

## **Tom Arndt HOME**



**Exhibition September 13 - October 31, 2014**

From Wednesday to Saturday, 2-7pm and by appointment

**Opening reception – Saturday, September 13, 2-7pm**

We're happy to introduce for the first time in France the photographer Tom Arndt. Born in Minneapolis, Tom Arndt's photography focuses on his native Minnesota.

Belonging to the grand, classic tradition of American documentary photography, Tom Arndt's body of work offers us a sensitive, empathetic portrayal: a family album of the people who live in his state including their coffee shops and soda fountains, their streets, their shop windows, their parks, the popular state fairs. Pessimism and pity are out of place here.

As Arndt's friend and well known writer Garrison Keillor points out, Tom Arndt photographs the DNA of Minnesotan culture-- the poor and the left out.

Tom Arndt belongs to the silver print processing tradition; his printing is exceptionally beautiful. He spends at least several hours daily in the darkroom; he really loves the paper print. His photographs are part of numerous American museum collections.

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A stalwart Midwestern matron posing with her lawn mower on a tidy sidewalk. A gathering of animated adolescent girls glimpsed through the glare of a downtown candy shop's windows. A pensive man caught in a cigarette machine's mirror as he sits in a ray of sun at a diner counter. These are scenes any of us might encounter at any instant of our lives. While we might apprehend the beauty or poignancy of these fleeting moments, it takes extraordinary skill and reflexes to use a camera to transmute them into art. Minneapolis photographer Tom Arndt, author of these and thousands more frank, heartbreakingly real black-and-white images, is among a select few masters of street photography with the eye, instincts, and technical know-how to spin poetry from everyday sights.

Since the early 1970s, Arndt has dedicated himself to searching for telling images of people and the times and places they inhabit. Using the genre's classic tools, Kodak Tri-X film and a fast, unobtrusive Leica,<sup>1</sup> he has roamed the streets of big cities and small towns in the United States, Europe, and Latin America in search of those elusive and evanescent instances where stories and pictures align. His work connects to an august tradition of humanist street photography—images concerned with life's universal themes. It extends the innovations of the genre's greats, past and present: Henri Cartier-Bresson's intricate instantaneity; Garry Winogrand's offhand timing and humor; Robert Frank's unvarnished take on the American scene. Yet Arndt's sensibility is wholly his own.

There is something more gentle and less brittle about Arndt's work than that of these predecessors and many of the genre's greats. He is less concerned with capturing Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" of compositional and symbolic perfection than stretching time a tiny bit to suggest its flow. Whether he's depicting a conversation, a trip, or even the act of waiting around, you feel Arndt's appreciation for the rare psychic state of absorption. Catching the quotidian reveries that occur in taverns, on busses, or on front steps is one of Arndt's specialties. His compositions are often casual, as if the photographer were part of the scene rather than a razor-eyed, detached observer. Most strikingly, though, his humanism has a different tenor than that of most street photographers who work candidly or without directly engaging their subjects. While Arndt makes many pictures that catch his subjects unaware, he just as often lets us see that his subjects see themselves being seen.

Arndt is never dispassionate. He has committed himself to depicting his fellow humans with care. "I'm interested in what it means to be alive. My subjects are people trying to get through today, and I'm with 'em," he says. "I want to make sure the people I photograph are fairly portrayed and in a respectful way."<sup>2</sup> Poverty, loneliness, and the slog of it all are regular themes in his work, but the cynical "gotcha" edge that animates many street photographs is never present. As demonstrated by his images of spectators bunched together on bleachers at a small-town tractor pull in 2013, a man peering at a menu posted in a restaurant window in 1982, and an empty phone booth in a bar in St. Paul taken in 1971, the desire for connection is always a subtext.

In this sense, Arndt's nearest peers are Helen Levitt and Jerome Liebling, the latter of whom was his professor at the University of Minnesota in 1969 and 1970. Both Levitt and Liebling share his habit of turning photographic encounters into amicable mini-collaborations. Arndt also has their ability to engage people of different ages and races. One of the greatest compliments he ever received, Arndt says, was from an African-American television executive who told him that his photographs of Black Chicagoans were the first in which she couldn't tell

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<sup>1</sup> The artist also makes his own impeccable gelatin-silver prints.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Arndt, conversation with the author, August 5, 2014. Unless otherwise cited all subsequent quotes from the artist are taken from this discussion.

whether the photographer was white. Arndt's photographs of groups of young people of color posing in Minneapolis and Chicago from the late 1990s and early 2000s (along with his pictures of beauty-shop windows, storefronts, and doorways) are images worthy of the great, socially engaged documentarians of the Depression era Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. They trace the changing demographics of regions long known for their white majorities.

Looking at Arndt's photographs, one always gets the feeling he is at home in the world. His patience, curiosity, and passion for the tragicomedy of life shows in his images of three passengers in various states of self-possession on a bus traversing a neon-lit Las Vegas strip at night (Was it Umberto Eco's chronicle of American spectacles *Travels in Hyperreality* that, like the artist, lingered in a bar in St. Paul, Minnesota?); a man behind a fogged-up clothing store window in Chicago (the masculine plight is the subject of Arndt's 1994 book *Men in America*); and in a brilliant series of nocturnal shots of neighborhood 4<sup>th</sup>-of-July fireworks bacchanal in a New York neighborhood (is it Vietnam or Little Italy?). "The streets," Arndt has said, "are the common denominator of all of us. The streets contain our history. The streets are where the revolutions are made, where political statements are made, where the change is born."<sup>3</sup>

Although his range is worldwide, Arndt is a true denizen of the Upper Midwest. Manhattan, that nirvana for street photographers where he has worked since the beginning of his career, has become "Disneyland" of late, he believes. Chicago, on the other hand, where he lived and worked for years, using the darkroom and compiling an extensive archive of his work at the city's Art Institute, still has a vibrant texture. The city's blunt charm shines through in his shots of a boy strutting with a cane and bowler hat, a Ukrainian couple posing in front of their brick apartment building, and a customer leaving with takeout from a restaurant advertising "soul by the pound."

Arndt's native state of Minnesota, however, is his most evergreen subject. This northern territory can be tough for a street photographer. Its long, cold winters and short, hot summers, constrain public, communal life. Additionally, as radio host and humorist Garrison Keillor, a close friend of Arndt, has so often remarked, its residents are not known for their expressive dress or behavior. But these mostly down-to-earth folks are Arndt's people, and he finds ways to reveal sides of their characters. His affection for and understanding of them shows through in picture after picture.

All corners of Minnesota provide subjects for Arndt: his Aunt Fud's bedroom and its beatific portrait of Jesus in the small town of Fergus Falls, guileless elderly trailer campers in the southern part of the state, and weatherbeaten pedestrians on Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis's main thoroughfare. But in this exhibition's selection of photographs, Arndt's work from the state is most alive in photographs taken at state and county fairs, parades, and other communal celebrations. At these gatherings, where distractions abound and spirits are high, he can work quickly and blend into the rhythms of the event. A 1983 documentary video produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts shows Arndt in his element at the Minnesota State fair. He works fluidly, with palpable excitement and uses his trademark phrase "don't mind me" to disarm his subjects.<sup>4</sup> In *Two Women and the Flag, Payne Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota*, 1982, an image of two female spectators watching a color-guard parade from a second-story window, he succinctly captures America's distinctive brand of watchful patriotism. This and other flag-filled images in the exhibition call to mind Robert Frank's 1958 unromanticized study of

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Arndt quoted in "Tom Arndt Interview," by Sean Samuels, *The Klieg Light*, March 31, 2013 (<http://theklieglight.com/tom-arndt-interview/>), accessed July 11, 2104.

<sup>4</sup> See "The Documentary Urge: Tom Arndt, produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1983 (<http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/97184/the-documentary-urge-tom-arndt>), accessed August 8, 2014.

folkways in the United States, *The Americans*. (Might Arndt be our own new, home-grown de Tocqueville?) *Caramel Corn, Minnesota State Fair, St. Paul, Minnesota* and *Ticket Taker<sup>1</sup>, Minnesota State Fair, St. Paul, Minnesota*, two images of young people manning fairground stands taken in 1973, illustrate the peculiar mix of boredom and anticipation that is teenage life. And, perhaps the crescendo of the exhibition, the extraordinary photograph, *Minnesota State Fair, 1976*, which depicts a group of freshly-scrubbed young women gathering at dusk under an illuminated banner reading "American" induces a Pavlovian response in any good Midwestern boy—your author included—because it so perfectly summarizes the promise of a summer night in the Heartland. Of course, it's understandable why a state fair, with its agricultural competitions, nostalgic Americana, and fried food, has such appeal for an artist like Arndt. In a sense, it does what his photographs do: it miniaturizes the world and creates space for different views of ourselves.

Whether made at a Minnesota fair, a New Orleans bus stop, or on an empty road in Western Montana, Tom Arndt's photographs are an invaluable form of art. Plucked from the real world, his images break the engulfing experience of visual perception into crystalline fragments and grant us rare leverage on the incessant flow of time and consciousness. Like any carefully observed portrait or cityscape, they reveal everyday life's telling patterns and moods. As is typical of the genre, Arndt's street photographs leave the big questions unanswered: who are his subjects, where are they going, and what are they thinking? Yet his photographs of lives being lived distinguish themselves by their generous spirit. In their intimacy, sincerity, and openness, they convey the palpable sense that the photographer is right there with us on our journeys.

**Toby Kamps**

Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art  
The Menil Collection, Houston

## Selection of the works

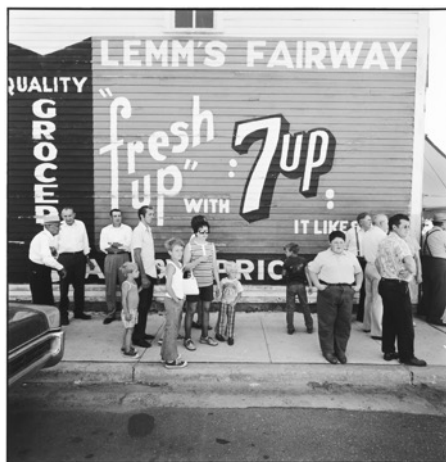
All prints are made by the artist.  
Each photo is available in two sizes :  
11 x 14" (11 x 14") and 16 x 20" (16 x 20")  
Edition of 15.

© Tom Arndt/Courtesy Les Douches la Galerie

*Minnesota State Fair, 1976*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 2012  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15  
*Minneapolis Institute of Art*



*Bicentennial Fete, Browerville,  
Minnesota, 1976*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 2009  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15



*Man with a bow tie, 6th Hennepin,  
Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1975*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 2006  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15  
*Minneapolis Institute of Art*



*Beauty shop Minneapolis, 1970*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 2014  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15



*Family, St Paul, Minnesota, 1988*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 2000  
11 x 14"  
N°5/15  
*Minneapolis Institute of Art  
Menil Collection, Houston*



*Reading the menu, Brighton Beach NY,  
1982*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 2014  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15



*Two women and the flag, Payne ave, St  
Paul Minnesota, 1982*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 2008  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15



*Young Women at dance studio, St Paul,  
Minnesota, 2011*

Gelatin silver-print, printed 2011  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15



*Mother and child on a bus, Chicago  
2000*

Gelatin silver-print, printed 2007  
11 x 14"  
N°3/15

*Art Institute of Chicago  
Menil Collection, Houston*



*Coffee Shop, Auction Barn, Sleepy eye,  
Minnesota, 1985*

Gelatin silver-print, printed 2000  
16 x 20"  
N° 2/15

*Minneapolis Institute of Art*



*Men riding a bus, Las Vegas, 1981*

Gelatin silver-print, printed 2005  
16 x 20"  
N°3/15

*Minneapolis Institute of Art  
Art Institute of Chicago  
Menil Collection, Houston*



*Couple at their mobile camper,  
Souterns Minnesota, 1975*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 1999  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15  
*Minneapolis Institute of Art*



*Man behind a store window, Chicago  
1990*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 1993  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15  
*Art Institute of Chicago*



*Man on Hennepin avenue, Minneapolis,  
Minnesota, 1974*  
Gelatin silver-print, printed 2008  
11 x 14"  
N°1/15  
*Minneapolis Institute of Art*



*Ice cube machine, Minneapolis,  
Minnesota, 1973*  
Gelatin-silver print vintage, 1973  
11 x 14"





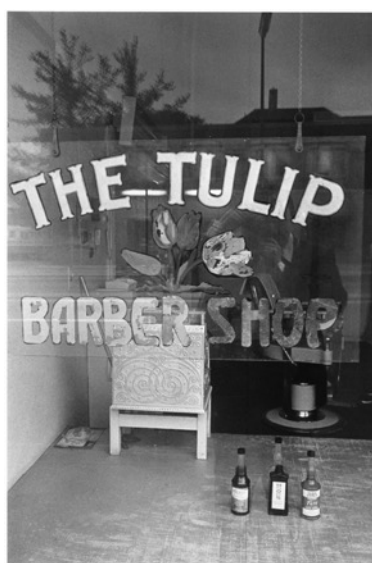
*Quality fish and Seafood, Minneapolis,  
Minnesota, 1973*

Gelatin-silver print vintage, 1973  
11 x 14"



*The Tulip Barbershop, Minneapolis,  
Minnesota, 1970*

Gelatin-silver print vintage, 1970  
11 x 14"



*On the road, western Montana, 1981*

Gelatin-silver print vintage, 1981  
11 x 14"  
N°2



## Tom Arndt

Born in 1944, works and lives in Minnesota (US)

### Selected solo exhibitions

- 2012 *4<sup>th</sup> of July*, Haggerty Museum, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.  
2010 *Being Human*, Galerie Axel Breuer, Munich, Germany  
2009 *Tom Arndt's Minnesota*, Minneapolis Institute of Art.  
2006 *Minnesota*, Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York.  
2002 *American Photographs*, Stephen Cohen Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.  
2001 *The Big Picture, Photographs by Tom Arndt*, Weinstein Gallery, Minneapolis, MI.  
1999 *A City Called Heaven*, Beloit College, WI.  
1998 *Recent Work*, Institute of Design, Chicago, IL.  
1995 *Chicagoland*, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis, MI.  
1992 *Men in America*, Art Institute of Chicago, IL.  
1989 *Tart Gallery*, Washington D.C.  
1989 *Photofind Gallery*, New York, NY.  
1986 *Edwynn Houk Gallery*, Chicago, IL.  
1986 *Light Gallery*, New York, NY.  
1984 *H.F. Manes' Gallery*, New York, NY.  
1984 *Tom Arndt's America*, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MI.  
1977 *O.K. Harris*, New York, NY.

### Selected group exhibitions

- 2009 *Picturing New York*, Traveling exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, traveling to Italy, Ireland and Spain. 2008 *The Minnesota Eye*, College of Visual Art Gallery St. Paul, MI.  
*Hall to the Chief*, Minneapolis Institute of Art, MI.  
2007 *New York at Night*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
2006 *From Darkroom to Digital*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.  
2004 *Photographs by the score*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.  
2002 *City of Life, photographs of New York from the permanent collection*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.  
2001 *The Sidewalk Never Ends*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.  
2001 *Street Photography*, Candace Perich Gallery, Katonah, NY.  
2000 *City 2000*, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL.  
*The Face of Minnesota*, Minnesota Historical Society,  
*Crossing the Line*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.  
1999 *The American Farm*, Candace Perich Gallery, Katonah, NY.  
1997 *New Faces, photographs from the permanent collection*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.  
1996 *Crossing the Frontier*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA.  
1996 *The Subject Was Music*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

- 1992 *At the Edge of Shelter: Homeless in Chicago*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
- 1982 *Twentieth Century Photographs from the Museum of Modern Art*, Seibu Museum, Tokyo Japan
- 1973 *Midwest Photographer's Invitational*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MI.
- 1970 *6<sup>th</sup> Artist's Biennial*, Minneapolis Institute of Art, MI.

### **Selected editions**

- 2009 *Home, Tom Arndt's Minnesota*, University of Minnesota Press
- 2001 *Bystander, A History of Street Photography*, Colin Westerbeck et Joel Meyerowitz
- 1997 *A World History of Photography*, Naomi Rosenblum
- 1995 *Men in America, photographs by Tom Arndt*, National Museum of American Art

### **Selected collections**

Museum of Modern Art, New York ; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ; Menil Collection, Houston Texas ; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago ; Art Institute of Chicago ; Minneapolis Institute of Art ; George Eastman House ; Los Angeles County Museum of Art ; Walker Art Center ; Hallmark Collection ; Houston Museum of Fine Art ; Margulies Collection, Miami ; General Mills Collection.

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