

ON VIEW: APRIL 18 - MAY 18, 2024

## GALLERY ONE

### An Outsider's Eye

Discoveries from Bruce Silverstein Gallery, Curated by Frank Maresca

Every art exhibition tells a story, one outlined by the curator's choices and enriched over time by the viewers. In this case, the initial premise is elegantly simple and stated in the title itself, but the true beginning is found in life, not in art; in the lifelong relationship between two people whose personal histories and visual sensibilities led them on distinct yet intersecting paths.

"I've known Bruce Silverstein since he was in diapers," Frank Maresca likes to say. This is not hyperbole. Between the late 1960s through the early 2000s, Frank shared a working studio space with Bruce's parents, the photographer Larry Silver and his wife and representative Gloria. Right out of college, Frank was hired as staff photographer for *Sexual Behavior*, a "serious magazine devoted to authoritative information about sex" that went bankrupt a year after hitting newsstands and never paid him a dime. Bruce appeared as a toddler, along with Gloria, in one of the issues of the magazine—in a photograph that Frank shot to illustrate a mother working with her small child to repair a tricycle.

Having put all work expenses on credit, and now \$30,000 in debt, Frank was a fledgling young artist living on \$1-per day food budget, which only allowed for a *Chock full o'Nuts* cheeseburger and orange drink combo, or half of a *Blimpie* sandwich. He carried his 30-pound photographic portfolio from downtown Manhattan all the way uptown, where the advertising agencies were located, on foot to save subway fare. He did numerous assignments for *Car and Driver Magazine*, and none of the car enthusiasts working for the publication ever found out he couldn't drive. Then, he was introduced to the legendary photo editor John Durniak, who hired him as a regular freelance photojournalist for *Time Magazine*, where he remained for about three years before moving on full-time to build a career as a fashion and beauty advertising photographer.

Sometime into this chapter, 10-year-old Bruce ventured into Frank's area of the studio on a day off from school. He vividly recalls being struck by a large cast iron hammerhead from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, carefully showcased on a custom mount, and instantly understanding Frank's intention in removing this object from its original context—so that through deliberate and thoughtful presentation it would be seen as a work of art. "This made perfect sense to me," says Frank. "Photographers that I admired, like Edward Weston, Man Ray, and Aaron Siskind had been exploring the beauty and mystery of the found object in their work." By then, Frank was a serious collector of 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century American furniture and related objects, and he had visited *Folk Sculpture U.S.A* at the Brooklyn Museum (1976). This groundbreaking

exhibition exclusively featured sculpture masterpieces by unknown artists, eventually influencing Frank's shift into collecting vernacular art. As his knowledge grew, his eye became more discerning; new and better acquisitions created the need to sell work that no longer fit into the collection. One day, much to his surprise, he overheard someone calling him an "art dealer."

An artist, art conservator, and fellow folk art connoisseur named Roger Ricco came into the scene in the late 1970s. Frank partnered with Roger in various associations and locations for a full decade before formally establishing Ricco/Maresca Gallery in the late 1980s. Over the next 20+ years, while the gallery emerged as a pioneer in the fields of self-taught, outsider, and vernacular art, Frank ran his photographic studio in tandem. However, digital photography was quickly gaining ground over film. Frank, an analog photographer who prided himself on his darkroom skills, foresaw the changing landscape and decided to transition fully into the art business.

Around this same period, Bruce, now in his early 30s, had left behind a thriving, but unfulfilling career in finance and was on the verge of opening a gallery specializing in photography. Years prior, he had considered going to art school, but being raised in an artistic family where financial security was rare, he decided to go in the other direction and major in economics and math. After graduating, he followed his older brother's course and went on to Wall Street, where he became a dealer in energy and started a division for a firm that quickly became successful. At only 23, his income allowed him to start collecting photography, which would become a lifelong passion.

Bruce entered the collecting arena when there were more opportunities to buy early vintage prints at relatively affordable prices. He would spend weekends and time after work looking voraciously and refining his eye, going to galleries, and talking to dealers. By his mid-20s he was buying masterworks. This process was informed by a meaningful early connection to photography; he remembers joining his father on shooting outings as a child and witnessing his process, flipping through photo books together in their living room in Westport, CT. Later, coming back home from school and checking the mailbox for a magazine called *The Photograph Collector*, searching for any mention of his father, and learning about important dealers and record-breaking sales. It was an incidental early education that had always been with him, combined with the fact that he was attuned to art from an early age, always drawing, serious about observation.

"Most people thought I was crazy to leave such a profitable job behind to open a gallery," says Bruce. "I went from having a staff of 50 brokers to being the only employee. I painted the walls, I learned how to hang pictures, how to frame, I programmed my website, and I updated it myself, I wrote the press releases... I learned everything on the job, and it was really one of the best times in my life." His first space, which Frank describes as a nice shoebox (500 square feet in a brownstone on 22nd Street in Chelsea) opened in 2001. Having spent years deep diving into other dealers' drawers, Bruce knew there were uncharted waters to explore; overlooked bodies of work by known artists that could offer new insight into their stylistic evolution

and fill gaps in the scholarship. One of his early shows illustrated Aaron Siskind's transformation from photo documentarian to abstract expressionist artist. Another focused on André Kertész's New York period, previously overshadowed by his Paris work. Other early exhibitions included one that looked at the work of Constantin Brâncuși, David Smith, and Henry Moore to explore how sculpture interacts with photography, and another that juxtaposed Lisette Model's work with German expressionist paintings and drawings.

Wanting to expand his program to contemporary work, Bruce made the leap to a much larger ground floor space on 24<sup>th</sup> Street, where he remained for 12 years. As the gallery became more profitable, resources were put into acquiring inventory that was both aesthetically and historically significant. The scope of Bruce's holdings always fascinated Frank, who was constantly grappling with the relative scarcity of self-taught and outsider masterworks. Now floor neighbors in the same building, still friends after all these years, Frank and Bruce maintain an ongoing dialog that led to this exhibition. Their taste is sometimes different, but they are both drawn to the concept of crossover—between self-taught and mainstream art or as a dialogue across art forms—and interested in finding lesser-known precursors to widely embraced trends. As art dealers who were collectors first, they lead with intuition and instinct.

Both Ricco/Maresca and Bruce Silverstein Gallery chose to focus on developing fields that are constantly in flux. It's now widely recognized that the emergence of art brut and self-taught art stemmed from the avant-garde movements of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which in their uprising turned the attention to forms of creativity that were not bound by the stronghold of the academy. Photography, then an emerging art form, became an integral part of this experimental ethos. In the last few decades, both non-academic art and photography have had to wage the battle of being fully recognized as fine art, not its odd cousins, and find their place in significant collections and museums.

Frank's discoveries from Bruce Silverstein Gallery bring their intertwined journeys full circle. His selection juxtaposes raw vs. elegant: the unembellished beauty of a great anonymous snapshot—which he collected for many years—and the flawless compositions of the masters—which he emulated in his photographic work—as well as his longstanding awareness of works of art not solely as images or forms, but as tangible objects whose surface and patina bear the marks of their journey through time.

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