



After 70 years with a camera in his hands, photographer George Zimbel is still snapping pictures



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Several old cameras sit on a high shelf in George Zimbel's basement studio in Montreal. "There are no Leicas up there," he says, "because they still work."

Zimbel is still working too, after 70 years with a camera in his hands. In those seven decades, a lot of the world has passed by his lens, leaving traces many of us recognize without knowing who captured them.

"Have you seen this picture?" he says, showing me a black-and-white print of John and Jackie Kennedy riding through New York in 1960 in an open convertible. Zimbel was right in front of the car when he took the picture. He shows me another, shot from close behind. "You can't get that picture any more," he says, and I know he's talking not just about Kennedy, but about the golden age of access, when pictures of the powerful were pretty much there for the taking.



Zimbel's Ham, Beef & Beer, NYC (Bronx) 1954 (Print 1990). (DF-MBAM)

That's a paradox of our times: Cameras are everywhere, but so are gatekeepers to stop you from using one. That's not what Zimbel signed up for when he began doing street photography in New York in the 1940s, some of which has shown up in a new exhibition of his work at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts called *George S. Zimbel: A Humanist Photographer*.

Zimbel moved to Montreal in 1980, and has rented his little carpeted studio in an office building in the Plateau neighbourhood for 21 years. He still shoots in black and white with his old Leicas, develops his pictures in a small darkroom, and prints them with a couple of vintage enlargers.

"I never catch up, because I print all my own work," he says proudly. "That's a Photo League thing." The Photo League, a now-legendary group that Zimbel joined in New York, espoused an impassioned engagement with the stuff of daily life. That is still his starting point when he prowls around Montreal, looking for the patterns and accidental coherences of the urban scene.

"The architecture here is very interesting, be it good, bad or broken-down," he says. He's not so happy with some of the gentrification that has transformed the Plateau during his watch, perhaps because it has made the area feel less genuine.

In his studio, one is more aware of the sounds of the Plateau than of its sights. The open windows bring in gusts of traffic noise and snatches of passing conversation in both official languages, but the blinds are closed.



Zimbel's street photography includes 1953's *Hoods up, Lincoln Tunnel*. (DF-MBAM)

Zimbel, who was born in Massachusetts in 1929, has white hair and moves with a slight stoop, but there's a youthful animation in his face. He's still enthusiastic about the documentary *métier* he encountered at gatherings of the Photo League, whose self-declared mission was "to put the camera back into the hands of honest photographers, who will use it to photograph America."

"It was very collegial," Zimbel says fondly, recalling how older photographers such as Edward Steichen gave him tips and advice. Another lent Zimbel a pass that allowed him to take several shots of Marilyn Monroe on the location of the famous blown-skirt scene from *The Seven Year Itch*. By that time, in the mid-1950s, Zimbel and other Photo League members were shooting for magazines such as *Look* and *Life*, which had made a business of the "photograph America" idea. Some of Zimbel's

projects from that era seem like outtakes from the Work Projects Administration that kept workers and artists in the United States busy during the Depression. He did a long series for the Ford Foundation, of children in schools all over North America. In 1959, he shot an exhibition for the U.S. Information Agency called *The County Agent*, which was meant to show how an agricultural specialist in Oklahoma was making farming more efficient.



Marilyn Monroe, *Seven Year Itch (The Flower)* 1954 (Print 1996). (DF-MBAM)

“It was after the war, and we were all enthusiastic about how great it was going to be,” he says. It became less great during the Vietnam War, and in the early 1970s he left the United States with his wife and children, initially settling on a farm in Prince Edward Island. Instead of shooting office workers walking through Manhattan, he took pictures of farm animals peering in at his window.

Zimbel’s show at the MMFA includes candid photos of the famous, including Helen Keller and Harry Truman, as well as pungent shots from bars in Europe and burlesque theatres in New Orleans. For his work in Montreal, you have to look at his website, where he has street photos from three decades. There’s snow in a lot of them, and probably not just because Montreal has long winters. Snow can have magical effects in black-and-white, and people walking in the stuff leave photogenic patterns.

Zimbel also appears in a forthcoming film called *Zimbelism*, and has a new book out, called *Momento* – “a word I made up,” meant to suggest two other words without committing to either one. The images are arranged in linked pairs. An intense portrait of Montreal dancer Margie Gillis in action, for instance, faces an older shot of a little girl twirling out her skirt in a private reverie. A lot of Zimbel’s pairings are sweet like that, drawing common links between people from different times, places and situations. Humanist photographer sounds about right.