

Fred Lyon's photos of old San Francisco in show

Sam Whiting, Chronicle Staff Writer

Saturday, June 5, 2010

Datebook Galleries
Chester Arnold's
dreamlike
paintings E2

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM | Saturday, June 5, 2010 | Section E

Fresh air and a view are the perks of the job for bridge painters in 1940s.

It's 1946 and a cable car needs tending; anyone mind if the guy smokes his pipe?

Go back in time in a snap

A crowd turns out at the pier for the fairs surrounding Sailing Day 1940s.

By Sam Whiting
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

After nearly 70 years as a professional photographer, Fred Lyon decided he was due a show of his work. The question was, what work to show?

He looked around his studio, and what called to him was not on the walls but in the bottom drawer of a file cabinet. He got down on his knees, which takes some doing when you are pushing 84, and pulled out a box marked "SF negs." Inside that box were rows of small envelopes, each containing a square 2-inch negative. Most had not been looked at in 50 years.

"I looked at them and I got a little scared," says Lyon, who at first wished he hadn't opened that box because it took two years of sorting and scanning and editing to get from there to here.

This week, 30 prints culled from among thousands of negatives were hung on the fourth floor of 49 Geary St., where "San Francisco Then" composes the opening exhibition at the new Modernbook Gallery.

The images on display are old, but the prints are new. Most of them were never printed in the first place. Made for this show, they range

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"They" continues on E4

in size from 11 by 14 inches to 30 by 40 inches, and range in year from 1946 to 1953. Lyon chose this era because it was shot in black and white and, most important, because it was the era that was organized and boxed and labeled.

The war was over and everything was new and fresh in the city, including Lyon himself. After the service and a short stint as a New York fashion photographer, he'd come back to where he started, as a teenage assistant at Gabriel Moulin Studio, riding the train in after school at Burlingame High.

"When I got out of the Navy and came back from New York, it was like New Year's Eve," says Lyon, who is now pushing 86 and evokes George Burns in looks, voice and the way he slowly works around to the point of a story. "Everything was wide open, and if you were willing to work, there was a job for you."

The job for Lyon was freelance magazine photographer, a job that did not require being hired or much of a credential beyond a camera and willingness to badger the glossy New York slicks with ideas for photo spreads.

He was always out walking with equipment that goes back so far that he can remember using flash powder. The viewfinder of his Rollieflex was in constant contact with the bridge of his nose. He still bears what he calls "this star here," rubbing it after removing his owl-rims.

"Everywhere you'd carry your camera, there was something begging you, 'Take my picture, mister, take my picture,' " he says. "It was such fun, I couldn't believe it."

Lyon can still feel the fun when he thumbs through the monograph of "San Francisco Then" at the Marina District studio he shares with his wife, Penelope Rozis, an interior designer. Lyon comes in at 7 a.m. and doesn't leave until the clock hits 7 again.

"I've been at this now since I was 14," he says, "and I have to tell you I've never been bored." Except when it came to the notion of writing text for the book.

"I get a little nervous about people who write photographer's statements," he says. "I'm suspicious of people who are overthinking what they are doing."

Still, somebody had to write some words for his book, which is \$65 hardbound. His first choice, Herb Caen, is no longer available. So he went begging at the office of his second choice, Willie L. Brown Jr.

"I said, 'I think it could make a real difference in the success of the book and by default, since Herb isn't here, you're Mr. San Francisco,' " Lyon told Brown. " 'I've made my mind up that you are going to do this, and if all else fails, I'm not beyond threatening to blackmail you.' "

This was speaking Da Mayor's language, and the subsequent intro lays it on nice and thick. After two paragraphs about himself, Brown finally gets around to writing about the photographs:

"Call them picture postcards with an edge, with an angle, a point of view and some with a message. Although Fred won't like me to use that word 'message.' He says he looks until he likes what he sees and then he pushes that button. But followers of Fred's long photographic career note that he has been capturing the city's unique, sometimes strange, sometimes loopy, always exciting images for more than 60 years. And I buy on to that."

San Francisco Then: Fred Lyon's photographs from the 1940s and '50s. Through Aug. 28.

Modernbook Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 732-0300. www.modernbook.com.

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This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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