

“Sixty Years in Photography,” a Retrospective of Photographer Pirkle Jones’s Career

By J.R. Wudel
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“Sixty years in photography,” a retrospective of photographer Pirkle Jones’s career, now adorns the walls of the John Cambell Gallery at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. With a visual style influenced by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, a political sentimentality instilled by Dorothea Lange, and an intellect inspired by Marion Baruch, Mr. Jones focused his camera on his California. The images he captured, from an inside view of life with the Black Panthers to the final days of the Barryessa Valley, chronicle the times which surrounded him. A look at Mr. Jones’s cumulative body of work reflects his portrayal of these changing times.

Mr. Jones’s career began in 1946 as a student of photography at the California School of Fine Arts—now the San Francisco Art Institute. His early work focused on the urban sprawl, and contrasts the more personal, nature photographs of his later career. These photographs show a tangle of building structures such as factory pipes or clotheslines. The work represents the homes, residents and workers of San Francisco in the 1950’s.

In 1956, Mr. Jones collaborated with Dorothea Lange on “Death of a Valley,” a project chronicling the Barryessa Valley prior to its flooding on the completion of the Monticello Dam. With these pictures, Mr. Jones’s own experience of living on a farm as a youth translates into photographs rich in nostalgia for a way of life about to end. Sunlit pictures devoid of technology, and stoic portraits of a community sheriff and grape picker, heighten a sense of mourning for a land so rich with pride.

In 1961, Mr. Jones exhibited a collection of pictures featuring Walnut Grove, a small California river town, at the San Francisco Museum of Art. The pictures reflect an ailing town on the verge of death. The dry waterways and streets empty of visitors create pictures barren of life. The few, weathered people that remain stand in front of decrepit buildings whose paint cracks like dried skin.

The sixties Found Mr. Jones and his wife infiltrating the Black Panther society and capturing what they saw and felt of the people involved. The collection shows the intensity of the political reformers standing strong with their fists raised in the classic gesture of defiance. Other photos succeed at revealing the Panthers not as angry activists, but relaxed in personal conversation and lending a hand to aid children.

In the late 1960's, Mr. Jones turns his lens towards Gate Five, a Sausalito waterfront community of houseboats for artists. For the first time in Mr. Jones's career, the community that he photographed included himself. These playful portraits of life on the waterfront, with residents playing in mud and a daisy protruding from the nose of one man in sarcastic defiance, capture the feeling of freedom sought by the 1960's love generation.

After the intense personal contact with the Black Panthers, Mr. Jones's next collection of work focused on texture, tones and surfaces as pure abstractions found at a bazaar in Marin County. For the first time in his career, Mr. Jones moves away from a clear subject. This comes often with the sacrifice of his earlier photographs' intensity. Several photographs appear as jumbled snapshots taken with a flea market Kodachrome.

Mr. Jones felt he finally captured his own images with the nature photographs of Mt. Tamalpais. He continues the abstract style begun at the Marin County flea market, and some

more convoluted pictures lack a subject that grasps the viewer's attention. His best work appears when he has a clear subject, such as the Black Panthers, or when photographing the death of an oak tree through two pictures taken twenty-five years apart.

Through sixty years of photography, Pirkle Jones captured the essence of change. He chronicled the final days of the Barryessa Valley. He documented the attempts at reform by the Black Panthers and the Gate Five community. He constantly showed how new becomes old and how the urban jungle environment extends from nature. The life portrayed in his successful pictures surpasses the confusion of his more convoluted work. Above all, the Pirkle Jones retrospective offers a rewarding experience.