

LOCAL COLOR, CHICAGO STYLE:

BORUCH
CARROLL
SLOAN-
THEODORE
SORCE
TRAUB

by Charles Desmarais

GRAVURE
PORTFOLIO
GREAT
IMAGES
#29

Even if you've never been to Chicago, you know this city. Maybe you know it because you remember reading in high school English class of Carl Sandburg's "City of the Big Shoulders." Or maybe your bent was social science, and you conjure an image of stockyards—a city that is "Hog Butcher for the World." Maybe you remember the turmoil of the Democratic National Convention held there 12 years ago.

You know this city because it is, metaphorically as well as geographically, the center of America. There's got to be some point where the raw materials of appropriated ideas and inventions become integrated components of any system, whether we're talking about computers, people, or cultures—where, reinterpreted and restructured, the conglomerate becomes a totally new thing. Chicago is where outside influence becomes, finally, American culture.

Still, Chicago's creative product often has the appearance of some special strain, indigenous only to this region. Chicago Blues, for instance, is a specific kind of blues music. Chicago Politics and Chicago Architecture, too, are categories unto themselves. While development in these areas may parallel that of "mainstream" activities elsewhere, a Chicago subset always seems unique. It's as if the creative person in any field has no choice but to draw on the sense and style of this major city plopped in the middle of a huge, flat plain; this city composed of scores of ethnic neighborhoods that sometimes seem more like city-states; this city with a beachfront that would make Miami proud.

Before Laszlo Moholy-Nagy came to Chicago in 1937, there was no creative photography in Chicago to speak of. True, Edward Weston was born in a Chicago suburb, and Edward Steichen did his earliest work in the nearby city of Milwaukee, Wis. True, too, the city's most important museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, displayed photographs occasionally from the turn of the century onward. But it wasn't until Moholy-Nagy opened a school for the dissemination of modern European design ideas that photography became a serious alternative for the Chicago artist. (The school was the New Bauhaus and was structured, loosely, around the same basic principles as the original Bauhaus in Germany.) In the years that ensued, Moholy's teachings

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were re-thought and incorporated into what amounted to a Chicago photography aesthetic by the instructors he brought to the New Bauhaus and its successor, the Institute of Design. These teachers—including Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind and Arthur Siegel—and their students and their students' students did such a good job of spreading the word that there is really no longer an identifiably Chicago way of working in black-and-white photography. All instruction anywhere in photography today is, to some degree, affected by Moholy's grand experiment.

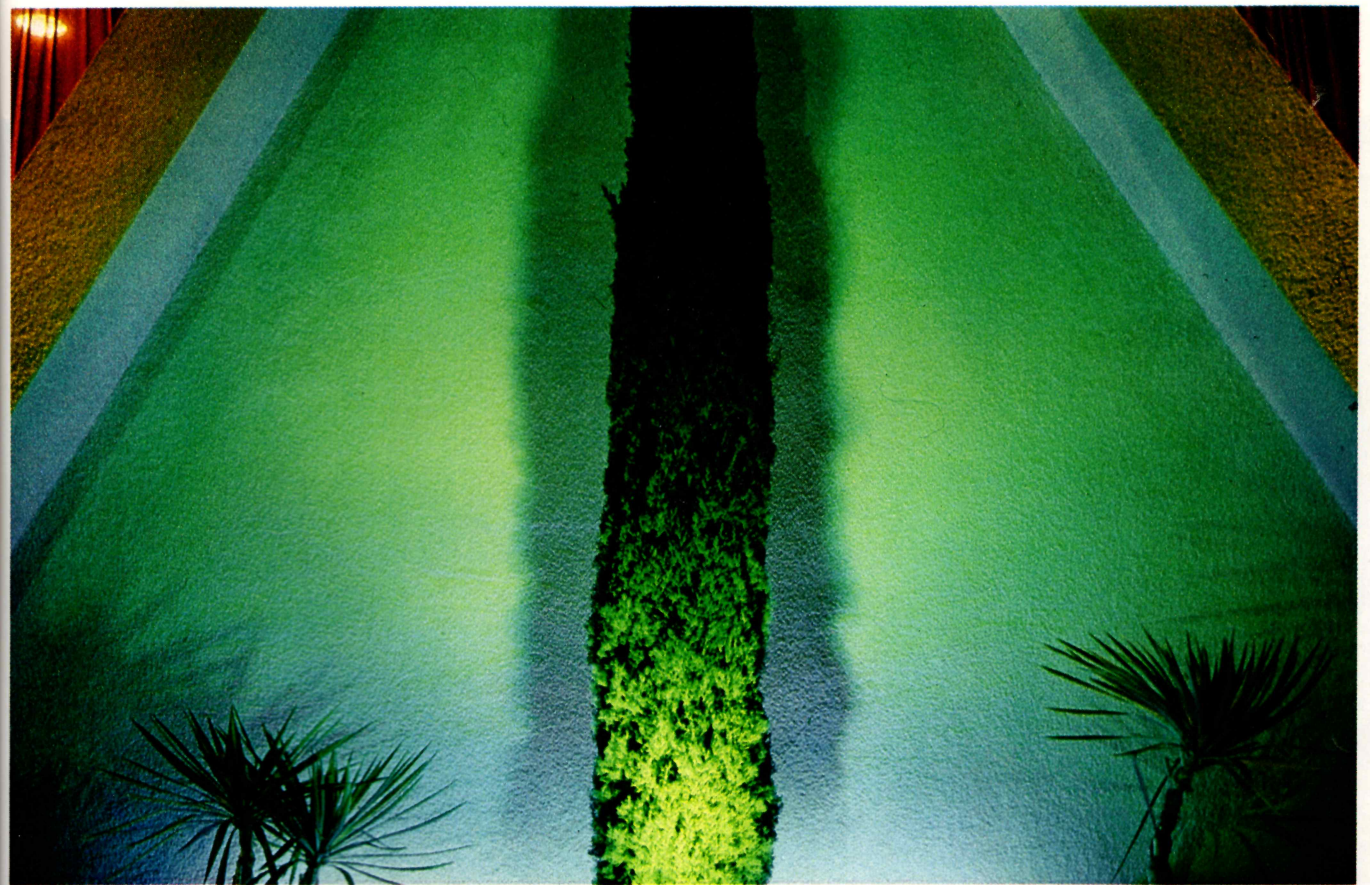
There are, however, factors that serve to set this city's color photography apart from that done elsewhere. The Institute of Design wasn't spared that combination of prejudice, expense and technical difficulty that obstructed development of serious work in color everywhere, throughout the United States, until recently (although both Siegel and Callahan began experimenting with color photography in the '40s).

Even now, when color finally has come into its own, there are difficulties in finding out what is going on in other parts of the country. Though photographs are easily and accurately reproduced on the printed page, it is still relatively expensive to do so. For this reason, ideas in color photography are not disseminated as widely or as quickly as they are in black-and-white. The more that picture-makers must rely on work seen in local classrooms and exhibitions, and on irregular trips to other parts of the country, the greater the chance that a "regional style" might develop.

Thus, it is especially important that the Chicago art scene, long a bastion of narrative and metaphoric content within a larger art world of form-as-content painting and of criticism that addresses itself more to what an object looks like than to what it means, has considered its photographers full and productive members all along. (That may be why there's been no real need for this city to turn the collecting of photography into the expensive fad New York has made of the medium).

Contemporary Chicago color photography—at least, that part of it that is uniquely Chicago—has two obvious strains running through it. The first of these bears a close relationship to Chicago Imagist painting, a style and movement in art that reigned unchallenged for many years, and one which is still thought of by many as synonymous with Chicago art. Imagist art, probably best described by Franz

Patty Carroll



Michael Boruch





Charles Traub



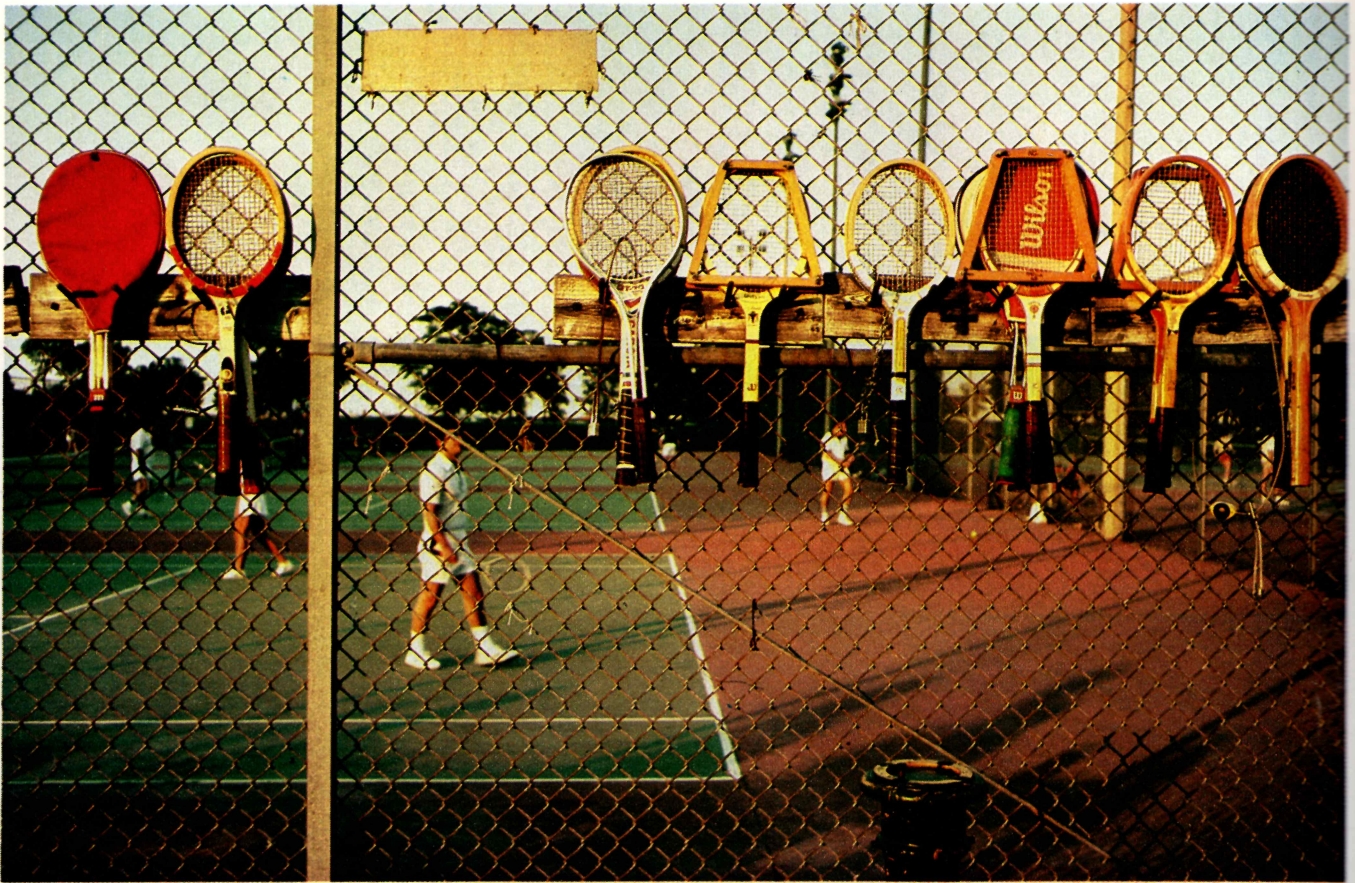


Wayne Sorce





Lynn Sloan-Theodore



Shulze in his 1972 book, *Fantastic Images* (Chicago, Follett Publishing Co.), "tends," as Shulze puts it, "rather towards highly personal, introverted and obsessive styles, and those who create it are usually . . . infatuated with symbol, image, dream and pungent anecdote. . . ." Chicago art, he says, is the place where "fantasy married funk." The other strain of Chicago color photography has its base in the tradition of documentary photography fostered by the Art Institute of Chicago's two famous curators, Hugh Edwards and Peter Pollack. This tradition currently is being reinterpreted and broadened by David Travis, the current head of photography at the institute.

Of the Imagist-related work reproduced here, Patty Carroll's is particularly instructive. Carroll shares with the Imagist painters a predilection for intense, acid colors, strong contrasts, and a formal strictness that suggests we may be looking at objects with some ritual function.

Chicago's hunger for kitsch, glitter and color combine with a taste for the deeply personal, and the result is a proliferation of neo-surrealist, neo-expressionist art in all media. The gamut runs from humor through irony and sarcasm to the bizarre. Thus, it is no small matter when *Sun-Times* newspaper critic David Elliott calls Carroll "our local Champ of Cheap." In this town, that's more than a compliment—it's the critical equivalent of a major museum retrospective. The work shown here is from an extensive series of nighttime pictures made in the beach resorts of southern Florida. A selection of these has been gathered into a portfolio, *Sunset After Dark*, published this year by Chicago's prestigious Allan Frumkin Gallery.

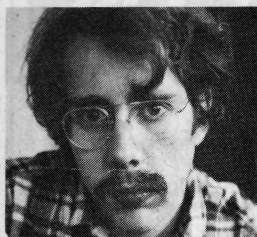
If Carroll's pictures reveal a fear-some purgatory bubbling under the bland facade of America's worn-out playground, Charles Traub's might be thought of as depicting the populace of a different kind of hell. Traub's people don't lurk, as we might expect they would, in dark and mysterious shadows. They stand, instead, in full daylight, looking for all the world like anyone you or I might bump into on Michigan Avenue. But the cumulative effect of a number of these pictures is devastating. (Traub himself mounts them in formally related groups, and Frumkin's director, Carol Ehlers, completely covered the gallery's walls with them in a recent show.) That's not a smile or a squint recorded there, you tell yourself. And those broad, bulbous faces don't really

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Five Chicago Color Photographers



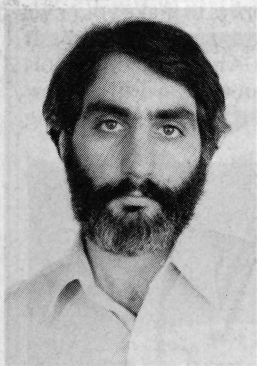
PATRICIA CARROLL combines careers as a photographer and a graphic designer. She was born in Chicago in 1946 and was educated at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (B.F.A., graphic design) and at the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago (M.S., photography). Since obtaining her graduate degree she has worked as a designer and as a photographer; currently she also teaches at the Institute of Design. Her work has appeared in a number of one-person and group exhibitions, among them "Chicago Color: Six Workers," shown at the Center for Contemporary Photography in Chicago in 1978.



MICHAEL BORUCH was born in 1948 and raised in Chicago. After graduating from Northwestern Univ. in 1971 with a degree in music, he became lab director for the photography department of the School of Art Institute of Chicago, until 1974. In 1972 he entered the M.F.A. program at the school, where he studied with Harold Allen, Barbara Crane, Ken Josephson and Joe Jachna. His work has since been shown extensively in the Chicago area, and currently he teaches full time at Barat College in Lake Forest, Ill.



CHARLES TRAUB was born in 1945 in Louisville, Ky. He got his undergraduate education at the Univ. of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, and received a master's degree from the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology. He subsequently taught and headed the photography program at Columbia College in Chicago. In 1978 he moved to New York City, where he assumed the directorship of Light Gallery, a post he continues to hold today.



WAYNE SORCE was born in Chicago in 1946. After being trained as a liturgical artist, he entered the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and became interested in photography. In 1969 he received a B.F.A. degree and in 1971 an M.F.A. After graduation he began using color film to photograph people and their homes. He received National Endowment for the Arts fellowship grants for photography in 1976 and 1978, and in 1977 his work was added to the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House. Sorce's pictures were included in "Mirrors and Windows" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1978 and in "Photography of the '70s" at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1979. In 1978 Sorce moved to New York City.



LYNN SLOAN-THEODORE received an M.S. degree in photography from the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, in 1971. Since February 1972 she has taught photography at Columbia College in Chicago. Her work has been exhibited in a number of group exhibitions and in one-person shows at the Rhode Island School of Design, The Photographer's Gallery in London and, most recently, at the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography. *Swiss Camera* reproduced her pictures in August 1974, July 1977 and April 1980. Sloan-Theodore is represented by Susan Spiritus Gallery in Los Angeles.

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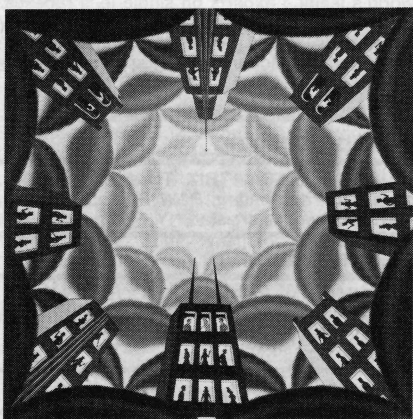
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resemble our lovers, friends or family all that closely. The pictures are understated in a way that befits the general tenor of today's academic photography, but there's more than a little bit of Diane Arbus and Chicago Imagist painter Ed Paschke in those guilty stares.

(Another Chicago photographer, whose work is not reproduced here but who makes "portraits" that relate to Traub's—and Paschke's—is Jerry Gordon. Gordon photographs swimmers



Imagist funk: Painter Ed Paschke's "Lunario," 1978. Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery. (Original in color.)



Hot-color icons: Roger Brown's painting "Rising Above It All," 1978. Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery. (Original in color.)

and the grotesque shapes their faces and bodies take as they flounder, sink and re-emerge.)

Traub's recent life history points up the problem in drawing geographical distinctions among people in this age of easy mobility. Both he and editorial/documentary photographer Wayne Sorce, Chicagoans when this article was

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conceived, have now moved to New York—Traub to direct Light Gallery, Sorce to establish an East Coast studio. Other major color photographers who have left after making important contributions here are Larry McPherson (a Guggenheim Fellow this year) and Joan Redmond.

Both Redmond and McPherson, though extremely independent (some would say eccentric) artists, make the kind of personal, haunted, oppressively colorful picture that fits the Chicago Imagist esthetic so well. Redmond, who is headed for Philadelphia, makes "summer snapshots" that are sopping with the hot humidity of memory and solitude. McPherson now lives in Memphis, where presumably the cows that are his main subject—animals he transforms into hulking masses of unseeing flesh—abound.

The documentary tradition

The alternative thrust of Chicago color has less to do with the art scene than with traditions in photography itself. Documentary photography has always been strong in Chicago, with the Art Institute providing encouragement to one-time locals like Danny Lyon, Joseph Sterling and Bruce Davidson, and mounting important early exhibitions of work by Robert Frank, Henri Cartier-Bresson and W. Eugene Smith. But though Chicago certainly doesn't lack the stereotypical documentary subject, the most directly influential photographer in the documentary vein doesn't make pictures of people at all.

Harold Allen has never sought nor received a great deal of critical attention outside of Chicago. Friends can't get him to even apply for grants. But he has, in his quiet, overly modest way, pointed to a wealth of ignored subject matter and

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Documentary strain: Harold Allen's b/w photograph "Two Houses, Chicago," 1969.

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developed a point of view that has permanently and profoundly affected his audience and his students at the School of the Art Institute. Allen's pictures make a case for the existence of "loving" photographs, with their obvious display of respect for the vernacular in architecture and design.

It stands to reason that some young, aware photographers would also be attracted to the simple pride and elegance of the city's neighborhoods—those famous admixtures of Midwestern genuineness and old-world style and color—and to the houses and public buildings that brashly proclaim the individual tastes of the people who use them. While Allen doesn't shoot color, a number of photographers who do studied with him before he retired from teaching two years ago. They have evolved a variety of approaches to the problem of updating his expansive view of architecture and its hand-wrought details. Among those who acknowledge his effect on their work are Barbara Karant (whose interior views are so gorged with light and space as to render the label "document" inadequate), Luis Medina, Gretchen Garner, Michael Boruch and Wayne Sorce.

An implied event

Michael Boruch is the colorist of this group. The picture of a hotel lobby reproduced here calls special attention to the pastels of pink and blue, the only contrasts in an otherwise monochromatic picture. The relationship between the discarded cloth and the stair railing is the kind of undefined, mysterious event Boruch likes to present as a subplot in his work. But the picture really *is* about the lobby of this cheap hotel or apartment house, and the scant decoration that tries to make the place someone's home. Likewise, Boruch's other photograph shown here suggests some dramatic scene—while at the same time it serves as a record of the dressing stand and its elaborate clothes hooks.

One couch, two views

Readers may recall seeing the couch in Wayne Sorce's photograph elsewhere. Sorce's best known picture is of that same couch, seen close up and from a lower angle. The Museum of Modern Art reproduced it on a calendar one year and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago distributed it as an over-size poster.

It is significant that Sorce has allowed—in fact, encouraged—the publication of both versions. For Sorce, the context of the picture of the couch alone is essential, and the complete series of pictures taken at that typically unique Chicago home includes shots of its resi-

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dents seated on the couch, of the arrangement of art prints, snapshots, and knick-knacks on the piano, and so forth.

Folk art and ethnic crafts are, as one would expect, plentiful in Chicago's multi-cultural atmosphere. When an Italian who built birdhouses modeled after European cathedrals passed away, Sorce felt he had to detail the man's legacy, went to his workshop/home, and discovered murals like the one which provides a backdrop for the religious still life with radio.

Sorce's work relies on the premise that one way to make a good photograph is to clearly describe an interesting subject. Of course, he's right. But how many of us would see the interest in his subjects without the clarity of a Wayne Sorce description?

Transforming the banal

Lynn Sloan-Theodore works, she says, "with the way the quality and the color of light transform ordinary and banal bits of the cityscape into places that reverberate with meaning. . . ." She sees meaning as emerging from the artist's imposition of form on an otherwise banal world. If there is something of both the documentarian and the Imagist in her pictures, it is tempered by such a formalist idea—an idea promoted in this country in the late 1930s by Moholy's New Bauhaus, and carried on in photography by Callahan, Siegel and Siskind at the Institute of Design. (Sloan-Theodore, Traub, Carroll, and many others mentioned here studied at the Institute of Design.)

Photography, history, all art and language are compromises between what we see and what we say about what we see. Sloan-Theodore and many other creative photographers in Chicago (among them Arthur Bell, Deborah Bright, Kathleen Culbert-Aguilar, Matti Maldre, Laurie Novak and Tom Petrillo) seek to make their photographs universally accessible by downplaying the medium's expressive and content-oriented aspects. By that effort, they become a part of the mainstream of academic photography. Together with the photographers who are developing an identifiably *Chicago* color esthetic located at one or the other end of the spectrum, they participate in the excitement that is contemporary Chicago color.

—THE END