

DATEBOOK



“Forty Real Estate Photographs” — which Henry Wessel shot in Richmond — are included in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s survey of his work.

SFMOMA

An uncommon eye for common places

When reality presents itself to Henry Wessel, his ‘soft eyes’ are available to capture — and elevate — the moment

By **Jesse Hamlin**
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Henry Wessel was a fledgling photographer in 1967 when he drove from Pennsylvania to the Jersey shore to shoot. He didn’t have a place to crash so he slept in his car by the side of the road. He awoke to the sound of rain and the sight of the blurry gray world beyond his windshield, the phone poles vanishing in the drizzly distance, the lights of an oncoming car reflected on the slick roadway.

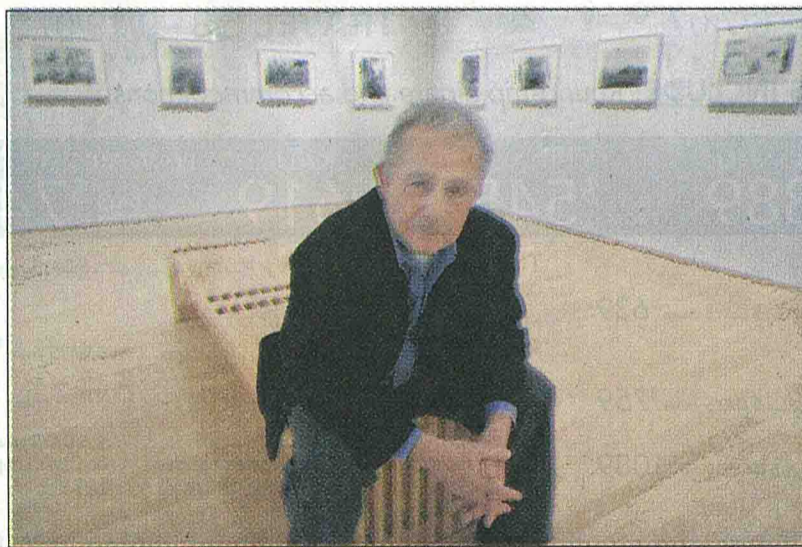
“I was sleeping in the front seat, I looked out the windshield, set up the camera and that was the photograph,” says Wessel, gazing at the dreamy image titled “New Jersey,” one of 80 or so works in “Henry Wessel: Photographs” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It’s a pleasing survey featuring familiar and lesser-known pictures by the renowned Point Richmond photographer who finds beauty and mystery in ordinary things, wonder in the everyday world of bus stops and parking lots and modest little homes, their sunlit shapes and shad-

ows locked in a moment of formal clarity.

“Some of my best work is done when I’m half asleep,” says Wessel, a cheerful, compact man with a ruddy complexion, white hair and a rollicking laugh. Like his pictures, he’s direct, unassuming and amusing.

For 40 years, Wessel has been photographing California and the West, rambling by foot and car through vast barren landscapes and modest suburban neighborhoods, if not half-asleep then in the receptive zone he calls “soft eyes.” Driving along some Arizona frontage road in the blinding afternoon sun or strolling around Los Angeles at 3 a.m., Wessel is in that open state where anything might make him stop and shoot.

“I respond physically to the physical world,” says Wessel, 64, a New Jersey native who was dazzled by the clarity of the California light he encountered on a visit to Los Angeles in the winter of 1969. He moved to the Bay Area in 1971 after receiving a Guggenheim grant. “I don’t go out looking for pictures. I go out, and if



PAUL CHINN / The Chronicle

Henry Wessel has been photographing California and the West for 40 years. “Some of my best work is done when I’m half asleep,” he says.

something catches my eye, that’s reason enough to photograph it.”

It might be the lone man peering out at the desert between two old wood structures in “Nevada”; the way the palm trees, phone lines and apartment-building shadows come together in “Hollywood, California”; or the noirish glow of porch light, shrouded by overgrown shrubbery, from a Santa Monica bungalow pictured in his

moody 1998 “Night Walk” series.

Wessel, whose art shares a certain sensibility with another California master who finds poetry in the commonplace, San Francisco painter Robert Bechtle, doesn’t stop to ask why these scenes speak to him. He just presses the shutter. He might analyze the images later, he says, but at the time, “things fall into place, and you say yes to them, and that’s it.”

Henry Wessel: Photographs: 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. daily except Wednesday, until 8:45 p.m. Thursday, through April 22, at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., San Francisco. \$7-\$12.50. (415) 357-4000, www.sfmoma.org.

SFGate.com

► To see more photos of the work of Henry Wessel, go to sfgate.com.

There’s a sense “that it all fits, that everything is working together and has its place in the photograph. . . . You could say that it’s recognizing an order in the physical world and then recording and presenting it. The task of the artist is to make order out of chaos. Yeah, it feels good to find moments of clarity,” he adds with a laugh.

Wessel, some of whose early images are also on view at San Francisco’s Rena Bransten Gallery, found his calling after experiencing a thrilling moment of discovery in 1966, when he saw the first picture he ever developed come to life. He’d recently graduated with a degree in psychology from Penn State, where his girlfriend was a member of the camera club. She asked him to take some pictures of her with a Leica camera her brother had

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Wessel says his photographs recognize an order in the physical world

► WESSEL

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brought from Germany. Wessel, who'd never owned a camera, photographed her on a fire escape and then processed the film in the college darkroom.

When the image came forth in the developing tray, "I could feel myself changing physically," Wessel recalls. "It was like something dropped out of the sky. Seeing her on the fire escape had given me a certain feeling, and then when I saw the photograph of her, it gave me a similar feeling. And I thought that was an incredibly powerful thing — that a photograph could give you a feeling that was similar to the feeling you

had in the physical world. Nobody could've told me that. I knew what I was going to do the rest of my life. The next day, I sold my motorcycle, and three months later I opened a portrait studio."

He plunged into picture making and absorbed the work of street photographers like Eugene Atget, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. He cites the last two as influences, and also loves the paintings of Edward Hopper, whose isolated American figures are brought to mind by Wessel's oddly arresting 1981 "Point Richmond, California." It shows an older gent in a light suit standing at the weathered garage door of a funky little house with pipes climbing the fa-

cade, a patch of chain link fence in the foreground, a small stack of cinder blocks on the driveway.

This and other solitary people in his pictures "are singular, but they're not necessarily lonely," Wessel says. "Contemplative."

That's an apt description of the man in a dark suit standing on the beach at Aquatic Park in "San Francisco, California (1973)," his back to the camera, hand on hip, as he gazes out to the bay. The triangle-shaped negative space made by his bent elbow is as crucial to the picture as the shadow of his legs spilling across the sand.

Thirty-five years after moving to California, Wessel, who teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute, is still drawn to the brilliant light

of the Golden State. "You can see everything," he says. "Every surface is described." Particularly in Southern California, where Wessel has photographed sun bathers, street corners, a cool Hitchcockian blonde seen from one car window into another in long-shadowed late-afternoon light.

"When I printed this, I thought Kim Novak," laughs Wessel, who often makes pictures of man-made environments empty of people, like the "Night Walk, Los Angeles" series. It includes the image of a huge leafless tree looming over a little house like something out of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," and a darkened Spanish bungalow that makes you wonder about the unseen lives

within. Seeing this picture, fellow photographer Lewis Balz said, "A couple had some terrible venomous fight 30 years ago and haven't spoken since."

Then there are the sweet little after dinner mint-colored Richmond houses that comprise "Forty Real Estate Photographs." These humble homes, with their tidy lawns, cherry-red shutters or lime-green trim, were all shot in early morning or late afternoon light from the same straight-on vantage point. They remind Wessel of the pictures on the walls of his mother's real estate office.

"You can see the handiwork of the occupants in every one of these houses," Wessel says.

Walking through the exhibi-

tion, he also sees "an aspect of my life. Each one of these things could be a mnemonic device, like this motel room," he says, pointing to a picture of a generic space strangely aglow with light from the sconces above the twin beds. "I see that the little tray on the floor has dog food in it. So that could throw me back to one period of my life, with that particular dog, and with that particular wife."

But Wessel prefers not to see this show as a retrospective of a life's work. "No, no, I'm still young," he says with a laugh. "I have another 40 years."

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