

KEITH DE LELLIS
GALLERY

FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

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OLYMPIA THROUGH THE LENS
THE OLYMPIC PHOTOGRAPHS OF LENI RIEFENSTAHL
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Keith de Lellis Gallery is pleased to announce **Olympia Through the Lens**, an exhibition featuring 25 original vintage exhibition quality prints by Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003) from the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Known for her groundbreaking documentary two-part **Olympia** (released in 1938), Riefenstahl also produced a striking body of still photography during the Games. Her images captured athletes in motion and repose, employing innovative techniques that helped define modern sports photography.

This exhibition explores Riefenstahl's visual legacy within the full historical and ethical context of the era. While her mastery of light, form, and composition is undisputed, her work remains controversial due to her ties to the Nazi regime and the propagandistic role her imagery played.

The 1936 Berlin Olympics were one of the most politically charged events in modern history. Held under Adolf Hitler's regime, the Games were designed to promote the supposed superiority of the Aryan race and the power of the Third Reich. Despite international calls for a boycott due to the regime's overt racism and antisemitism, the Games went ahead with broad global participation. To maintain a favorable international image, the Nazis temporarily suppressed antisemitic displays and propaganda during the event.

Amid this charged atmosphere, Jesse Owens (1913–1980), an African American track and field athlete, emerged as the hero of the Games. He won four gold medals—in the 100 meters, 200 meters, long jump, and 4x100 meter relay—directly undermining Nazi claims of racial superiority. Owens' achievements were celebrated internationally and remain a powerful symbol of athletic excellence and human dignity. However, upon returning to a segregated United States, he continued to face systemic racism and was not formally recognized by President Franklin D. Roosevelt or invited to the White House.

Despite being commissioned by the Nazi regime, Riefenstahl insisted her work was apolitical, yet her stylized portrayals of athletes and grand spectacle were deeply intertwined with Nazi ideals. Her earlier film, **Triumph of the Will** (1935), a depiction of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, explicitly served Hitler's ideological messaging and remains a stark example of state propaganda in cinematic form.

"Riefenstahl's photographs are technically masterful and historically significant," says curator Keith de Lellis. "But they also raise urgent questions about art, politics, and responsibility. This exhibition encourages viewers to engage critically with those issues."

Also, of note is **Riefenstahl**, a new German documentary film by director Andres Veiel, which examines Riefenstahl's legacy. As of this writing, the film is unavailable for viewing in the United States. This film has been widely shown in international film festivals, and the next screening in the United States will be shown simultaneously at Film at Lincoln Center and Quad Cinema from September 5-11.

Join us for a thought-provoking journey through a defining moment in 20th-century visual culture, as seen through the lens of one of its most controversial figures.