

Vivian Maier — A Recollection by Jim Dempsey

My first memory of Vivian Maier was at the Film Center, the Chicago art-house movie theater showing independent, international, and classic cinema at which I served as House Manager for many years. I believe it was an Andy Warhol film series, screening gems like *Empire*, *Sleep*, *Kiss*, *Blow Job*, and *Lonesome Cowboys*. I took note of her distinctive look: patent leather two-tone shoes, loose stockings, skirt, usually an androgynous suit jacket and a floppy felt fedora. She would watch an hour or two of a Warhol film, then come out to the lobby and talk to me, expressing admiration or disdain for the particular film she was viewing.

For the next 10 years I saw and spoke with Vivian on a weekly basis. I started to refer to her as Frau Blucher, based on the Cloris Leachman character in *Young Frankenstein*, because of her intense directness and her thick accent. Vivian seemed a very private person who, for some reason, took a liking to me; it was rare that she would show up without pulling me aside to discuss the German noir or British B-movie she was about to see. Often times she fumbled through her purse, looking for money as patrons lined up behind her, which occasionally prompted me to say something like, "Don't worry about it, this one is on the house," and hustle her into the theater. I felt slightly conflicted emotions with Vivian. The sight of her walking up the stairs to the theater lobby was usually followed by a mild sense of dread at having to stand and talk to her. She was a close-talker, routinely breaking through one's personal space. That directness could be off-putting; a few box office workers just thought she was rude. But by the end of our conversations, I would always warm to her, we would laugh together in an almost flirty manner, and the next week the cycle would start all over again.

Looking back, I realize now how little I really knew about Vivian's life. Our conversations were about movies and whatever questions she had about me. I remember her arriving for a film once with a vintage Rolleiflex box camera around her neck. She asked me to step back so that she could photograph me. I moved into position, she looked into the box, snapped the shutter, and wandered into the dark theater. I remarked to the box office staff that the camera fit the exact vintage of her clothing and said that I doubted that there was even film in it. How little I knew. I didn't even know her name.

Not yet having made the connection, I stumbled onto a photo blog of Vivian's work a few years ago and was transfixed by the imagery. There were some early self-portraits that made me wonder: who was this quirky mysterious woman who shot all these beautiful images? Later, I saw a news

story on WTTW's 'Chicago Tonight' about Vivian. A much later self-portrait flashed on the screen, and the fedora on her head instantly made me think of her resemblance to the woman I had known. The newscaster mentioned audiotapes Vivian had made, speaking into a cassette recorder; they



played a clip of one, and the voice was unmistakable. Vivian Maier was Frau Blucher! I couldn't believe the odd lady I'd known for so many years was the eye behind these images. Seeing them, I understood her inquisitive nature, the way she asked questions and got almost unnaturally close to people; rather than revealing herself, she wanted to know more about others, whether they were vagrants sleeping on the street, socialites playing with their kids, or a guy working at the cinema.

Vivian never made the transition as the theater moved to State Street and was renamed the Gene Siskel Film Center. Around 2007, as I was crossing Randolph on my way to work, I spotted Vivian walking down the street. I couldn't believe Frau Blucher was still alive and dressed exactly the same as always — she had seemed old already in 1989. I had the urge to stop her on the street and say hello. I was running late and I let her walk by and turned to watch her shuffle around the corner. ■

Untitled
n.d.
photograph
3.25" x 3.25"