

Rudy Burckhardt's Maine
an exhibition of photographs, paintings & films
New York Studio School
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Curated by Vincent Katz

At dusk in Puglia, down in the heel of Italy's boot, I ascended a hill and watched the rocks and field, the field across bisected by a road, distant fields with rolls of hay, the oaks and pines, and above them the sky settling into the end of day, a spectacular flow of bluish greys in oceanic sweeps, separating into shifting scuds which lost focus as they seemed to come nearer, and I thought, Now I'm seeing something Rudy Burckhardt might have seen, or better, Perhaps I'm seeing something Burckhardt's art has encouraged me to see. Just then a brisk breeze swept over the hill and through me. Was that Rudy?

Puglia plays a role in what I consider a benchmark in book making — *Mediterranean Cities*, published in 1956, which combines Burckhardt's photos and Edwin Denby's sonnets. The current exhibition features not the Burckhardt of the cities, whether in Europe or, most famously, exuberant New York, where he charted fleet pedestrians and the New York School's nonchalant eminence. This exhibition, "Rudy Burckhardt's Maine," shows the private, meditative Burckhardt — that essential base of solace that facilitated the cosmopolitan flâneur.

Burckhardt moved to New York from Basel in 1935, grew friendly with de Kooning and the rest, traveled, photographed, and filmed. In the mid-1950s, he started going to Deer Isle, Maine, with his first wife, Edith Schloss, and their son, Jacob. It was there that Burckhardt began a relationship with Maine that lasted until the end of his life in 1999. From the mid-1960s on, Burckhardt spent summers in Searsmont, with his second wife, Yvonne Jacquette, and their son, Tom.

From his earliest Maine work, we see Burckhardt thinking in terms of abstraction. Whereas his sidewalk abstractions can make us think of Mondrian, Burckhardt's Maine photos can remind us of Newman or Gottlieb. His photos looking up at trees maintain remarkable compositional balance, neither sky nor leaves dominating but both continually moving each other around the frame. The blackness Burckhardt achieves in the leaves contributes to this effect. A photograph of a pine needle covered forest floor,

on the other hand, features a softly defined, floating shape of light at its center, acutely balanced by centrifugal patches in the lower left and upper right corners. The verticals in a series of photos of trees in the middle distance read as formal markers, particularly when their bases or tops are cropped by the frame.

In a later period, Burckhardt became almost obsessed with an examination of closeness, in his paintings and photographs of tree trunks. This work from the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps kindled by a renewed interest in the shallow picture plane favored by many abstract painters, zooms in on patches of bark, bringing the eye so close that the bark fills the frame, allowing no identifying feature of scale or setting. The result can be disorienting (there is an almost Surreal effect in some paintings, where these strange shapes take on a life of their own, seem about to crawl off the canvas) but also calming, as we are allowed the time to see what tree bark actually looks like.

In addition to Burckhardt's respect for historical aesthetics, his work is also about seeing afresh, the naked eye jettisoning all it has heard and read and seen and simply looking, point blank, at something. When looking can achieve that degree of unselfconsciousness, there is always something to see, often something that would not be considered worth a glance -- the space of sky made by a road between two borders of woods, some nondescript plants on the forest floor, a goldenrod in the sun.

While the strong effect of light on a variety of surfaces often plays an important role in Burckhardt's Maine photographs, that is not always the case. A duller light can be just as evocative, and the many moods of rain, sun, morning or afternoon light, contribute to form a group of work that makes a cumulative statement about the variety of experience. The experience of nature itself in these works, without evidence of man's hand, is reassuring. At another remove, we are given hope. This is what man can aspire to: his life can be as beautiful as the glitter of sun on a pond.

Burckhardt's paintings have usually been seen as corollary to his photographs. We can find many similar images in both mediums, a similar encounter with abstraction via nature, a similar ability to slow down and see. In his later years, Burckhardt became more and more involved with the act of painting, particularly in Maine. In fact, he began to prefer it to photography. While a photograph is over in a second (the taking of it at least, if not the preparatory looking), a painting demands a more continuous application of energy and as such rewards the painter with a sustained experience. In Burckhardt's case, his modus operandi was to leave his easel set up in the woods before a subject, covering it each night with plastic, and returning each day to work. Painting thus

became a ritualistic, contemplative practice. And there was a payoff: as Burckhardt painted more, he got better. Suddenly, his paintings, which had often been shrugged off by a nonplussed art public, began receiving favorable reviews. At the age of 75, he had made a breakthrough!

The films speak for themselves. Burckhardt made 100 16-millimeter films, and he frequently used Maine as a subject for a meditation, the setting for a comedy, or as counterpart to New York's restless animation.

We see in this exhibition one of Rudy Burckhardt's twin poles: that place he came to for repose, for meditation on beauty and also the ravages of time.