

MARY ELLEN MARK (1940–2015)
THE LIVES OF WOMEN
23.03.–28.07.2024
→→ **KUNSTHALLE VOGELMANN**

GB

“I’m looking for humor, I’m looking for irony, I’m looking for intensity. I’am looking for what makes a good photograph.”

Mary Ellen Mark, 2014



EIN RUNDGANG

MARY ELLEN MARK - THE LIVES OF WOMEN

Mary Ellen Mark is widely regarded as one of the most respected and influential voices in critical photojournalism. Clearly and directly in her visual language, unprejudiced and with a profound sensitivity for her counterpart, she focused her attention on the marginalised, needy and stigmatised in society.

Influenced by the emerging women's movement of the 1970s, she repeatedly placed the precarious living conditions of women and girls at the centre of her unpretentiously intimate pictures. "I feel connected to the outsiders, and even if I don't see myself as a feminist, I am always on the side of women, because they are usually the outsiders." The immense expressive power of the predominantly black-and-white photographs results from the emotional directness and respect with which she encounters her protagonists.

The photo reportages that took her around the globe were published in nearly all major international magazines (including *Life*, *Look*, *Stern*, *Paris Match*, *Rolling Stone*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Geo*). After completing her projects, she often returned to the locations and the people to explore her themes in greater depth. For weeks and months, in the case of the child prostitute TINY even over three decades, Mary Ellen Mark dived into the realities of her protagonists and published the results in a total of twenty illustrated books.

GROUND FLOOR

ICON IMAGES

Iconic images are memorable visual landmarks that stand out due to their unique and enduring significance. They capture special moments, tell stories, and often become part of history. Mary Ellen Mark was always in search of "the picture." Her photo essays, therefore, do not follow a chronological order with a beginning and an end. For her, a successful photo was one that distilled the essence of the subject, capturing key moments. *Tiny in her Halloween Costume* is one such iconic image, as are the *Damm Family* living in their car, the gun-loving couple from Kentucky, the lonely *Drag Queen* in a shabby New York hotel room, the little *Amanda* posing smoking in a kiddie pool, or the lively old ladies in Luigi's Italian Dancebar. "I always try," says Mary Ellen Mark, "to think of the specific picture. What's important to me is to make strong, individual pictures. (...) I think in great magazine or newspaper photography every picture can stand on its own; it doesn't need the other pictures to support it, to tell a story."

TINY & STREETWISE

In 1983, Mary Ellen Mark received a commission from *Life Magazine* to cover a story on street children in the USA. This phenomenon was relatively new in the early 1980s. In May 1983, she traveled to Seattle with a journalist, a city that was

then considered one of the cleanest and most livable in the USA. Street workers revealed to them that most of the kids hung out on Pike Street. Here, she also encountered the confident 13-year-old Erin Blackwell. Known as Tiny among her friends, she was part of a group of children and teenagers who resorted to thefts, small frauds, pimping, and prostitution to survive. During the photo sessions, a special relationship of trust developed between Tiny and Mary Ellen Mark. Mark introduced her to her husband, documentary filmmaker Martin Bell. In his film *Streetwise*, made shortly afterward, which focused on the children of Pike Street, Tiny played a central role. *Streetwise* was the first collaboration of the couple. In 1984, the film was nominated for an Oscar in the Documentary category. Although the couple offered to take Tiny to New York on the condition that she attend school, she declined. Nevertheless, Mary Ellen Mark and Martin Bell remained in contact with her for over three decades, documenting her and her ten children with their camera. *Tiny: Streetwise Revisited* was not only the title of the film released by Martin Bell in 2013 but also the title of the last photo book completed by Mary Ellen Mark shortly before her death in 2015.

HEROIN ADDICTION

In 1969, Mary Ellen Mark received a commission from *Look* Magazine to photograph on the set of Federico Fellini's *Satyricon*. She owed this highly attractive opportunity to editor Pat Carbine, who would later publish the first feminist women's magazine in the USA. During the filming in Rome, Mary Ellen Mark learned that Britain allowed clinics to distribute heroin to drug addicts. So she suggested it as a photo reportage to



Pat Carbine. The setting was St. Clement's Clinic in London's East End, where the subjects also received psychological and social support. The

reportage, titled *What the English Are Doing About Heroin*, was published in *Look* Magazine in 1970. Although Mary Ellen Mark primarily worked in black and white, the magazine decided to use the few color shots. However, for Mary Ellen Mark, "the black-and-white pictures taken on this assignment as being strong statements about drug addiction."

WARD 81

Ward 81 was Mary Ellen Mark's first extensive long-term project. The idea originated in 1975 during her photographic work on the set of Milos Forman's film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The filming took place at the Oregon State Mental Hospital. When the director of the hospital gave her a tour of the facility, Ward 81 left a particular impression. The high-security ward for female patients who posed a danger to themselves and others was the only closed psychiatric unit in the USA at the time.

In February 1976, she and the author and therapist Karen Folger Jacobs were granted permission to live in the hospital and photograph on Ward 81. "We slept in an old deserted ward next to Ward 81", wrote Mary Ellen Mark. "Each of us was given our own cell and also a key to the ward. (...) We ate all of our meals with the women. We went to all of the activities — swimming; the weekly dance with the men's ward (which lasted 15 minutes) and of course joined the women in the endless hours in front of the TV (...)". In this way, they gradually gained the trust of the women and eventually gained access to the most intimate situations. Mark photographed the patients while dancing, bathing, showering, undergoing electroshock therapy, or restrained to their beds. "I wanted to show what it felt like to be mentally ill. I wanted the individual images to be strong and

to show the confusion and the pain of women who were mentally ill. It was not to show that it was weird or exotic (...) it was more that there is someone who could be me", she said.

FALKLAND ROAD

Die Falkland Road in Mumbai, formerly Bombay, was one of the most infamous prostitution streets in the Indian megacity. The women and girls working there had already captured Mary Ellen Mark's interest since her first visit in 1968. Ten years later, the *Geo* Magazine facilitated a several-month-long reporting stay. "I had no idea if I could do it, but I knew I had to try," she said. Despite the initial great distrust she faced in this environment, she slowly found "friends... very slowly." Madame Saroja invited her into her brothel, and Champa welcomed her into the circle of transsexuals. The prostitutes, offering themselves to their clients like animals in cages, came from the poorest backgrounds. Here, she exclusively photographed in color, as per the assignment. But she did not regret this decision, "because the color underscored the harsh reality. Colors were among the most dignified aspects of these women's lives - in the way they dressed and decorated their rooms." However, the photographs were not published in *Geo* because the editorial team deemed them "too specific" for the US market. Instead, the thirteen-page

reportage was published in the German *Stern* Magazine in September 1981.

FIRST FLOOR CIRCUS LIFE

Mary Ellen Mark harbored a special passion for the circus, no matter which country she found herself in. Since her first visit to India in 1968, she had been as fascinated by the Indian circus culture as she was by the land and its people. In 1989, a scholarship enabled her to embark on a six-month-long stay, during which she could combine both passions. She had ambitious plans. Two three-month-long trips, for which several assistants had established contacts with sixteen circuses in advance, took her to Madras, Calcutta (now Kolkata), and smaller Indian cities. Equipped with 13 cameras, 18 lenses, multiple flash units, various light meters, and almost 1000 rolls of film, she was more interested in the preparations for the performances, the rehearsals, the breaks, and the daily lives of the artists, trainers, and performers, as well as the highly unusual animals from a Western perspective, rather than the daring acts themselves. During her stay, she also encountered *Pinky*, a six-year-old girl who, at the age of three, had been "rented out" by her mother along with her barely older sister to the Great Royal Circus. The children became part of a group of very young acrobats who grew up with their trainer and his wife. Shortly after the photo

reportage was published in *Life Magazine* in 1991, the television channel National Geographic commissioned her husband, Martin Bell, to make a documentary: "CIRCUS OF DREAMS" in 1992.

LITTLE PEOPLE

When Mary Ellen Mark went to Turkey in 1965 with a Fulbright scholarship, she photographed the small Emine on a street in Trabzon. Mary Ellen Mark once described this photo as a personal turning point. For her, it was her first powerful photo ever. Time and again, she focused on the fate and life of children: children threatened and affected by illness, homelessness, abuse, poverty,



exploitation, and often all at once. Mark, who herself had no children, greatly appreciated these "little people." She was fascinated by how children and teenagers, even in the most difficult life situations, speak and gesture unfiltered, how naturally they behave. She took them seriously: "I've always felt that children and teenagers are not "children," they're small people. I look at them as little people and I either like them or I don't like them."

In various countries, she visited children's clinics and orphanages, such as a clinic

for orphaned children in India in 1980, a children's clinic for eye surgery in Ukraine in 1987, or a facility for physically disabled children in Reykjavik in 2011. In 2012, the Swiss pharmaceutical company Novartis commissioned her for photographs for the company's annual report. Mary Ellen Mark focused particularly on children's healthcare here as well. Together with her husband Martin Bell, who directed short films for this purpose, she visited clinics in China, India, Kenya, Ukraine, and cities in the USA.

MOTHER TERESA

In 1979, Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Shortly after, Mary Ellen Mark was commissioned by *Life Magazine* to photograph the missions in Calcutta: "When I went there for the first time, I simply went to the Mother House to meet Mother Teresa and obtain permission to photograph in her mission houses. She asked me at that time who Muhammad Ali was. She wanted to know because he would be visiting her in Calcutta. Then she wrote me a note that said: 'Dear Sisters, please allow Mary Mark to take photos. God bless you. Mother Teresa.'"

The hospice was the focal point, especially. The destinies of the sick and dying she encountered here moved her so profoundly that she returned in 1981 for her own book project. However, this time she was confronted with a particular

challenge. She was expected to actively engage in caregiving: "This time you must work – here – then you can write about what it really feels like - to feed and bathe and serve the dying – you must put down your cameras and work this time – you must experience this", Mary Ellen Mark recalled in her travel diary and noted: "And this time (...) I walk around and no cameras looking at the men and women – I feel so distant so afraid to go near to touch – to smell – awkward no camera to protect me."

SECOND FLOOR TWIN AT TWINSBURG

Mary Ellen Mark had a special fondness for twin pairs. The annual Twins Days Festival in Twinsburg, Ohio, provided a suitable opportunity to delve into this subject extensively. Founded in 1976,



the Twins Days Festival features numerous events and competitions and has grown to become one of the largest twin gatherings worldwide, with around 3,000 attending twin pairs. Mary Ellen Mark first visited the festival in 1998. It was during this time that not only our poster motif, the photo of the smoking older ladies, was created, but

also the project idea that was eventually realized in 2001 and 2002. To make even the finest differences visible, Mark opted for shots with the 50 x 60 cm Polaroid large-format camera; an equally rare and monstrous instant camera that famously only allows one print. The shoots took place in a specially constructed studio tent on the festival grounds.

Against a neutral gray background, girls and women of all ages present themselves, always dressed alike - and fill the image solely through their presence. In 2003, Mary Ellen Mark published the book *Twins*, featuring interviews with the 150 participants. Additionally, her husband Martin Bell made a short film of the same name, which is both humorous and insightful.

AMERICAN IMAGES

The photographs under the title *American Images* were exclusively taken in the United States. They address topics that have been close to Mary Ellen Mark's heart since the beginning of her photographic work: the living conditions of people who were not necessarily on the sunny side of the *American way of life*. In her photo book *American Odyssey*, she wrote: "Looking back, my work in America strikes me now as being a long and blessed journey – a journey that has taken me from one end of this country to the other many times and allowed me to enter into the lives of countless people. From the extremely poor to the very rich I

have been a witness to some of the things that make this country so extraordinary. I have photographed people at baby beauty pageants, and in singles' bars; at twins' conventions, and Ku Klux Klan gatherings. I have crossed paths with some wonderful people and some terrible ones. One thing is for sure, for all of its ups and downs it has always been an incredible adventure. You can find everything in this country, anything goes, and anything can happen. My travels through America have defined my vision as a photographer."

This leporello was published on the occasion of the exhibition

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<https://www.maryellenmark.com/>

BIOGRAPHY

Mary Ellen Mark was born on **March 20, 1940** in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, USA. After studying painting and art history at the University of Pennsylvania, she graduated from the Annenberg School for Communication in 1964 with a master's degree in photojournalism. In 1965, a Fulbright scholarship enabled her to spend a year in Turkey. Then she moved to New York and worked as a freelance documentary photographer. Preferably in black and white, it was mainly parades of all kinds, as well as demonstrations and protest marches during the women's movement and the Vietnam War, that attracted attention. With her special interest in people on the margins of society, she felt a particular affinity with American photography pioneers such as Dorothea Lange (1895-1965), W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978) and Swiss-born Robert Frank (1924-2019).

It was not only commissioned work for international magazines, occasional advertising campaigns, grants and workshops that initiated and enabled her freelance projects, but also her work as a set photographer, which began in 1969/70 with Federico Fellini's surreal masterpiece *Satyricon*. Subsequently, she garnered numerous commissions from Hollywood and worked with major directors such as John Schlesinger (*Marathon Man*, 1976), Francis Ford Coppola (*Apocalypse Now*, 1979) Tim Burton (*Planet of the Apes*, 2001 / *Sweeney Todd*, 2007) and Alejandro G. Iñárritu (*Babel*, 2006). Milos Forman's film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) was the starting point for her first long-term project *WARD 81*.

Since her first solo show in London in 1976, her extensive photographic work has been presented in well over a hundred solo exhibitions and recognised with numerous honours, prizes and awards. Mary Ellen Mark passed away on **May 25, 2015**, in New York.