

PHOTOGRAPHY OUT OF THE DARK

David Elliott

These are the Klondike years for American photography. After sleeping in the back rooms of museums and art galleries, the art has exploded not only into a major field of collection but into the limelight of "media." Recent signs of that are the attention given to Susan Sontag's book "On Photography," the big "Mirrors and Windows" show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the almost absurdly publicized exhibit of Richard Avedon's pictures at New York's Metropolitan Museum.

Chicago has not lagged. The '70s have brought a burst of activity in the galleries, and recognition that the photo department at the Art Institute (now under David Travis, before that under the great Hugh Edwards)

has not only a superb collection but is one of the real prodding powers of the medium. No longer seen as a mere craft skill or Sunday stroller's hobby, photography is on the verge of being a certified blue-chip culture commodity—which for many of its partisans causes as much distress as jubilation.

Kodak made picture-taking the "art" of the masses, and camera fanaticism still helps make it a democratic activity. Yet even as technology has become easier, and as serious photographers have elevated mundane subject matter to serious attention (so that a garage or laundromat can take on the mantle of art), and color becomes at last a viable, stable form of expression, the pull of the market threatens to turn the art into a hunting preserve for the rich and consciously cultivated.

I TALKED TO three men who are right in the midst of it here: Douglas Kenyon and Jeffrey Gilbert, who each own galleries on the Ontario-Michigan gallery axis, and Charles Demarais, who as director of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography at Columbia College is freer of commercial pressures. Their overlapping statements

Among those in the forefront of the Chicago photo gallery scene: Charles Demarais (top), director of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography at Columbia College; Douglas Kenyon (left), owner of Kenyon Gallery. (Sun-Times Photos by Gene Pesek, top, and Keith Hale. Cover design by Bill Linden.)

Out of the dark: Art collectors discover photography

Continued from Page 1

give a fair picture of the Chicago photo scene.

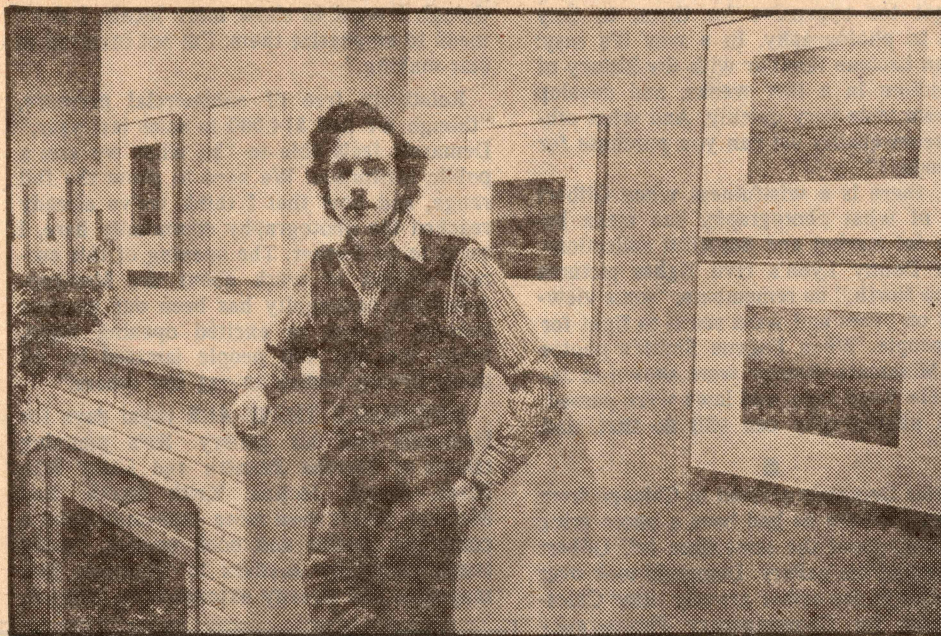
They are not, let's emphasize, the sum of the scene. Other valuable figures and institutions include, of course, Travis and his staff at the Art Institute; Mickey Pallas, who with a whole series of galleries has done much to stimulate local interest and local artists; collectors Arnold Crane and Arnold Gilbert; the Exchange National Bank, which has collected widely and well; the Alan Frumkin Gallery; the Museum of Contemporary Art; Henry Tabor, director of the big art book section at Kroch's and Brentano's bookstore on Wabash; the Evanston Art Center, and such small, gallant outlets as The Darkroom, Facets Multimedia and Photoworks Ltd.

Douglas Kenyon, whose new quarters at 155 E. Ohio are the third home for his Kenyon Gallery, was in on the boom before it bloomed. He began with a restoration and framing shop in 1969, then in '71 followed his first show, of Whistler drawings, with one for the Chicago photographer Jonas Dovydenas.

"At that time it was a rare thing," says Kenyon, a bearded, graceful man with an easy manner. "I think the prints sold for \$50 each and we sold about five. But it was noticed, and appreciated."

Since then he has shown such "pantheon" artists as Paul Strand and Imogen Cunningham, but also local talents on the rise such as Mary Koga, Roger Minick, David Avison. He's known as an outlet for old masters, 19th Century work and superb, classically printed imagery. Once a student at the Art Institute, where he cut mats for photo curator Hugh Edwards, Kenyon admits that "I absorbed most of Hugh's likes and dislikes—most of which were very good."

STILL, IT WASN'T until 1975, when the



Jeff Gilbert, owner of an E. Ontario photo gallery: "What other museum-quality art can you purchase for \$100 today?" (Sun-Times Photo by Martha Hartnett)

boom was heating up in New York, that Kenyon felt "we could make a real commitment to buying and collecting photos. I felt it was our niche, *provided* we could show photos with other kinds of art. I don't want to sell a photograph just as a photo, but as a work of art, and I think it grows from being seen with drawings and etchings."

It's also good for business, since, he says, "Most collectors who get into photography started with drawings or etchings. When they come in here now, for example, they make it around the corner after seeing the Bellows and the Sloans and they find this section given to photographs, and often they get hooked."

He feels, as do others, that a real spur to

the current rise in photo prices was the decision, in the early '70s, by landscape genius Ansel Adams and his shrewd business manager, William Turnage, to limit Adams' production to fairly small, highly priced editions of his classics. Not only did Adams' "Moonrise, Hernandez N.M." become the now almost nauseatingly familiar icon of the new market, but its artificially inflated value helped drive up prices for many artists.

"I know a number of people who work for law firms or banks," says Kenyon, "and they just have to have 'Moonrise.' But it is a

fine picture, and living with that kind of recognized property, their taste evolves, and they go on to other things. That's why the boom is helping younger artists as well—the level of taste inevitably grows more comprehensive for the true collectors.

"Obviously it's easier to sell the blue-chips, but these pictures provide a foundation for collectors. And they're willing to spend for it. When we had a show by the 19th-Century artist P. H. Emerson, I thought we'd die, but we sold a lot of \$2,000 platinum prints. Still, you can get a lot of fine work today for \$200 or less."

AS A RECOGNIZED leader, Kenyon sees a great deal of uninvited junk, but he keeps the door open: "There was a man in from Texas this morning with some really embarrassing stuff. Some people don't hesitate to call themselves artists just because they have a camera. If I see one more picture of peeling paint or garage doors or fat women floating in pools, I'll throw up! But I'll look first!"

Kenyon feels that the market has not yet closed out the adventurous, young, sub-rich collector. "When Beaumont and Nancy Newhall came here about 10 years ago to build up a collection for the Exchange National Bank," he says, "they put together an incredible mix very fast. Now people say, 'My God, look what they got for that amount of money!' My contention is that those days haven't passed."

Jeff Gilbert, 29, has been in the field briefly—his Gilbert Gallery opened at 218 E. Ontario last fall—but he has roots. His father Arnold, a realtor, is one of the great American photo collectors, and Jeffrey recalls

Turn to Page 14

Photography—Is it becoming expensive art commodity?

Continued from Page 13

"growing up in a household of beautiful images, with a constant stream of artists passing through with portfolios. Many were friends of the family."

But his real conversion apparently came in 1975, on a trip to California's Monterey-Carmel art community. "I introduced myself as a dealer," he recalls, his large eyes getting a bit wider, "and in one incredible day met Wynn Bullock, Ansel Adams and Brett Weston. I must have seen 1,500 prints. Before that I'd trained as a musician, and did ceramics, and then went off to Vermont for seven years and was becoming an isolationist. But I wanted more contact with people, and after that day, and also seeing Dad's collection again, and sensing the big upswing of interest in the medium, I decided to exhibit."

In its first year, the pearl-gray Gilbert Gallery ("I like this '30s salon feeling") has had important shows of works by Edgerton, Kris, Renger-Patsch, Lilo Raymond, the Weston family and Harry Callahan. Currently there's a show of portraits by red-hot Richard Avedon, and Gilbert's love of the immaculate image is rooted above all in Wynn Bullock.

"I know many people find his vocabulary too simple: rocks, forests, nudes, water," says Gilbert, "but I think the subjects are not so important as that he deals philosophically with the event of making a picture. Still, does it really matter what I think of, say, Andre Kertesz? He's much more established than I am! What I really want to do in time is lend the prestige of these established figures to some of the new ones. They give me the space to introduce new work." (Among that work is the current show of Bruce Wood's abstracts.)

HE BELIEVES THAT "with the current momentum going, the market can only expand further. Many people were just feeling confident about collecting graphics when

they got too expensive for them, so they turned to photography. In a way it's easy: You can become familiar with the history of the medium in a few weeks, and develop your own taste very quickly. And what other museum-quality art can you purchase for \$100 today?"

Still, there is a wistfulness when Gilbert thinks of what photography can mean beyond a fat market and beautiful collections. "When Danny Lyon's civil rights pictures came up North," he remembers, "some viewers got on buses and went south to fight for those people. When Eugene Smith's photos of the Minamata disaster were shown in Japan, there were riots, and laws were passed. I think photography can still do that, and should."

Charles Demarais arrived in Chicago from Rochester, where he had been a photo critic and editor, about the same time Jeff Gilbert was opening his gallery. Demarais took over as director of the rather grandly titled Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography (CCCP), which in its handsome quarters at 600 S. Michigan is the maturing bloom of a little gallery already developed for Columbia College by Howard Kaplan.

"The emphasis in my discussions with Columbia," he says, "was always on expanding the audience, out into the community. It's really a kind of open classroom. Choosing the programs and implementing them, I felt, had to be my decision. And I decided we first had to show what was going on in the country."

The CCCP staged the first one-man Chicago show for the urban landscapist Lee Friedlander, "which was really absurd, because New York had already seen him again and again and his influence was tremendous. We did the first Robert Heinecken show here. To show some newer person whose work comes out of Heinecken, you first have to see Heinecken. It's all part of the same mix, and

though I want to show more locals, I don't mean to emphasize them. I'm not involved in star-making."

Relatively free of commercial pressure, "though we had \$14,000 in sales last year," Demarais feels able to "be what we are: a public institution. We need to show the full range, and now that I think we've already reached the photography community here, I want to go further. The opening of this current exhibit of work about the Mexican-American community has been our greatest success. I was so excited opening night, when we had 400 people jammed in, all those brown bodies among the others!"

OBVIOUSLY THESE ARE royal days for Demarais and his gallery. He's planning shows of Marsha Reznick and Larry Williams, Joseph Jachna, Keith Smith, Ray Metzker, and is even more expectant about a combined exhibit and book project, "using snaps taken by soldiers in Vietnam. Life magazine has already expressed an interest,

and I think it will be very special. Also, I'd like to do a show of work on the L, as a response to the constant discussion of whether to tear it down. I might ask architect Harry Weese to prepare an essay for the show."

If there's a cloud for Demarais, it seems to be in his fear that "the market is taking over, and that scares me. I went to an opening at the Harry Lund Gallery in Washington recently, and the place was packed with rich, older people—nobody in blue jeans! I was told in New York that Joel Grey, Woody Allen, Neil Young, Diane Keaton are collecting. Because you can print hundreds of images, photography can be a really democratic form, and some people are asking, 'Why are we so blithely turning it into a commodity?' Look at what that's done to painting."

Still, in a field where an Adams can bring \$12,000 but work by such brilliant Chicago artists as David Avison, Rusty Culp and Barbara Karant can be found for \$200 or less, these are times more of wonder than worry.

For less than twenty bucks, see how easy it is.

