

KEITH DE LELLIS
GALLERY

FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

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New York Street Photography

Simpson Kalisher

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Simpson Kalisher, who liberated his lens from slick images in corporate reports and trade magazines to emerge as a discerning photojournalist whose street scenes froze the panorama of urban American life in the 1950s and '60s, died on June 13 in Delray Beach, Fla. He was 96.

A Bronx native, Mr. Kalisher "was one of the last survivors of that generation of dynamic New York street photographers born in the 1920s and employed at first by the magazines, a group that included Robert Frank, Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand," Lucy Sante, who wrote the foreword to Mr. Kalisher's book "The Alienated Photographer" (2011), said in an email. "His most distinguishing feature was his social empathy and imagination."

The foreword described Mr. Kalisher as "our Virgil through this rapidly receding time, giving the impression in every frame of remembering a stricter but richer past while also perceiving the outline and maybe even the details of the anarchic future" through photographs that "seem to represent the culmination of a thousand thoughts that were in the air."

Describing a showing of Mr. Kalisher's work at the Keith de Lellis gallery in Manhattan in 2011, The New Yorker wrote that it was grounded in "atmospheric urban noir."

"Kalisher worked primarily on the street," the magazine said, "yielding photographs that are anecdotal and full of characters: a pugnacious child outside church, a driver sticking his tongue out, a fed-up guy pushing his stalled car." His photographs were included in the Museum of Modern Art's historic "Family of Man" exhibition in 1955 and its 1978 show "Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960."

Among his books were "Railroad Men: A Book of Photographs and Collected Stories" (1961), which presents gritty portraits of the unheralded workers who maintained the tracks and rolling stock as train travel was declining. Mr. Kalisher also tape recorded their memories, which were excerpted in the accompanying text.

Reviewing the book in The New York Times, Grace Glueck wrote: "From near-abstractions, like a night view of wriggly tracks that appear as thin white lines on black paper, to an animated close-up of two men in ticking-striped caps yakking at a lunch counter, these deftly captured images have a plain-spoken eloquence."

Mr. Kalisher also published "Propaganda and Other Photographs" (1976), with an introduction by Russell Baker. The author later explained the challenge he faced in choosing which photos to include:

"Propaganda is a neutral word. There are no value judgments to the word Propaganda. A person advocating peace is no less a propagandist than someone advocating war. This got me to wondering if it would be possible to create a book that illustrated propaganda in all the ways we see it in the every day, but somehow, through selection and sequencing make my own point of view clear."

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The art historian Ian Jeffrey described Mr. Kalisher as “a brutal parodist of pictorial stereotypes.” Sarah Meister, the executive director of Aperture, the photography magazine for which Mr. Kalisher was a regional editor in the 1960s, distinguished him from the coterie of talented colleagues whose ranks he joined.

“That Kalisher was able to establish an individual voice among these towering figures is remarkable,” she said in an email, “all the more so because he was (to a greater degree than these peers) frequently involved with commercial projects at a time in which those assignments were often seen as detracting from or limiting a photographer’s ability to establish an independent vision.”

Simpson Kalisher was born on July 27, 1926, the son of Benjamin and Sheva (Ruskolenker) Kalisher, immigrants from Poland. His father was a jeweler and watchmaker, his mother a dressmaker. Raised in the northeast Bronx, he graduated from Christopher Columbus High School. He attended Indiana University in Bloomington for a year before being drafted and served in the Army from 1944 to 1946. After World War II, he completed his higher education at Queens College, where he majored in history and received a bachelor’s degree.

Some of his first published photographs appeared in The Times in 1947 with an article by a former professor who had returned to the Bloomington campus to compare how freshmen differed from those who arrived in 1941, before America entered the war. Having become an avid photographer when he was 10 and selling his first prints as a teenager, Mr. Kalisher initially took up commercial photography.

He freelanced for the Scope Associates agency in the early 1950s. One photo he took for a client of the firm, the Texas Company (which became Texaco), of two apron-clad women chatting at the gate to a house, was chosen by the photographer Edward Steichen for MoMA’s “Family of Man” exhibition.

Mr. Kalisher’s photographs appeared in corporate annual reports, industry magazines and advertisements. But even in embracing photojournalism he had pecuniary motives in mind. “When I decided to make photojournalism my career I was less interested in making art than in making a living,” he recalled in an unpublished memoir he wrote for his family. Some of his photos appeared in popular periodicals like Sports Illustrated and Fortune.

Traveling worldwide, he learned to fly, he told his family, because he trusted his own skills over those of pilots with whom he was unfamiliar. In addition to his daughter, he is survived by two sons, David and Allon, all three by his marriage to Colby Harris, which ended in divorce; and five grandchildren. He lived in Delray Beach.

His partner of 27 years, Gloria Richards, died in 2021. His eldest son, Jesse Kalisher, also a photographer, from his marriage to Ilse Kahn, which also ended in divorce, died in 2017. Mr. Kalisher lived in New York and Connecticut and retired to Florida in 2013.

In the memoir, he sought to define the line between taking pictures and making art in a world where photographs had become ubiquitous.

Photojournalism in the late 1940s and early 1950s “lacked the values I hoped to express in my own work,” he explained, largely because “the photographs in the magazines only served as illustrations for the captions which actually told the story.”

“Photography is difficult only because it is so easy,” he wrote, and then went on to explain why it isn’t. “For example, when I saw a series of Stieglitz photographs of Georgia O’Keeffe’s slender hands gracing round (they were always round) slick industrial products, I was prompted to photograph the hands of a Black worker washing down one of the white wall tires of my father’s 1947 Hudson,” Mr. Kalisher wrote. “It was my first protest photograph.”