

Vivian often turned the camera on herself, playing with the idea of artist self-portraits



It was John Szarkowski, the pre-eminent photographer, historian and critic, who noted that photographs can be either described as windows looking out into the world, or as mirrors reflecting the artist behind the camera. But how do you analyse images when the photographer in control of the lens appears to be a total enigma, even on those occasions when the photographer turns the camera on herself?

That's the quandary that sits at the centre of the new documentary *Finding Vivian Maier*, a fascinating detective story that follows the journey of Chicago-based local filmmaker, photographer and Vivian Maier archivist John Maloof.

It was during John's research in 2007 to co-author a book detailing the history of his neighbourhood, Portage Park in the north west of Chicago, that he first happened upon Vivian Maier's images. Following a request by his publisher to include some vintage pictures within his book, John bought a box of negatives at an auction house for \$300 (around £180).

The negatives contained therein were so fascinating that John felt compelled to track down the other bidders who won boxes from the same lot to see if he could buy them. All the negatives were by one Vivian Maier, a figure so obscure even a Google search revealed nothing.

# Curating a legacy



The acclaimed documentary *Finding Vivian Maier* focuses on one of America's most enigmatic photographers. **Charlie Siskel**, its director, explains why he found her story so compelling. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**

A little detective work later (revealing that Vivian was an everyday housekeeper and nanny) and John was directed towards a storage unit containing an astonishing array of items.

Vivian was a hoarder to rival all others, even going so far as to collect teeth in an old film canister. But the real prize of this collection wasn't the hats, shoes, bus passes or uncashed income tax cheques (amounting to thousands of dollars) – it was the 100,000 negatives, 700 rolls of undeveloped colour film and the

2,000 rolls of undeveloped black & white film. So begins one of the most fascinating stories to come out of the world of photography for a long time.

'When I first became involved with the film project, the general idea was to produce a straight biography of Vivian Maier,' says Charlie Siskel (pictured above), director of *Finding Vivian Maier*. 'I wasn't so interested in that because, although she's a fascinating character, I felt the film could be a roller-coaster ride. It had to be a kind of detective story because there's a real mystery at the centre. Why was this nanny and housekeeper such a prolific photographer and, more than that, why did she never show her images to anyone? Why are we only seeing them now? The real story for me is the discovery of this body of work and the fact that she is finally getting the recognition she deserves.'

## Mastering the camera

To look at the work of Vivian Maier is to look upon the work of an artist who was truly in control of their medium. Both Mary Ellen Mark and Joel Meyerowitz (who describes Vivian as a 'genuine shooter') have commented on more than one occasion about Vivian's great eye for an image: her sense of framing, light and environment, and her ability to communicate humour and tragedy.

'One of the fascinating things to me was how economical Vivian was with her shooting, despite how many rolls of film she shot in her lifetime,' says Charlie. 'We actually figured out she was probably shooting about one roll a day throughout four decades. That's particularly important because the archiving of Vivian's work,



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Despite being self-taught, Vivian had a clear eye for framing and composition



with the help of the Howard Greenberg Gallery and Joel Meyerowitz, was occurring as we were making the documentary. They were producing around 300 scans a week. When you look through the contact sheets you can see that she rarely produced multiple exposures of her subjects. More often than not, she would take one frame and then move on. She knew exactly what she wanted to shoot and then it was on to the next subject. There's a big lesson in there for today's spray-and-pray digital photographers.'

The scope of Vivian's subject matter is astonishing to see (the archive is now 90% complete). Vivian was in some sense a self-appointed journalist, one eager to document the time in which she was living. Through Vivian's work, we see an artist building an archive – one that reflects the society that surrounded her.

'Vivian had a great eye for a story,' says Charlie. 'She had a journalistic mind. When you go through the various items she kept you'll find a great number of newspaper clippings dealing with subjects like corrupt politicians, rape and murder.

Basically, it's all the things that journalists see fit to put into newspapers. On one occasion, she witnessed a little boy get hit by a car in a quiet suburb and she was right there with her camera, documenting the scene with her Rolleiflex TLR. Vivian was itching for an outlet for her creativity.'

With this in mind, it's no surprise to find Vivian gravitating towards subjects that may otherwise remain unseen. She was particularly fond of photographing down-and-outs, people on the fringes of society.

'She had to no fear of going into the rougher areas of Chicago with her camera,' he says. 'There she'd find people who were disenfranchised and didn't fit into society. They were ghostlike and weren't a part of the kind of life she was seeing working as a nanny for privileged families.'

'The thing that strikes me about Vivian's work is that there always seems to be a degree of empathy with her subjects,' continues Charlie. 'For example, Vivian seemed to have a penchant for photographically studying the relationships of children with adults. In her images of children, they're always shot in such a way

that the eyes really draw you in.'

On the other hand, there is a kind of ruthlessness to Vivian's photographs. It's perhaps an unavoidable trait considering that people were her primary subjects and her documentation was a result of her journalistic drive.

'She never flinched from a subject,' says Charlie. 'She was doing her version of war photography – you don't look away in the presence of hardship and suffering. So when she's photographing a boy who's just been hit by a car, there's a coldness there. The boy was fine, but who knows if Vivian would have continued shooting if the situation turned out worse?'

#### Fascinating secrets

Trying to get to grips with just who Vivian Maier was is no mean feat. At one point, John Maloof and the filmmakers employ the services of a genealogist to trace the elusive photographer's path. It was without a doubt the most difficult task this particular genealogist has ever faced.

The secrets that are revealed are certainly fascinating (we find that Vivian cut off all contact with her family and it was most likely her mother who inspired her to take up photography), but what's perhaps more interesting is the character – or even lack of one – that Vivian built for herself to deal with the people she knew in her everyday life in Chicago.

'We were keen that we would never speak on Vivian's behalf,' explains Charlie. 'We would let the people who knew her do that and what we found was that they would always contradict one another. So, for example, Vivian had a French accent. We interviewed two expert linguists who knew her. One insists her accent

**Above: Vivian once described herself as 'a sort of spy' – a clear reference to her documentation of street life**

**Below: Vivian's journalistic mind led to many great shots**



**While most of Vivian's images are candid, there are the occasional shots of posed subjects**

was genuine. The other insists it was fake. One person will say she posed people in her photographs, another will say the opposite. Such was the power of the mystery of this woman.'

One thing that a lot of people seem to agree on was that, due to her strict embargo on all matters of her personal life, Vivian would have hated having her work seen and to have herself the subject of such intense worldwide speculation.

In one key scene of the film, John Maloof confesses to camera that he has begun to experience feelings of guilt and discomfort that he is putting this work out into the world, an act that, according to a number of people, contravenes Vivian's wishes.

'In actual fact, Vivian never made any such statement saying that she wanted her work to remain hidden,' says Charlie. 'In the film, we found clear evidence that she was approaching the idea of having her work seen by the public. For various reasons, that never happened in her lifetime. But we don't have another Franz Kafka here. Kafka asked that all of his work be destroyed following his death. It was released into the world against his wishes. It was the same with Emily Dickinson.'

But there's another problem.

Despite the fact that she took more than 150,000 photos over a 40-year period, Vivian's work was essentially incomplete when she died in April 2009. The thing is, a photographer's work doesn't end when the negatives are developed. There then follows the printing and the decision of which images to show the public. That means John Maloof is having to curate Vivian's work on her behalf.

'This is a huge burden on John because Vivian shot so many damn things,' says Charlie. 'If he chooses too many images of one thing, Vivian will forever sit under a label of that particular thing.'

Time will tell how Vivian Maier's photographic legacy will settle into the annals of history. It's only been just under seven years since the discovery of her work, yet she is already being mentioned in the same breath as many of the 20th century's great photographers – Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Eugène Atget and Weegee are obvious references. Regardless of how she will sit in the pantheon of master practitioners, Vivian's images have, in the words of many, turned the world of street photography on its head. AP



To learn more and to see if *Finding Vivian Maier* is screening in your area, visit [www.findingvivianmaier.com](http://www.findingvivianmaier.com). *Vivian Maier: A Photographer Found* by John Maloof will be published by Harper Design in November, 2014.

## The Rolleiflex TLR

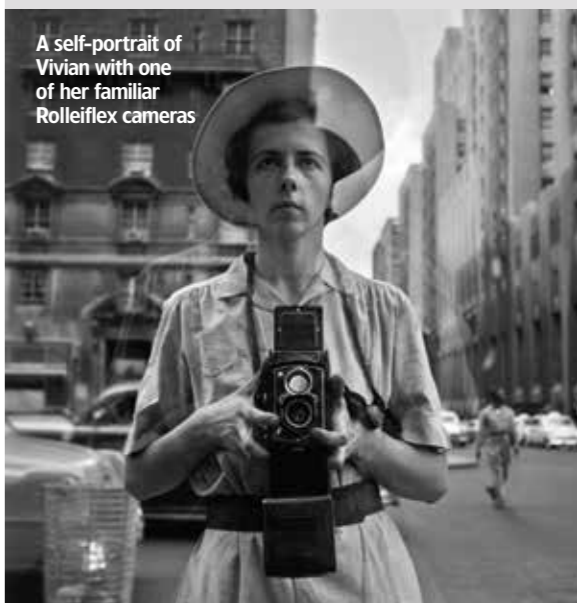
VIVIAN Maier's first camera was a modest Kodak Brownie box camera that had one shutter speed, no aperture and no focus control. In 1952, she bought her first Rolleiflex camera.

Over the course of her career, Vivian used a Rolleiflex 3.5T, Rolleiflex 3.5F, Rolleiflex 2.8C, Rolleiflex Automat and others. She later also used a Leica IIIc, an Ihagee Exakta, a Zeiss Contarex and various other models of SLR cameras.

Despite Vivian's various collections of cameras, it's the Rolleiflex TLR that will most often be associated with her work. Its silent leaf shutter, waist-level finder and bright screen were ideal tools for her street photography.

'The Rolleiflex is a great disguise camera,' says Joel Meyerowitz in the film. 'It isn't a camera you hold up to your eye. You can keep it by your waist and look down through the viewfinder. Vivian's camera was shooting at an angle pointing up and it gave the people in her images a towering magnitude.'

'Street photographers tend to be gregarious in the sense in that they can go out on the street and they're comfortable being among people. But at the same time they're a funny mixture of solitary. You observe, embrace and take in, but you stand back and try to stay invisible.'



**A self-portrait of Vivian with one of her familiar Rolleiflex cameras**