

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

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## Salute in Black and White

Photographer Ray Metzker has rendered classic images for 70 years. Locks celebrates his vision with a show of 35 pictures.



“Chicago, 1957”

By Stephan Salisbury  
For The Inquirer

For nearly 70 years, Ray Metzker has been taking pictures.

He has headed out onto the city streets, Leicas slung over his shoulder, and hunted, a shooter aiming to capture images, not game.

Tens of thousands of pictures later, this unassuming man, one of the most celebrated photographers alive, has hung up the cameras, packed away the lenses, folded and stored the tripods.

His last series of images, taken in 2009 in Philadelphia, where he has lived since 1962, forms a chunk of an exhibition currently on view at the Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, through next Saturday.

“This is great and lasting work - the very best of a classic form of American modernism,” Keith F. Davis, senior curator of photography at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., said

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before a Metzker show opened there this year.

“Metzker has led a life of deep devotion to understanding the potential, challenge, and pleasure of photographic seeing.”

The 35 images that make up the Locks Gallery show are drawn from the full range of Metzker’s career, the earliest coming from 1957: an older woman, dressed in black, almost nunlike, walking next to a wall, lights puncturing the deep blacks of the overall scene, like bomblets.



“Philadelphia, 1963”, seemingly about to be devoured by black.

“I’m walking down the street and I see something and I make the exposure, I capture the image and then when I see the proof sheets, certain images look to me to be successful,” said Metzker, now 80, gazing at the photo he made half a century ago. A very matter-of-fact man.

He thinks for a moment.

“I proceed from there.”

Another work, a famous image, shows a sailor in whites carrying a white duffel and walking down a sidewalk. A deep black shadow obscures the wall behind and in front of him. In fact, the sailor looks as though he is about to be devoured by black.

The image, from 1963, almost instills fear in a viewer. No! Don’t walk any farther!

The depth of the blackness - Metzker’s work has not infrequently been described as “noirish” - and the brilliant white in this 1970 print - are products of the darkroom, juxtapositions that Metzker extracted under the red light using chemical solutions.

“Oh yes,” he said, peering at the sailor on the verge of obliteration. “That’s pretty contrasty.”

City Whispers, a suite of Philadelphia images shot in the early 1980s and not included here, is particularly dark, he said: “There’s a lot of darkness in there. . . . A lot of them are shot during the winter. The darkness is an element of drama. So I think I work there.”

Metzker grew up in Wisconsin and studied with Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind while attending the Institute of Design of the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago.

A job teaching photography at the Philadelphia College of Art



“Philadelphia, 1965” He came here in 1962, and has walked the streets working with black-and-white film incessantly ever since.



drew him here in 1962, and he has walked the streets working with classic black-and-white film incessantly ever since. Until now.

Metzker never went digital. He always worked with film, paper, and chemicals. Indeed, the whole painstaking process - from viewing something potentially magical in a mundane street scene, capturing the image with his camera, then working in the darkroom processing with silver halides - is all part of his art.

“There was always the pleasure of just working with silver, and there’s plenty of nuance in there,” he said.

Sometimes he used double negatives to combine images into a discombobulating near-abstraction.

One photograph at Locks, for example, shows a vertical Schuylkill River and an oil-tank farm beyond its bank, all topped by a girder and streetlight from the old South Street bridge. Another image, of a traffic light and telephone wires, contains the same telephone wires upside-down, drawn from a second exposure.

Metzker will use anything to tease out the mystery, and sometimes the humor, in what he sees.

He looks at a no-parking sign in an underground drive-through portion of the old Bulletin building near 30th Street Station, and calls it “jaunty.” A car with multiple reflections is “squirmy.” A man in an overcoat and wearing a fedora is irresistible.

“He’s got it made!” Metzker said with a laugh, looking at just such an image.

So why, given his delight in street scenes and love of photography, has he stopped?

“I don’t have any inclination to continue now,” he said. “I have such a large archive, it’s kind of ridiculous to say I’ve got to keep amplifying it.”

But surely the urge to take pictures must still possess him after all these years.

“In a sense, if you’re endowed with a strong visual sense, I can still be taking pictures except that I’m not leaving anything as testimony to what I’ve seen,” he said.

“I understand what I’m seeing and doing and I don’t have to run out and grab an instrument to leave it for posterity. That’s just not part of me now.”