

Celebrating The Views That Others Looked Past

SAN FRANCISCO — In its quiet way, the Henry Wessel show here at the Museum of Modern Art is a revelation, one of the season's sleepers.

For the last 30 years or so, Mr. Wessel has been photographing the American West. Not the mountains and redwoods, but the parking lots, body builders, nude beaches and absurdly trimmed shrubbery. And the light.

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ART
REVIEW

He is having his moment. There have been shows lately at the Robert Mann and Charles Cowles galleries in New York. The exhibition here has about 80 mostly black-and-white prints that cover his whole career, one whose arc may make you scratch your head yet again at how distracted and fickle the art world can sometimes be.

He's a photographer's photographer. Born in 1942, he grew up in suburban New Jersey, then studied psychology at Penn State, borrowing a Leica one day from his girlfriend's brother. "It really knocked me out," he has recalled. "I had never really seen how a camera could describe something."

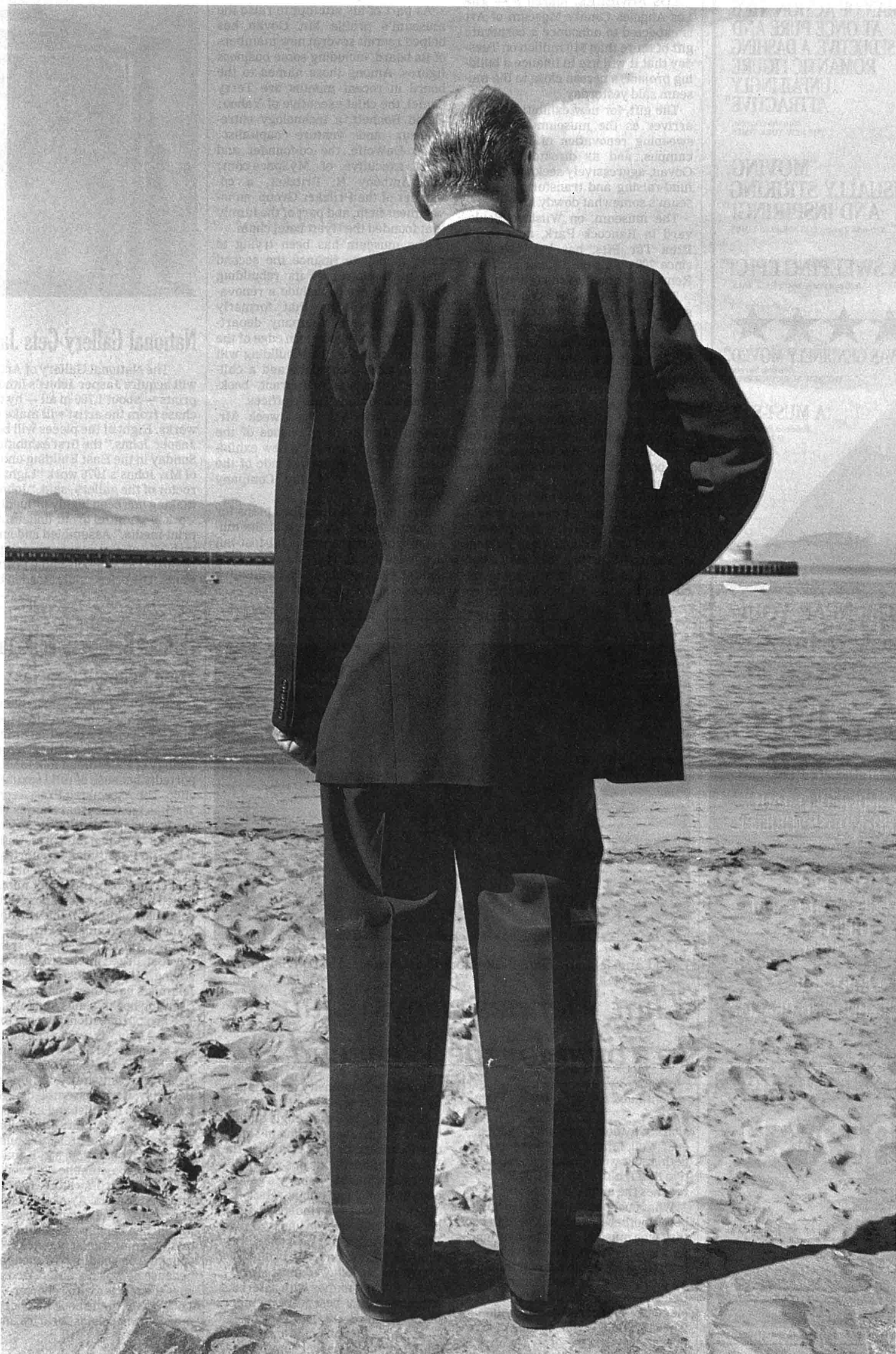
Behind that simple-sounding remark was a sea change Mr. Wessel came to recognize when he read "A Photographer's Eye," the catalog for a 1966 show put together at the Museum of Modern Art in New York by the great photography curator there, John Szarkowski. The show included, among others, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, whose works rejected the gauzy theatrics and feel-good humanity passed down to "serious" photography by Alfred Stieglitz, Ansel Adams and Edward Steichen.

Following Walker Evans's example, a postwar generation focused on what everybody in America during the 1950s, 60s and 70s actually saw in front of their noses or through their windshields or across their backyard fences, but didn't bother to register or preferred not to — much less to think was worth photographing. These were run-of-the-mill subjects, mostly, shot with deadpan acumen: highways, strip malls, used car lots and other seemingly nowhere places, shown to be somewhere after all. In the old populist spirit of Walt Whitman, but with a heavy dose of dry-eyed skepticism, they found a fresh kind of poetics in the American everyday.

Mr. Wessel crisscrossed the country too, and in 1972 at the Modern, Mr. Szarkowski gave him his first show. Mr. Wessel's humor was laconic, and he had a knack for seeing compositional order where it didn't obviously present itself — making pictures like visual haikus.

In the middle of the desert in Arizona, for example, he found a small white sign

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Henry Wessel: Photographs, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, has about 80 examples, including "San Francisco, California," right, from 1973.

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for ice. He spotted a vacant stretch of highway and scrub where a single puffy cloud suddenly made an apotrophe beside the T of a lone telephone pole. He noticed how, outside a soulless concrete house in sun-baked New Mexico, two curious piles of dirt and a plank fence made a serendipitous symmetry, to which was added a very subtle brand of comedy in the form of a water meter, teetering, as if beckoning a delicate television antenna like a prospective Romeo to his Juliet on the balcony.

The show here was organized by Corey Keller. Sandra Phillips, a colleague at the San Francisco museum, notes in the catalog that "there is no forlornness, no empathy, only amazement" in Mr. Wessel's work. That's right. Without sentiment but without condescension, either, he keeps a respectful distance from his subjects, and generally keeps himself out of the picture, ego-wise. When his shadow casts into the frame, it's the familiar device to acknowledge the fact of the photographer's presence, but above all a way to stress sunlight as an abiding fact. Light has weight and character. In California, it's denser in the south, crisper in the north, and you see it in his photographs.

During the 1970s Mr. Wessel seemed to be everywhere. He was included in groundbreaking exhibitions like "New Topographics" at the Eastman House in Rochester. Mr. Szarkowski concluded a book, "Looking at Photographs," with one of his pictures. This was before the art market Gold Rush of the 80s, which made fashionable a very different, glitzy brand of photography: big, staged and self-consciously "arty" pictures that turned figures like Cindy Sherman and Andreas Gursky into stars. You wonder what might have happened had Mr. Wessel switched sooner to color

"Henry Wessel: Photographs" is on view through April 22 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third Street; (415) 357-4000 or www.sfmoma.org.

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

More images from the Henry Wessel retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: nytimes.com/design

and enlarged his prints, the way they did theirs.

Instead he went about his business, it seems. He has said he aspired to make photographs that looked styleless, but his style is cool, self-effacing and based on the deep, quiet pleasures of keeping your eyes open, because the world is full of surprises. At one time, he traveled around with Winogrand, who, like him, saw how fantastically weird America can be and kept an eyebrow cocked in response. But Mr. Wessel didn't traffic in claustrophobia and alienation. He had none of the caustic or darkling energy of Mr. Frank or of a photographer like Robert Adams.

His equanimity can be a detriment sometimes. Modesty has its costs, and his views of houses, straight-on like head shots or real estate advertisements, while conveying a curious, plainspoken affection for their home(ly) subjects, in the end don't overcome their inherent boredom. Noir-ish night shots of darkened bungalows and moonlit trees come to look repetitive too.

Sometimes the point of an image is simply hard to fathom. I gazed at a picture of an empty yard, wondering whether the geometry of it was the subject, before finally giving up. Mr. Wessel doesn't always make it easy. But then, looking hard isn't.

There are also pictures like the one of four people, lingering close to a fence in San Francisco, spaced equally far from one another for who knows what reason, waiting presumably for a bus. It's Beckett meets the Twilight Zone. There's the motel room with twin beds illuminated by wall lights that, combined with the half-moon headboards, suddenly make a funny face. And there's the man in a business suit, a Willie Loman of Malibu, standing on an empty beach. He's shot close-up from behind, so you can't make out his face, an image that summons to mind artists like



Photographs from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Many of Henry Wessel's photographs, like this one taken in San Francisco in 1977, focus on the peculiarity of everyday events.



A photograph taken by Mr. Wessel in Walapai, Ariz., in 1971.

Wayne Thiebaud and Robert Longo all at once.

A camera sees everything in front of the lens that we unconsciously edit out when we look around; then it crops the view in ways that create fresh meaning. In the early 70s Mr. Wessel shot a strip mall in Las Vegas from across a wide avenue. The middle ground is bisected by a lamppost and a Hilton hotel, and the whole scene is framed by a palm tree and a cement statue, of which only a gloved hand makes it into the picture, reaching down from above, touching the sculpture's base like Michelangelo's God in the Sistine. It's a riddle, solved by the shadow that the sculpture casts, revealing the ridiculous figure of an acrobat who looks as if he's catapulting to the cocktail lounge at the mall.

Around the same time, driving

from Waco, Tex., to Los Angeles, Mr. Wessel recalled in an interview in the catalog, he looked over his shoulder, "out the open window, raised my camera and said 'yes!'" What he saw were dried corn stalks making a rough hedge, like a scrim before a white clapboard house.

And back in California, on New Year's Day, he spotted a pair of long-legged majorettes in high white boots, practicing for the Rose Bowl parade, lined up perfectly with the trees behind them. The nearer of the young women raised both arms, her gesture echoed by the pointy peak of a juniper and two skinny palm trees on either side.

You can almost hear, in the clear morning air, the drone of the little plane flying overhead, which she seems to have tossed like a magician's dove into the sky.