

For seven decades Bill Rauhauser has photographed his native Detroit, producing an extraordinary corpus of street scenes that has only come to light in the past few years. He earned his living as an engineer and later as a teacher of photographic history, rarely selling work and exhibiting only sporadically. Now ninety-six, he is finally beginning to get the recognition he deserves.

Since the millennium his work has been published in more than half a dozen monographs, one of which spurred the interest of Tim Hill of the Hill Gallery in Birmingham, Michigan. Hill was moved by the timeless quality of Rauhauser's street scenes, which, he says, "strike a highly specific but universal



By Jason
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The Natural: Bill Rauhauser

From his earliest scenes of Detroit in the 1950s Bill Rauhauser was a poet of the streets. His work belongs in the great American tradition of Helen Levitt, Robert Frank, and his contemporary Garry Winogrand

Fig. 1. *Woman Looking Down [Woodward Avenue]* by Bill Rauhauser (1918–), Detroit, c. 1960s. Pigment print on archival paper, 30 by 16 inches. All images © Bill Rauhauser, courtesy of Hill Gallery.

Fig. 2. *Young Woman at Lamp Post [Woodward Avenue]* by Rauhauser, Detroit, c. 1960s. Pigment print on archival paper, 30 by 19 inches.

Fig. 3. *Woman on Bus* by Rauhauser, Detroit, c. 1955–1960. Pigment print on archival paper, 21 inches square.



chord. I thought they would give people a different insight into the situation of people living in the city, Detroit in particular." Hill began to represent Rauhauser in 2013 and since then has mounted two solo exhibitions of new large format prints, and another co-organized with Carl Hammer Gallery in Chicago, and consigned a piece to a group show of Detroit artists at the Marianne Boesky and Marlborough Galleries in Manhattan. Earlier this year Rauhauser received the Eminent Artist award from the Detroit-based Kresge Foundation, whose arts program is administered by the College for







Creative Studies where Rauhauser taught, an honor accompanied by \$50,000 and a book chronicling his career.

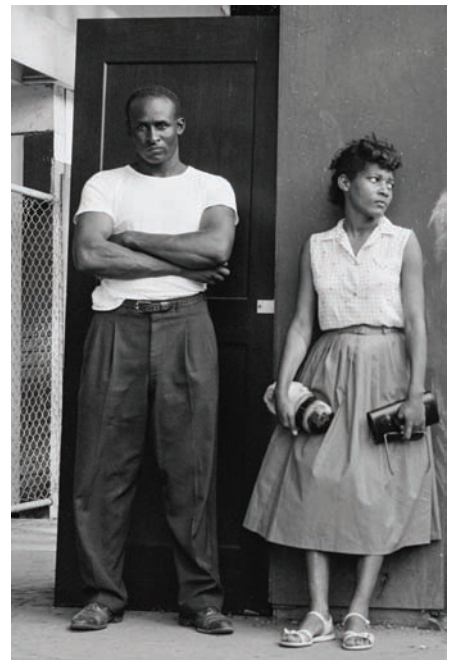
Ironically, Rauhauser's star has ascended as his hometown's has fallen. Struggling to recover from the largest municipal bankruptcy in American history, Detroit has become a catchword for urban squalor, its image shaped by headlines trumpeting financial collapse, rampant poverty and unemployment, faltering public services, crime, drugs, and racial tension. While other photographers raid the city for images exacting a tragic beauty from degradation and decay, Rauhauser helps us remember the city in its heyday.

Walking Woodward Avenue, downtown, and the riverfront, heading out to Belle Isle, the Michigan State Fair, or the Detroit Auto Show, Rauhauser has been Detroit's quintessential flâneur, a voyeur of the variegated theater of the living city. His cast includes office workers, commuters, shoppers, cops, waitresses, sidewalk preachers, street cleaners, barbers, buskers, and beggars on a set that features proud landmarks such as the Penobscot Building, J. L. Hudson's department store, Tiger Stadium, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and neat single-family houses. He is alert to the psychological struggles of modern life, often focusing on individuals isolated amid their daily routines. Though he continues to photograph, his panorama of the once vibrant mid-century metropolis reminds us of the years when Motor City thrived as an engine of the American Century, a great manufacturing hub whose primary product, the automobile, altered the face of the country and even the world. The window he opens onto that lost era gains poignancy amid the current crisis.

Fig. 4. *Stone Burlesk [Detroit]* by Rauhauser, c. 1960s. Pigment print on archival paper, 21 by 30 inches.

Fig. 5. *Three on a Park Bench [Detroit River]*, by Rauhauser, c. 1950s. Pigment print on archival paper, 22 by 30 inches.





Born in 1918, Rauhauser grew up middle class; his father was a technical draftsman descended from Pennsylvania Germans who arrived in the United States in the eighteenth century. His interest in photography began in his teens when he mail-ordered a 39-cent plastic Univex camera, traded the stamp collection his father had given him for a 35 mm Argus, and converted a bedroom into a darkroom, rigging an enlarger from an Ovaltine can and a light bulb. An autodidact schooled on *Life* magazine, *Popular Photography*, and books such as Ansel Adams's *Making a Photograph*, in 1938 he joined the local photography shop's Silhouette Camera Club, where locals tutored him in chemistry and printing.

"Photography sort of grew on me," he says, "but I couldn't see having a hobby as a life's work." He earned a degree in architectural engineering from the University of Detroit, avoided military service because of his frail physique, and in 1944, a year after graduation, married Doris Lippert, a schoolteacher, with whom he had a son and a daughter. To support the family he worked as an engineer and photographed his wife and kids as a pastime. In 1947, on a business trip to New York, he saw an exhibition of Henri Cartier-Bresson at the Museum of Modern Art that changed his life. "To that point I was considering photography as a hobby, but the show was just so strong. I saw that photography was an art," he says, "and decided I was going to go into it full blast."

In 1951 he attended a lecture by Edward Steichen at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Steichen spoke about the forthcoming *Family of Man* exhibition that he was organizing for MoMA. It was to be an international survey that, in the aftermath of war, would illustrate common concerns shared by people everywhere. The small audience was invited to submit work, and one of three prints that Rauhauser sent in—a shot of a soldier and two women on a riverside bench (Fig. 5)—was accepted for the 1955 exhibition. The landmark show traveled the world for eight years and was seen by more than nine million visitors, making it the most viewed photography show in history.

Bolstered by this success, Rauhauser entered his work in juried salons and won several awards, but was frustrated by the lack of sophistication of his fellow exhibitors. In 1964 he and three like-minded camera club members opened Gallery Four, the first gallery in Detroit devoted to art photography and possibly the first in the Midwest. Flagging sales shuttered the venture within a few years, but Rauhauser started teaching photography at the school now known as the College for Creative Studies, and when

the job became full-time he left engineering for the classroom, retiring after more than thirty years in 2002.

Beginning in the 1970s, Rauhauser collected photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, André Kertész and many others. He later sold most of them and donated the rest to the Detroit Institute of Arts where he helped launch the museum's photography department.

Rauhauser's career coincided with the flowering of street photography. The genre had emerged in the late nineteenth century as cities boomed and the urban spectacle provided a ready subject for the camera. Masters including Charles Marville and Eugène Atget in Paris, John Thomson and Paul Martin in London, and Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine in New York recorded the buildings and denizens of their respective cities. In the early twentieth century advances in film technology and handheld cameras enabled photographers to capture passing incidents rather than static scenes. By mid-

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century street photographers such as Berenice Abbott, Helen Levitt, and Robert Frank were moving away from reportage to embrace lyrical and artistic concerns in what critic A. D. Coleman describes as "a search for resonant contrasts, rich metaphors, and found dramatic scenarios." Rauhauser is in this tradition. His work belongs with that of Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Bruce Davidson, and Elliot Erwitt, among others.

The most successful street photographers identify intriguing people and incidents representative of a place and time, and frame them with aesthetic intelligence in a manner that expresses their universality. Rauhauser achieves this in an understated way, but what distinguishes him from his contemporaries is his focus on Detroit. He never went to Europe and worked very little on his occasional trips around the country. "There's something about Detroit," he says. "I feel at home here, and couldn't get myself oriented to how other cities worked."

Rauhauser's photographic vocation unfolded during a period of momentous demographic change. Beginning in the 1960s, as in so many U.S. cities, Detroit's white and middle-class residents departed for the suburbs. The population fell from 1.8 million in 1950 to seven hundred thousand today, going from 90

Fig. 6. *Kresge Court* [Detroit Institute of Arts] by Rauhauser, c. 1970s. Pigment print on archival paper, 20 by 30 inches.

Fig. 7. *Woman in Black Turtleneck* [Kresge Court, Detroit Institute of Arts] by Rauhauser, c. 1970s. Pigment print on archival paper, 24 by 30 inches.

Fig. 8. *Edgewater Park* [Detroit] by Rauhauser, c. 1960s. Pigment print on archival paper, 30 by 19 1/2 inches.

percent white in 1940 to more than 82 percent African American today, with one in three residents living in poverty. In Rauhauser's work you find scant evidence of the ills that attended this transformation. Though he is a lifelong liberal who even ran (unsuccessfully) for county office in the late 1960s, he has avoided the newsworthy eruptions of political strife and violence to seize moments evocative of individual states of mind and the relationship of people to their environment.

His main subject is people, primarily working- and middle-class citizens, more often than not introspective and isolated even among a crowd. These figures—in rail stations, pool halls, cafes, and on the street—are akin to those in paintings by Edward Hopper. There are shades of Hopper in a 1950s photograph of three working girls at Sander's Lunch Counter—two dipping into sundaes in conical cups, the other exhaling a plume of cigarette smoke and gazing into the distance—and again in the portrait of a woman with a cigarette in her gracefully upturned hand, caught unawares in the Kresge Court of the Detroit Institute of Arts, where Rauhauser routinely stopped for coffee (see Figs. 6, 7). Boredom and exhaustion afflict many of his subjects. A short order cook buries his face in his hand, a beehive-coiffed vendor stands alone in her “French Frys” concession, and a lady in an empty coat check looks like the last person on earth.

Race relations are not a deliberate focus, but the issue emerges adventitiously as one surveys the characters arrayed before his lens. An all-white frieze of pedestrians promenades in front of Hudson's department store suggesting a Norman Rockwell vision of 1960s Detroit. A

later shot at a downtown intersection is thronged with African Americans sporting afros and mod-printed shirts like extras in a blaxploitation film. An indicting image of a Civil Rights-era policeman, menacing behind sunglasses with folded arms as a black boy and woman hasten by in the background, resonates with segregationist animus.

Rauhauser provides a subtle and seemingly inadvertent commentary on race in one of his most beautiful works from the 1950s, a portrait of an attractive young black woman in a high-necked dress and white gloves seated on a bus (Fig. 3). Unlike Walker Evans's surreptitious shots of sullen New York subway riders from a decade or so earlier, Rauhauser's subject is imbued with dignity and the promise of a bright future.

Rauhauser also has an eye for whimsy and humor. In a sidewalk scenario from the 1960s (Fig. 4), an elderly nun chats with a pudgy matron beneath a sign that reads “World's Hottest Strippers!” Across the marquee at the top of the frame, the word “Burlesk” serves equally to identify the business and the visual joke that Rauhauser has found. His images of the Detroit auto show portray the city's flagship industry more as a beauty pageant than a trade show, focusing less on the glittering cars than the temptresses accompanying them.

Aside from his street work, Rauhauser spent winters in his basement studio making still lifes tinged with modernist formalist concerns. The “Object” series, begun in the 1960s, consists of iconic portraits of manufactured items—a bowler hat, a baseball, an eggbeater, a used galosh—always evenly lit and without shadows against a black or white background void (see Fig. 10). He also experimented with abstraction, pur-





Fig. 9. *Tossing Stones [Lake Michigan, Chicago]* by Rauhauser, c. 1960–1970. Pigment print on archival paper, 20 by 30 inches.

Fig. 10. *Baseball* by Rauhauser, Detroit, c. 1970s. Pigment print on archival paper, 17 by 22 inches.

Fig. 11. *Woman in Red Dress* by Rauhauser, Detroit, September 2014. Pigment print on archival paper, 26 by 36 inches.

Fig. 12. *Rear view Mirror* by Rauhauser, Detroit, August 2014. Pigment print on archival paper, 26 by 36 inches.

chasing white objects at the hardware store and arranging them in assemblages against a black background. The resulting “Constructions” range from sharp-edged geometric configurations that might have been executed at the Bauhaus, to cubist compositions that seem inspired by the purist paintings of Le Corbusier.

As he nears his centennial Rauhauser still lives in the house he has occupied for more than forty years. His picture taking slowed in the 1980s after he became the sole caregiver for his invalid wife. But he has switched to digital cameras and continues to make new work, most recently photographing a young woman who resembles Mona Lisa at various sites around the city (see Fig. 11).

Reflecting on his late-in-life success, Rauhauser says, “I didn’t start out with the idea of becoming a well known photographer. It didn’t seem possible. Now here I am, one foot in the pail, and things are happening. I’m enjoying what’s going on and I’m still working. The only thing that I think of constantly is, why couldn’t this have happened forty years ago?”



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