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Photographs by

Stern Bramson

The Art Institute of Chicago • July 1 - September 4, 1989
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When the Royal Photo Company's office and
studio was to be demolished as part of an urban
renewal project in 1973, Stern Bramson sold the
company files and client list to another
Louisville commercial photographer. Bramson
hasn't taken a picture since. For forty-three
years, Bramson had photographed employee
banquets, storefront windows, visiting
celebrities, and accident victims in his
hometown, Louisville, Kentucky. Although this
was standard material for commercial work,
Bramson's pictures are by no means ordinary.
His straightforward approach results in
humorous and sometimes inexplicable images,
setting Bramson's photographs apart from other
conventional work of the period.

Royal Photo Company, the commercial
photography studio where Bramson spent his
career, was founded by his father, Louis, in
1904. Everything the younger Bramson knows
about photography he learned from working in
the studio and going out on assignment with his
father starting in 1922 when he was ten years
old. Bramson entered the family business when
he graduated from high school in 1930. Except
for a brief hiatus from 1944 to 1946, when he
served in the United States Army as
photographer in Germany and as photography
teacher at training centers in the United States
and England, Bramson worked at Royal Photo
Company until he retired.

Bramson's life as a commercial photographer
was rarely dull. He was on call twenty-four
hours a day for both trucking and insurance
companies to photograph accident sites, fires,
and natural disasters. He remembers being par-
ticularly busy when the first interstate highway
between Louisville and Cincinnati was built in
the late sixties. As the photographer explains it,
no one knew how to get on or off the new
roadway and cars and trucks collided regularly.
Bramson's station wagon could be loaded up
with camera and lighting equipment at a mo-
ment's notice, and he was often awakened in
the middle of the night for an emergency.

Whether Bramson photographed a calamity or a
special occasion, he carefully orchestrated each
picture, imposing a sense of formality and order
on both the mundane and the unexpected. Such
precision is remarkable in light of the fact that,
unlike other photographers, who take multiple
exposures of a subject to ensure good results,
Bramson made only one negative of each scene.
When photographing groups of people, he
waited for just the right moment, then politely
asked, "Ladies and gentlemen, would you be
kind enough to look this way?" What separates
the resulting pictures from commercial imagery
of the period is the photographer's cool
observation and the odd self-consciousness of
his subjects. Bramson's single-shot method,
frontal lighting, and central placement of the
figures in the frame lend an unreal, stunned look
to those he photographed. The images are clean
and direct, but there is a haunting element to
them, as though we have somehow entered a
late-night science-fiction television program
and traveled back to a small town in postwar
America. Everything may seem normal, but
something is not quite right in Bramson's
Louisville.

In one particularly peculiar photograph (Blind-
folded Girl and Plymouth, Client: Great Atlantic
and Pacific Tea Company, June 19, 1956), Bramson recalls that the young woman had put on the mask to conduct a blind-drawing for the winner of the Plymouth. But that does not explain why there are holes for the eyes in the mask or why the woman did not remove it for the picture. In Re-enactment of Injury Accident, Client: Southern Bell Telephone Company, April 5, 1957, a man lies on the dented hood of a telephone repair truck with his feet and arms raised awkwardly in the air. His head is turned slightly toward the camera and he appears to be not only re-enacting the body position of the fall victim but also the grimace on the injured man’s face; or is he just smiling for the camera? When asked about these pictures, Bramson never talks about their strangeness. The photographer only describes the circumstances of their making.

On the few occasions that Bramson went so far as to hand-work an image, his experimentation was generated not by curiosity about how the medium could be altered or transformed, but by the dictates of a job. The composite photograph taken for the Howell Furniture Company gives the illusion that people are casually relaxing in couches and easy chairs on an open street in downtown Louisville. The two pictures that make up this piece—one of an empty street, one of the furniture showroom—were composed and taken with the final arrangement in mind. The problem-solver in Bramson devised the invention but his understated, formal method of photographing is responsible for the humor of the work.

In 1982, ten years after Bramson sold the company business, Barry Bingham, Jr., editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal, bought Royal Photo Company’s negatives and donated them to the University of Louisville Photographic Archives. Although many of the company’s early files, negatives, and prints have been lost over the years, much of the work done by Stern Bramson from 1937 to 1973 still exists. Bill Carner and James C. Anderson of the Archives have sorted through the negatives with care and have printed several of them for exhibition. Since then, Bramson’s photographs have been exhibited in art galleries on both coasts of the United States. But Bramson has never thought of photography as an art—it is a trade, a skill; it was his livelihood. In the photographer’s eyes, his pictures are simply the products of jobs completed, the fulfillment of clients’ requests.

If we were to look at only one of Bramson’s photographs without knowing of the others, we might see his work as Bramson does. Although when we consider a group of images selected from throughout the photographer’s career, as we do in this exhibition, it is clear that these pictures are no longer the simple documentation of the events or the people they portray. Years after these photographs were delivered to the client and paid for, they have transcended their original utilitarian function. Bramson’s images exist now as both delightfully dated pictures of an era gone by and as a chronicle of an individual’s singular way of seeing. But our interest in them will always be a mystery to the man who made them. As Bramson says, “It was all in a day’s work.”

Sylvia Wolf, Curatorial Assistant
Department of Photography

All of the photographs in the exhibition are silver gelatin prints enlarged from original negatives by Bill Carner and lent by the University of Louisville Photographic Archives. The exhibition is supported by the John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Special Exhibitions Grant.
Checklist of the Exhibition

1. Victor Mature at Opening for "One Million B.C.", Loew's Theatre, April 4, 1940. (16 x 20 in.)

2. Party for Employees and Families, National Cash Register Corporation, June 27, 1953. (16 x 20 in.)

3. Baron LaVelle (Lawrence Jones) in His Home Theatre, February 17, 1962. (16 x 20 in.)

4. Photograph of Bruised Face (Robert D. Cash), April 30, 1963. (20 x 16 in.)

5. Lovely Legs Store, Fourth Street, September 15, 1948. (20 x 16 in.)


8. Sealtest Employee Banquet, January 22, 1964. (16 x 20 in.)

9. Louisville Cooperage Company Employees Receiving Watches, December 21, 1949. (16 x 20 in.)

10. Neon Art Sign Company, October 14, 1940. (11 x 14 in.)


12. Stocking the Pantry, Home for the Elderly, Little Sisters of the Poor Good Mother, February 17, 1959. (16 x 20 in.)

13. Golden Donut Ranch, 608-1/2 South Fourth Street, January 27, 1942. (14 x 11 in.)


15. Kentucky Elks Association Quartet, December 17, 1945. (11 x 14 in.)


17. Christening Ceremony, Slick Air Freight, Standiford Field, October 8, 1956. (11 x 14 in.)

18. Will Sales Jewelry Company, 401 South Fourth Street, August 16, 1947. (14 x 11 in.)

19. St. Bernard Coal Company Truck Wrecked at First National Bank, Preston and Oak Streets Branch, May 7, 1942. (16 x 20 in.)

20. Trucks and Men, Community Towel Service, March 25, 1950. (16 x 20 in.)


22. Fire Damage at Pearl Street Garage. Client: Southern Bell Telephone Company, June 17, 1949. (16 x 20 in.)

23. Toys for Christmas at the Salvation Army, December 10, 1940. (16 x 20 in.)

24. Models and Blank Screen. Client: Kaufman-Straus Department Store, August 20, 1946. (16 x 20 in.)

25. Four Generations of the Schuster Family, November 27, 1960. (16 x 20 in.)