

ART SPIEL

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1947, Simone de Beauvoir in America



Coast to Coast, SONJ ©Esther Bublely, 1947

From de Tocqueville on, travelers have chronicled America, fascinated by its vast space, bustling cities, and diverse people, the gap between the idealized vision of itself and the version outsiders see. In 1947, before Jack Kerouac and Robert Frank took their famous road trips, Simone de Beauvoir took one of her own. Traveling East to West by trains, cars and Greyhound buses, she crossed nineteen states and visited fifty-six cities in four months, recording impressions that were published in 1948 as "America Day By Day".

Translated by Carol Cosman

AMERICA DAY BY DAY



Simone de Beauvoir

“For women, and men, who want to experience vicariously Jack Kerouac’s open road with less macho romanticism and more existential savvy, *America Day by Day*, hidden from us for nearly 50 years, comes to the reader like a dusty bottle of vintage French cognac, asking only to be uncorked.” — *New York Times Book Review*

‘America Day by Day,’ published in 1999 by the University of California (with a new translation)

Though the book never caught on, Corinne Tapia read it fifteen years ago and was struck by its visual thought and potential for an exhibition. The result is “1947, Simone de Beauvoir in America” currently on view at her [Sous Les Etoiles Gallery](#) in Soho. Drawing on photographs taken in or around that year, it seeks to convey the feeling of the country at the time, as well as the “thirst of the writer to know everything.” Viewing the tightly packed show, we are able to step into de Beauvoir’s shoes and take a journey of our own.

The photographs are all black and white by famous and lesser-known masters, mixed in with quotes from de Beauvoir and a few archival items like Billie Holiday and Louis

Armstrong record jackets that harmonize with the images and deepen our sense of the time.

According to Tapia, the show is “a kind of storytelling.” It delights the eye and tickles the mind. In exploring a road less traveled, one with “less macho romanticism and more existential savvy” according to historian [Douglas Brinkley](#), it suggests the possibility of alternative narratives, a lesson for our gridlocked age where different perspectives, including those of women, are desperately needed.



Taxi, New York at Night ©Ted Croner, 1947-1948

Though monochromatic, all the images exude a sense of brightness, fitting for a year that marked the high point of the American Century. The country had won the war and was still the only nuclear power. There was a sense of hope and forward motion as the economy revved up and the cultural energy tilted away from Europe, which lay in ruins. Tapia conveys this optimism through a tight edit of sparkling prints where even night scenes are

upbeat. Ted Croner's after-hours images of buildings and cars are less about dislocation and darkness than exuberant energy, and Louis Faurer's nocturnal city stretches up with none of the seedy, claustrophobic menace that haunted many film noirs of the 1940s.



Under the 3rd Ave. EI ©Rebecca Lepkoff, 1947

Rebecca Lepkoff's daytime streets are cut by shadow, but also by dazzling sun. Sy Kattelson's overhead of urban children is bound by clotheslines and brick, but there is a sense of light and space, freedom and possibility.

The prints are bold, the choices subtle. A haunting reflection by Saul Leiter stuns even without color, and a down-tilted Ansel Adams (*Mudhills, Arizona*) anticipates the bleak landscapes of Robert Adams and Stephen Shore that will come as visions of America grow dark.

The problems we face now were present then: racism, financial struggle and inequity, accusatory politics, women not yet woke to their own power. We hear rumblings in de Beauvoir's text, catch glimpses in photos like Todd Webb's "Bus Station", "Natchez,"

“Mississippi,” with its segregated entrance; issues that won’t disappear, only grow in coming years.



Bus Station, Natchez, Mississippi ©Todd Webb, 1947

In discovering new places, travelers also open spaces within themselves. “From now on my life will embrace the contour of these streets... New York will belong to me; I will belong to it,” de Beauvoir wrote. Despite her critical gaze, there is sense of learning and incorporation: though an outsider to the land, a part of it becomes part of her. At a moment when many Americans feel their country is heading the wrong way, her sense of wonder and Tapia’s sense of beauty kindle in the viewer the notion of possibility. By showing us what we were, it prompts us to look at what we are, and think of what we might be. It is a gentle nudge, a cluster of images and ideas ripe for rediscovery and contemplation.

"1947, Simone de Beauvoir in America" is on view through February 9th at the Sous Les Etoiles Gallery, 100 Crosby Street in Manhattan.



Catherine Kirkpatrick is a writer and photographer based in New York. She wrote the introductions to Meryl Meisler's two books, and is currently working on an oral history about recent changes in photography.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

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