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Photographing a Fast-Moving New York, Slowly

Lugging her cumbersome camera around mid-20th century New York, Evelyn Hofer captured a rapidly changing city, slowly, sensitively and methodically.

By Matthew Sedacca
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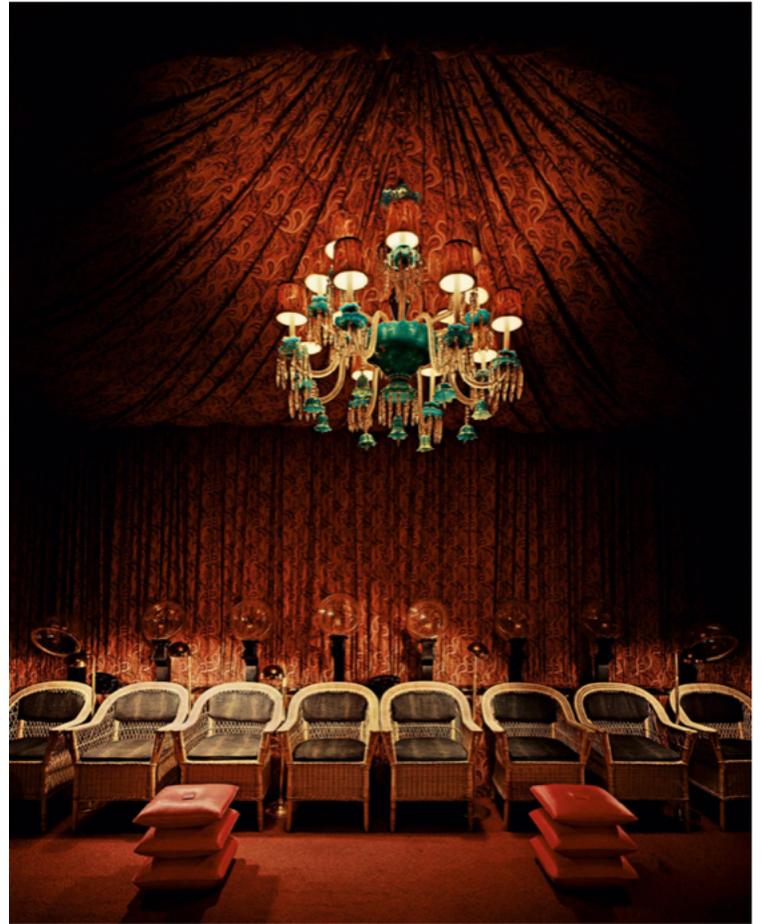
Harlem church, 1964. Estate of Evelyn Hofer

It's no secret that most New Yorkers have always moved at breakneck speed. But in mid-20th-century New York, Evelyn Hofer — often toting a cumbersome 4x5 Linhof Technika view camera — found momentary pauses. Her saintlike patience and technical expertise, as well as a penchant for capturing people's emotional intensity, imbue her images with a pulsing, urban kineticism.

“She stepped back into not participating in fastness but cultivating this slowness,” said Susanne Breidenbach, the owner of Galerie m Bochum, in Bochum, Germany, about Ms. Hofer, who died in 2009 at 87. “This is the very special thing you see in the photographs.”



Policeman, 59th Street, 1964. Estate of Evelyn Hofer



Beauty palace, 1963. Estate of Evelyn Hofer

Moving to the United States from Mexico in 1946 was a turning point for Ms. Hofer, who was born in the German river town of Marburg. In New York, she worked regularly for magazines and immersed herself in its post-World War II culture. Later, she provided the photography for travel books by renowned authors, including “New York Proclaimed” with V.S. Pritchett.

Ms. Hofer could dedicate weeks to studying the light, her subjects and certain backdrops of her adopted city before taking pictures. She looked for “inside value, some interior respect,” she once said. A selection of images from the 1960s and ’70s appear in the recent book “Evelyn Hofer: New York,” published by Steidl.



A girl in 1975. Estate of Evelyn Hofer



Santo Domingo in New York, 1964. Estate of Evelyn Hofer



Union League Club, 1965. Estate of Evelyn Hofer



The Bowery, 1963. Estate of Evelyn Hofer

In addition to her work's striking composition, Ms. Hofer conveyed myriad New York societies. From scowling barflies and clean-cut men celebrating the new year in Chinatown to Harlem churchgoers and weary-eyed hot dog vendors in Little Italy, all were captured by her lens. Cherry red and cream advertisements above the Bond Clothing Store in Times Square contrast with the tombstones and angel sculptures in a Queens cemetery running parallel to the skyline.

“She wanted to keep the timeless, the eternal things,” said Andreas Pauly, her longtime assistant, “and of course, that was difficult in New York.”



Hotdog stand, 1963. Estate of Evelyn Hofer



New Year in Chinatown, 1964. Estate of Evelyn Hofer

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Car park, 1964. Estate of Evelyn Hofer



Man in front of club, 1975. Estate of Evelyn Hofer



Cemetery, Queens, 1965. Estate of Evelyn Hofer