

VISUAL ARTS

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Lange photos: history, art, activism

If Dorothea Lange's mark on the history of photography was profound, her pictures have a continuing effect that is not bound by the borders of the art world. They define an era of American history now seven decades past. Some of them have become universal emblems of human need.

The Oakland Museum of California possesses an extraordinary trove of works by the woman universally acknowledged as one of the most influential photographers of the 20th century. A new exhibition, "Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing," opens Saturday, May 13, with the goal of reaching a new understanding of the artist and the 25,000 negatives, 6,000 prints and myriad other materials she left behind.

No picture more aptly fits the notion of that universal emblem of human need than "Migrant Mother," one of history's most famous photographs. It is a portrait Lange made of Florence Owens Thompson in 1936, at a roadside settlement called Nipomo, about 20 miles south of San Luis Obispo. Lange described Thompson as a "destitute pea picker," a 32-year-old mother of seven children. The woman told Lange that her family subsisted on gleanings from the fields surrounding her encampment and "birds that the children killed."

None of this is in the photograph. Lange made other photographs of the woman that same day; the biographical and geographic details would apply equally to those pictures, but none of them have the same diagonal rhythms of gesture, harmonies of texture, rotations of heads.

The website of the Library of Congress reproduces two versions of "Migrant Mother." There's the one we know, but there's also a print from the original negative. That one clearly shows a thumb that was once visible at lower right, later retouched to make it less obtrusive. Once you know this, it's impossible to ignore the amorphous, fleshy knob left behind, but it is still the much better picture.

Drew Johnson argues that what we most value about Lange — her instinct for classic composition amid the confusion and devastation of the Great Depression — misses a more complex point. He has



Dorothea Lange 1938

"Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing": 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Thursday; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday; 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Saturday, May 13-Aug. 13. \$6.95-\$15.95. Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak St., Oakland. (510) 318-8400. <http://museumca.org>

Above: In 1938, Dorothea Lange made the photo "Crossroads General Store," among her many riveting works that depict simple human grit at a difficult time in U.S. history.

Right: Lange's photo from 1934 titled "May Day Listener at Rally."

cared for and studied her work for 28 years, as the Oakland Museum's curator of photography and visual culture. He is working on a catalogue raisonné of her entire body of work, and is curator of the exhibition.

The exhibition will look at "the photographer as activist," Johnson says. "She hoped that people could be motivated to work for change.

"She was all about sequencing and stories — throughout the show you'll see groupings of works," he adds.

Johnson is particularly keen on providing historical context, while keeping true to the artist's language, both visual and verbal. "Some of her cap-

tions sound like excerpts from John Steinbeck novels," he notes.

Lange was the only California photographer to be hired by the Farm Security Administration, and the first woman to be tapped for a photography retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

"My photographs are collaborations" with the people depicted, Lange once said. Johnson plans to show us what she meant by that.

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Dorothea Lange 1934