda and dedicated to making a case for a particular group or social issue. But such an activist slant does not really fit Chim either. Although he was far from apolitical, his photographs do not advocate a party line. Nor does the term “photojournalist” necessarily clarify our image of Chim for he did not work as a dispassionate chronicler or reporter, covering one event and then moving on to another without the burden and pleasure of engagement.

In assembling this exhibition, I tested the various labels used to categorize photographers who record reality and the human condition to see if Chim should or could be precisely situated.

Finding no easy fit, I surveyed his work in hopes of understanding his relationship with these approaches to photography—what he shares with the photojournalist and the documentarian and what is unique about his use of the camera, lens, and photographic print.

Twenty-eight photographs have been selected and presented without regard to chronology or geographical location. I have intentionally chosen to suspend temporarily the strong associations between Chim and the well-known historical events of the Spanish Civil War, the aftermath of World War II in Europe, and the Suez War, so that I might inquire into his general mode of working. I wanted to determine how Chim created so many images that suggest “closeness,” a rapport between photographer and subject. While the story or context of each individual image is surely its *raison d’être*, it is also possible to find a commonality among pictures originating from very different situations. I am reluctant to use the word “style” or to decontextualize the work by applying a formalist analysis; however, it seems not only valid but useful to examine Chim’s work as a body of images—to work backwards, if you will, from the end results to the sources of the pictures. Essentially all other discussions of his work have begun from the historical events and have declined to apply a critical lens to the photographs themselves although Bondi offers some very useful observations at the end her book.<sup>viii</sup>

The photographs in *Close Enough* were made in different locations, under different conditions, and for different purposes. Interpreting these pictures without the benefit of the magazine spreads in which they appeared, without seeing the contact sheets, or knowing the parameters and circumstances of the assignment during which they were made, is, to some extent, risky. It is important to note, also, that this particular exhibition is a very small sampling of work from Chim’s career of two decades and one that concentrates on pictures of individuals or small groups of people. It ignores vast numbers of images in Chim’s oeuvre which are more concerned with places and events. The work presented here includes some well-known images but it is also an attempt to investigate Chim’s commitment to get “close” to the people before his

lens; a survey of other images by Chim might examine in a parallel way, the broader meaning of “closeness” which does not hinge on human relationships.

My interest in Chim’s “closeness” is not primarily concerned with the simple notion of physical proximity.<sup>ix</sup> It has much more to do with the dilemma which permeates documentary photography and its purpose of documenting the “truth:” the photographer’s need to balance the conflicting pressures of showing respect for *and* becoming intimate with the subject in front of the camera, of keeping ones distance *and* getting close. As writer James Agee said in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, when he and photographer Walker Evans began to study and record a family’s house, “I shall touch nothing but as I would touch the most delicate wounds, the most dedicated objects.”<sup>x</sup> This text was written while Agee and Evans were on assignment for *Fortune Magazine* in 1936. Their assignment was to assemble a vivid and detailed picture—in photographs and words—of poverty in Alabama during the Great American Depression. In their case, they had essentially lived<sup>xi</sup> in the homes of several families for weeks at a time. Evans’ visual images and Agee’s texts describe in intimate detail these families and their homes, down to the number of socks in a drawer and whether they were mended or dirty, and the scrapes and bruises on the dirty legs of the sharecropper’s wife. Indeed, Agee and Evans were close enough to literally pass their hands over the material objects which made up the worlds of these families, to have physical contact with these people, and, in a sense, to touch their lives.

Although begun as a magazine assignment, *Fortune*’s editor changed his mind about publishing the story by Agree and Evans. As a result, the project evolved into a long and literary book which was first published in 1941. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* can be seen as the result of the strategy pursued by two documentarians to reconcile the “closeness” dilemma inherent in their project. The text and photographs were their attempt to get “close enough” so that they could see beyond deceptive surfaces, discern the “truth,” and translate that reality into a document to be read by others. Through long and reflective prose, Agree elevates his report on

southern poverty to an extraordinary testament to the lives of those enduring the hardships of sharecropping. Evans achieves a respectful distance from the families through the formality of his pictures, and thus a closeness that may be more dignified and genuine than one reached through intimate snapshots.

John Berger has described Walker Evans' work and that of Paul Strand as "offering direct access to the real"<sup>xii</sup> and clearly this is at the heart of Chim's photographs. They are unaffected but sensitive recordings. They are arresting pictures but not because they shock us. They are not moments clipped out of a continuum but rather stretches of time. Regardless of the actual length of exposure, Chim's photographs often seem to register hours, days, or even years. It is as if we are invited to settle in with individual images and let the characters take their time in telling their stories. Berger's description of Strand photographs is somehow quite appropriate to borrow in writing about Chim's work: "Such photographs enter so deeply into the particular that they reveal to us the stream of a culture or a history which is flowing through that particular subject like blood."<sup>xiii</sup> He saw Strand as using "his camera as the listener...and encouraging a story to be told."<sup>xiv</sup>

Compared with Strand, Chim made fewer pictures in which the subject speaks with his or her eyes looking directly into the lens. In photographs such as two taken in 1948 in Greece, (*Boy with head in hands* and *Girls Playing with something that was once a doll*), Chim's camera is more like a tape recorder, neither hidden nor directly confronting the children, but unobtrusively placed nearby. The presence of Chim, however, seems integral to the process. It is through him that the camera has become "friendly" and open to "hearing" the stories of the children. Chim listens with his own eyes and simultaneously guides the lens of the camera. Even posed portraits such as *Sophia Loren*, 1955, and *Raphael Alberti*, 1936, in which the sitters' gazes meet the camera straight on, suggest that Chim first created an ambience of trust, perhaps even of camaraderie, before using the camera as his recording instrument.

Unlike Evans' sustained contact with the Alabama families, Chim's journalistic

engagements tended to be briefer. There are examples of his work, such as the famous pictures of Ingrid Bergman, (Robert Capa's lover and friend), which probably owe a great deal to a true social relationship between photographer and sitter. But overall, Chim seems to have been able to radiate a charisma and sense of respectful concern that effectively reassured his subjects—whether they were strangers or friends, whether they were hungry *Children in a Displaced Persons Camp* in Vienna, *Peggy Guggenheim in her Palace on the Grand Canal* in Venice, or a muscular soldier *Patrolling the border between the Negev Desert and Jordan* in Israel.

Chim's pictures of children give us a glimpse of his struggle with some of the burdens and pleasures of engagement—those features which I noted earlier as often missing from photojournalism. Of course Chim *was* employed as a photojournalist and, like the vast majority of visual reporters, concerned with the way his photographs were read and interpreted when they appeared in the mass media. But he was equally concerned about his engagement with the people he chose to photograph. As has been frequently noted by his professional colleagues, friends, and family, Chim was a private person on the one hand, but also someone who liked people, a person known for his warmth and his social flair. Simply put, Chim took pleasure in human interaction.

His affection for children in particular leaps out of the photographs; sometimes his feelings push these pictures precariously close to sentimentality. This is one of the burdens of engagement, one of the risks of getting "close."<sup>xv</sup> It is possible to detect Chim's efforts to resist sentimentality at the same time that he remains true to his emotional responses. It is as if the individuals before his camera were his own children or family and that he was reaching out to hug them. He seems torn by the "camera's twin capacities, to subjectivise reality and to objectify it."<sup>xvi</sup> I would argue, though, that Chim rarely if ever yields to the seduction of pictures that are "sweet," that make us weep, that through their horror make us numb, or that assuage our conscience by offering a simplistic avenue for us to send food or money.<sup>xvii</sup>

Neither does he entertain us with decisive or special moments such as those in Cartier-Bresson's photographs from all over the world or Helen Levitt's pictures of children in New York. The children, and adults, too, in Cartier-Bresson's and Levitt's images are usually engaged in particular—and often amusing—activities; the activities are as much or more the subject of the photographs as the people. Cartier-Bresson and Levitt have portrayed many different places and events and their work shares a concern for human conditions similar to that found in Chim's. However, Chim seems more likely to photograph the ordinary and quiet moment than the peculiar or unique one, an approach which gives space to the whole person in front of his camera. The individuals in their total being are Chim's concern and the subject of his pictures. He lets meaning arise of its own volition by *not* presenting carefully spelled out narratives. He uses the frame of the picture in a casual, relaxed way—*not* in a way that produces a structured arrangement of figures, objects, buildings, etc., composed for the purpose of determining a specific reading of the image. Chim's frames function primarily to bring us close to the subject, to help us make contact.

Chim shares much of Joseph Koudelka's (another Eastern European and member of Magnum) unrehearsed intimacy and compassion. Chim's black and white palette is less harsh than Koudelka's, however, and the drama suggested by his images is also more subdued. Koudelka often uses tilted, elevated, and lowered camera positions—angles which create tension in his photographs. This tension sometimes counteracts the sense of intimacy and causes distance to reassert itself between photographer and subject and between viewer and subject. In contrast, Chim rarely uses the device of a camera angle different from his own eyes' viewpoint. He chooses the human viewpoint over something more dramatic.

All of this does not mean that Chim works haphazardly or that his photographs lack sophistication. It is through his keen understanding of visual images and the inherent attributes

of the camera that his photographs succeed. Some of his most complex images are those in which his empathy and sadness are not only as visible as his pleasure but appear mutually intertwined and also fused with his reportorial task. The pictures of *Citizens work in their vegetable gardens near the Reichstag building*, of the baby in the stroller in *Among the war ruins*, and of *Boys with grenades* all resonate sadness and, if not joy or pleasure, then hope. The sun warms the ground into which seedlings are being placed as well as the man and woman who appear relaxed and at peace in their work despite the war-ravaged backdrop of the Reichstag. The infant also basks in the sun, another sign of new life after the War which destroyed vast numbers of cities, towns, and families—including Chim’s parents who were killed by the Nazis in 1942 in Otwock, Poland. It is perhaps less easy to find hope in the picture of three boys standing alongside scores of deadly grenades stacked on barren and rock-strewn ground. However, the grenades are inert: in a sense, they are history, in the past (even though they may not have been deactivated when the picture was made). In contrast, the boys are standing, alive. They *have* survived and have lives ahead of them.

If the mandate of documentary photography is to “bear witness,” then the photographs just described are true to that directive and definition. If we problematize this mandate and require further that these images not only establish evidence so that those who were not “there” can understand, but also direct their plea to “never forget” at us, the viewers,<sup>xviii</sup> Chim’s work continues to satisfy the requirements of witnessing. Without its descriptive title, the close-up picture from 1953 of *A man [who] mourns at the funeral of an Israeli watchman slain during a border incident at Beth Hafafa*, could be almost any adult male anywhere experiencing profound grief. We do not see the source of his pain. In Chim’s picture, there are no slain bodies such as those we often find in war correspondents’ photographs. Chim does not show us the moments of horror such as those in photographs from Nicaragua taken by Susan Meiselas in 1978-79.<sup>xix</sup> Even in the midst of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, he chose to photograph a single soldier, gun on his shoulder, holding and caressing a small child.

His 1956 picture of the *Boy and tank, Suez War*, depicts a quiet interlude on a sunny street occupied by an adolescent boy and an ominous tank. The boy with his long frail shadow stretching across the ground in front of him appears to be fleeing but the tank is still; there is no obvious confrontation, no visible cannon fire, and no wounded. The message conveyed by this picture is as profound and frightening, though, as one flung at us with more gruesome details. Chim presents a universal and timeless issue—the massive, destructive machinery of war confronting the delicate trace of humanity. As Cornell Capa said of his brother Robert who died in 1954 while on assignment in Indochina and of Chim who died in the Suez in 1956, They were inseparable in their lives and deaths...both loved life and left behind a tradition in photography: their shared respect for humankind."<sup>xx</sup> Even on this last assignment, Chim's photographs are more about teaching us to live in the world of the present and future than about rereading the chapters of the past. We are not confined by the specifics of one moment, but are pulled into the stream of ongoing human struggle.

—Terry Gips

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> When Szymin joined the United States Army in world War II, he changed his name to Seymour to protect his Jewish parents in Poland.

<sup>ii</sup> See the discussion of Magnum on page XX of this catalogue.

<sup>iii</sup> The terms “documentary photography” “photojournalism,” “picture story,” and “photo story” have much in common and are sometimes used interchangeably. “Documentary” was first used in reference to film by the British producer John Grierson in 1926, and was subsequently used to describe the work of Atget, Kertész, Sheeler and others in 1928. A “picture story” tends to have journalistic or reportorial connotations whereas a “photo story” often implies a specific sequence or series of photographs which do not accompany a text. I have chosen to use documentary as the default and general descriptor for Chim's work. Several helpful essays can be found in *Observations: Essays on Documentary Photography*, (Carmel, California: Friends of Photography, 1984).

<sup>iv</sup> Inge Bondi, *Chim: The Photographs of David Seymour*, (Boston, New York, Toronto, London: A Bullfinch Press Book, Little, Brown and Company, 1996).

---

<sup>v</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson, Introduction to *Chim: The Photographs of David Seymour*

<sup>vi</sup>, p. 11.

<sup>vii</sup>This term appear as the title of the book, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography*, Colin Westerbrook and Joel Meyerwitz, authors, (Boston, New York, Toronto, London: A Bullfinch Press Book, Little, Brown and Company, 1994). Interestingly, Chim is mentioned but none of his photographs are reproduced.

<sup>viii</sup> Bondi, pp.185-6.

<sup>ix</sup> Physical proximity would arguably have a more essential role in defining “closeness” in photographs that did not include people.

<sup>x</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, second edition, 1960) pp.135-36.

<sup>xi</sup> Agee slept at the homes of sharecroppers, while Evans returned to a hotel at night. See Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), p. 198.

<sup>xii</sup> John Berger, *About Looking*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 48.

<sup>xiii</sup> Berger, p. 43.

<sup>xiv</sup> Berger, pp. 43-4.

<sup>xv</sup> See Agee and Evans, pp. 450-4 and Mora and Hill.

<sup>xvi</sup> Berger, p. 35.

<sup>xvii</sup> Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," in Richard Bolton, ed., *Contest of Meaning : Critical Histories of Photography*. (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1990), pp. 306-7.

<sup>xviii</sup> Andrea Liss, "Distant Witnessing" in *Afterimage*, September/October 1998, p. 3.

<sup>xix</sup> Susan Meiselas, *Nicaragua*. (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

<sup>xx</sup> Cornell Capa, from the foreword of Bondi, p. 9.