

The Blink of an Eye

No matter how prosaic a photographer Van Schaick was, he still practiced an art based upon compressions and elisions; he still presided over archetypal images that were originally created at the secret heart of this culture as silently and thoughtlessly as the blink of an eye.

—Michael Lesy



This exhibition, organized by Portrait Society Gallery, marks the first time Charles Van Schaick's turn-of-the-twentieth-century photographs have been presented as works of art. Making the final selections was daunting, not because it was difficult to find compelling images among the thousands, but because so many are beautiful, emotionally resonant, and strangely contemporary. They depict ordinary people in a particular time and place; in aggregate they document something much greater—youth, age, death, work, play, aspiration, failure, love, despair—in sum, they sketch the contours of human experience.

Van Schaick's photographs focus on the residents of a small Midwestern town and its rural surroundings. His formal portraits are carefully composed with crisp details, a standard set of backdrops and props, and costumes chosen by the sitters. His subjects are at ease, their gaze usually forward and direct, their formal poses often skewed by odd juxtapositions or humorous elements. The images compel the viewer to look more closely and ponder the constructed reality. Why this strange layering of cultural symbols? Why these clothes and props? Who is the intended audience? Did his subjects plan this performance or just stop by on a whim? Looking back from an age of incessant selfies, Van Schaick's visual language is like a historic dialect of

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our mother tongue. Although he worked more than a century before J. Shimon & J. Lindemann, his photographs project a similar playful collaboration between photographer and subject, a parallel investigation of a specific place.

Charles Van Schaick was born in 1852 in New York and was raised in Springvale, Wisconsin. Before taking up photography, he worked as a schoolteacher and travelled to the Dakota Territories. He returned to Wisconsin in 1879, rented an established studio in Black River Falls, and learned the craft of photography. His business prospered at first and then, like the town, it persisted through a slow decline.

Photography made portraiture accessible and affordable to a broad public. By the time Van Schaick opened his studio, it had already displaced most of the travelling limners and their wagons of canvasses and paint. In 1882, he hired an itinerant artist to paint the backdrops and carve the stone balustrades that would frame his subjects for the next six decades. His business survived the introduction of inexpensive film and cameras and continued until 1942, when he sold the building. Ultimately, about 5,700 of his glass plate negatives came into the collection of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Van Schaick was hired by generations of local residents to witness and preserve moments in their lives. Singly and in groups, Indians, settlers, and new immigrants posed against his studio backdrops and props, amid forests, fields, and meadows, and in front of houses, businesses, and barns. As is typical in portraiture, openness and truth merge with gesture and mask in an improvisational duet between model and artist. The props and presentation suggest social position and aspiration: what is, what was, and what might yet become. The studio backdrops, depicting romantic landscapes and formal Victorian architecture, persist through decades of studio portraits; the edges sometimes exposed as in a modernist gesture, sometimes blurred behind a narrow plane of focus. The studio is a stage, a playhouse, a workshop for crafting self.

The 1973 publication *Wisconsin Death Trip* first introduced Van Schaick's photographs to a national audience. Social Historian Michael Lesy paired Van Schaick's images with local news accounts of madness, eccentricity, suicide, violence, and untimely death to illustrate his thesis that society, as exemplified by the town of Black River Falls, was gripped by a bizarre social malaise during the last decade of the 19th century. About 200 images, which Lesy describes as "taken by a careful, competent town photographer... artful only in so far as he obeyed the most prosaic conventions of portraiture,"ⁱ were appropriated, cropped, flipped, removed from context, and manipulated to support his argument. Or, as Lesy stated, "to emphasize emotions or elaborate meanings contained by his original pictures."ⁱⁱ

In 2011, 330 of Von Schaick's photographs were reproduced in *People of the Big Voice, a history of the Ho-Chunk people in Wisconsin*.ⁱⁱⁱ By photographing families over time, Van Schaick recorded complex relationships and shifting identities throughout a period of displacement, upheaval, and tenacious survival.^{iv} No differently than his patrons of European descent, people of the Ho-Chunk nation came to his studio to be portrayed as they wished to be represented; wearing (and often combining) work clothes, formal Western suits and dresses,

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and traditional regalia. Individuals and groups posed in front of a white gingerbread porch, in a formal living room, or leaning on a rail fence beneath a painted sky. A middle-aged couple commissioned two portraits, one in full Ho-Chunk regalia and the other in Western dress. Wild West performers combined traditional appliqué blankets, beaded bandoliers, and moccasins with the long hair and eagle bonnets of the Plains Indians, or with Western suits and rakish hats. Men hold guns, whiskey bottles, cigars, and legal documents as symbols of wealth and power. Young women are pictured for potential suitors wearing beads and finely-crafted clothing or boarding house dresses and modern bobs; they reappear with husbands, children, and grandchildren. Eagle feathers, a warrior's symbol, are worn with equal pride by an elderly veteran of the Civil War and a young woman who served in WWII.

Beginning in 1885, when he bought his first portable camera, Van Schaick began chronicling ordinary life like a modern street photographer, shooting from his studio window, on the boardwalk, or at Ho-Chunk powwows. His location shots depict Ho-Chunk families loading winter supplies, linemen stringing cable, loggers in man camps, picnics from the perspective of the grass, farmers and merchants, horses, cows, and pets.

Van Schaick also turned the lens on himself and his family. He appears in profile in the studio surrounded by props, seated with an ironic smile in a tiny cardboard boat with his wife and first child, and as a wistful old man gazing past the stained curtains of the second-floor studio. His hushed interiors are drenched with filtered sunlight and haunted by absence. These domestic images are meditations on love, women's work, and the intimate space of home. Girls gather produce in the garden, women hang laundry in the wind, women squint from a sunny porch, mothers cuddle babies, families stand in front of stately homes and dilapidated shacks, festive tables are laid with fine china, and old women gaze through lace curtains from cluttered Victorian interiors. A house becomes a metaphor for the body; a bed evokes sex and death.

The local photographer was sometimes called upon to take the last photo of a treasured family member or to document the accoutrements of mourning. Van Schaick's most indelible image depicts a young girl dressed in white lace and satin in a tiny coffin leaning against the wall in a room (probably his studio) with an expanse of plain plank flooring in the foreground. A lean man wearing dark trousers and a white shirt stands in front of a closed door; his shoulders stooped, his body bent toward the tiny coffin. He holds a white bow in his hand, his head in shadow, cropped. Van Schaick's youngest child and only daughter, Florence, lived from 1892–1893. Likely a self-portrait, taken in a dark corner beside a stack of throws, the exposure evokes the bleak desolation of a father's grief.^y

The portal of Van Schaick's lens allows a contemporary viewer to glance back into the lives of people who laughed and loved, persevered or failed, sickened, and eventually died. Our eyes lock with his subjects' as they gaze into the camera. Van Schaick gives his subjects permission to perform, frames the action, and selects a moment. Click. The strangeness of ordinary rituals and social interactions, acted out on anachronistic stage sets or rural fields, comes across again and again in ways that seem startlingly fresh and modern.

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Art Critic Mary Louise Schumacher wrote that John Shimon and Julie Lindemann “didn't set out to interpret something about the turn of the 21st century in the middle of America, about shifting economic realities, altering landscapes and the culture created by people the culture leaves behind. But they have done this in spite of themselves.”^{vi} Likewise, Van Schaick recorded small moments of hope amid hardship that, in turn, reflect the promise and decline of a microcosm of America at the turn of the previous century. Despite changing styles, the faces and facades he collected are still familiar. The remains of this and similar towns still cling to two-lane highways, partially obscured by a patchwork of steel and vinyl siding, broken neon, and plastic signs. These images record a time when life was brutally hard but people still believed in the possibility of a better future. The photographer looked through the lens with empathy, the blink of his shutter capturing the emotional truth of the performance.

Susan Barnett, 2015

ⁱ Lesy, Michael, and Charles Van Schaick. *Wisconsin Death Trip*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2000. P. 5

ⁱⁱ *ibid.* P. 7

ⁱⁱⁱ Van Schaick, Charles, and Tom Jones. *People of the Big Voice: Photographs of Ho-Chunk Families by Charles Van Schaick, 1879-1942*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011.

^{iv} *Ibid.* P. 15

^v Taylor, S.J. Blog: *Field of Vision: Spirit & Place*. “Charles Van Schaick: A Voice from the Passion of Nature.” <https://stephenjessetaylor.wordpress.com/2013/07/25/charles-van-schaick-a-voice-from-the-passion-of-nature/>. 2013. Taylor argues that this is a self-portrait, since it was taken in the photography studio, is unlikely have been commissioned, could only have been made with a dead child, and the odd cropping suggests that the photographer stepped into the image during a long exposure. In addition, the man in the photograph looks like Mr. Van Schaick.

^{vi} Schumacher, Mary Louise. “Shimon and Lindemann retrospective a good way to begin considering duo's legacy.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 17, 2015.