

Aaron Siskind: From Chicago to Providence, 1951-1991, October 10, 2003-January 11, 2004

This exhibition, drawn entirely from the Museum's collection, complements *Interior Drama: Aaron Siskind's Photographs of the 1940s*, opening November 14. Both exhibitions celebrate the centenary of the birth of Aaron Siskind (American, 1903-91), one of the most influential photographers of the 20th century. During the 1940s, Siskind made a radical move away from documentary photography toward the personal, metaphorical approach seen in the works on display here.

Siskind's early training in literature and piano led him to see in photography the ambiguity, layered meaning, and terseness of poetry and a structure inspired by music. In his photographs of the 1940s, he discovered that he could transform subject matter by isolating and framing images from the exterior world to give him fresh and expanded meaning. The flat, rectangular space of the photograph became the arena for an "interior drama."

Architecture was one of Siskind's earliest subjects, and it always remained important to his work. Urban walls, in particular, appealed to him because aging surfaces—peeled, stained and scrawled—conjure visions of other lives. Rock was also rich subject matter, for Siskind and the graphically powerful photographs of rock walls in Martha's Vineyard exhibited here show how he used that imagery metaphorically to suggest tensions and relationships.

Shot in Chicago "The Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation" series captures the bodies of casual divers hurtling through space and uses them to reflect psychological states. Although people were infrequent subjects, they were always at the heart of Siskind's work. He strove to connect with people, whether by photographing evidence of human handwork, by creating compositions suggestive of social interaction, or simply by eliciting emotional responses to his art.

During the period covered by this exhibition, Siskind taught photography at the Institute of Design, Chicago, from 1951 to 1971, and at Rhode Island School of Design from 1971 to 1976. After he retired from teaching, Siskind remained in Providence and continued making photographs until his death in 1991.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)
Acolman 2, 1955 (printed ca. 1980)
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph A. Chazan 1999.87.2.12



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Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Chicago 32, 1960

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.19

"These are found photographs, discovered, and I think one of the reasons why I was able to discover these was because of my...contact with surrealist objects...A wall that consisted of planks...that had a sign painted on it, had to be moved from one place to another. But in doing that they didn't follow the order of the planks and so the planks got scrambled and created curiously a thing which is only valuable for its design...and also...mystery." Siskind, from transcript of Judith Wechsler's film, *Aaron Siskind: Making Pictures*, 1991.



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Chicago 101, 1952

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.20



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Chicago Facade 3, 1959

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.9

"Consider the outer wall of the city's structures as the inner walls of its streets and open spaces. Within these walls and with these walls as a backdrop the inhabitants of the city conduct their public lives. They move in and out of these walls or up and down the corridors formed by them. The character of the walls (their shape and



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ornamentation, what is written on them or displayed in their windows) and the movement and gestures and postures of the inhabitants are at once fact and symbol of the aspirations and struggles of the city." Siskind from his Guggenheim Fellowship proposal, ca. 1958.

Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Terra Cotta, Illinois 5, 1961

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.24



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Arizpe 7, 1966

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.6



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Chicago 10, 1959

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.8



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Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Rome, Homage to Franz Kline, 1973

Gelatin silver print

Edgar J. Lownes Fund 75.002

"Fortunately Franz Kline was connected with the same gallery I was, the Egan Gallery. And I showed there in '47 and from then I got to know him...I think he was ready to show in '49 his new work....I became related to Franz not only aesthetically but personally because of the kind of person he was. We were very similar in many ways."

"There were two things I wanted to say in these pictures, in relation to Franz Kline and his work. One was his stroke, which was very clear, very strong. And the other thing that interested me in Franz was that he was always overpainting." Siskind, from transcript of Judith Wechsler's film, *Aaron Siskind: Making Pictures*, 1991.



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Olmec, Villahermosa 5, 1973

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gilman Angier 78.084



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Martha's Vineyard 114B, 1954

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.21

"One day when I was shooting I began to think...[of] the way these rocks shelter other rocks, how they pressed on each other and I began to feel the pressures and the relationships. I began to think about a family I was very close to and the relationship between the parents and the children....And somehow thinking of that helped me resolve a lot of problems with the formations of the rocks....It seems far fetched, and no one would ever think of it, but it was that thinking that enabled me to take these pictures."



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Siskind, from transcript of Judith Wechsler's film, *Aaron Siskind: Making Pictures*, 1991.

Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Martha's Vineyard 104A, 1954

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.10



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Chicago Facade 21, 1957

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.8



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Martha's Vineyard IIIb, 1954 (printed ca. 1980)

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph A. Chazan 1999.87.2.10



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Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Westport 10, from the portfolio *Tar Abstracts*, 1988

Photogravure

Gift of Paul Taylor in memory of Aaron Siskind 1991.044.4

"In the early [seaweed] pictures I just used the frame because I was making a picture...and it had to have a frame, limitations. But here the frame works more actively. You can feel that it is containing the tar configurations—they move against the frame, they hang from the frame, they move into the frame or they come into the picture from the frame." Siskind, from transcript of Judith Wechsler's film, *Aaron Siskind: Making Pictures*, 1991.

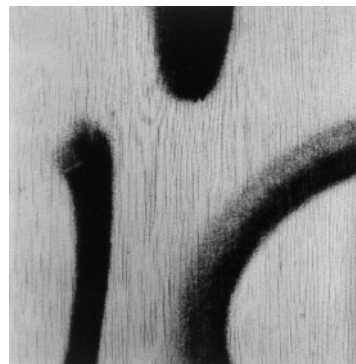


Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Providence 52, 1972

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Aaron Siskind 78.085



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Westport 7, from the portfolio *Tar Abstracts*, 1998

Photogravure

Gift of Paul Taylor in memory of Aaron Siskind 1991.044.6

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Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation 94, from the portfolio *Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation*, 1961

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Aaron Siskind 73.011.9

"The thing that stimulated me most was in my mind there was this title, which happened to me very rarely, "the pleasures and terrors of levitation." And so I began working on that. That helped me determine a number of things, you know, that the picture had to be square, that the ground had to be negative, no clouds and that kind of stuff, and the figure itself was not to have too much detail. Those were the determinations I made. In order to get that kind of a picture of the kids diving in the lake, I had to be there at a certain time so that sun was not too far in the west and it would hit them. And, I would get a fully delineated figure. I have to be there on a day when there were a lot of people, especially young people there who were horsing around, you see, 'cause then things happened. A guy came up there and did a perfect swan dive, it didn't interest me at all." Siskind in taped conversation with Harry Callahan and David Travis at Art Institute of Chicago, May 27, 1982.



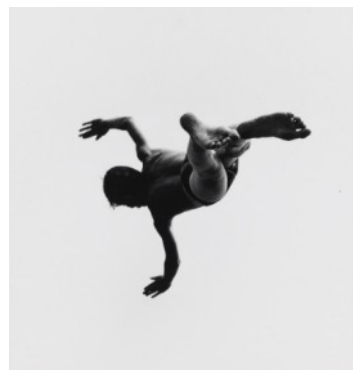
Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation 37, from the portfolio *Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation*, 1953

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Aaron Siskind 73.011.1

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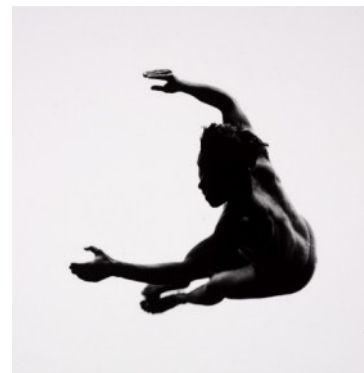
Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation 491, from the portfolio *Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation*, 1954

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Aaron Siskind 73.011.4

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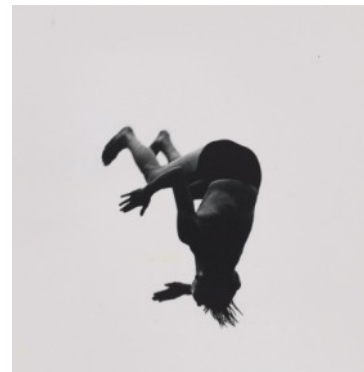
Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation 58, from the portfolio *Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation*, 1956

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Aaron Siskind 73.011.6

"The thing that stimulated me most was in my mind there was this title, which happened to me very rarely, "the pleasures and terrors of levitation." And so I began working on that. That helped me determine a number of things, you know, that the picture had to be square, that the ground had to be negative, no clouds and that kind



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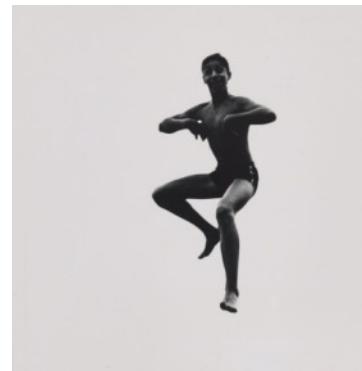
Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation 59, from the portfolio *Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation*, 1956

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Aaron Siskind 73.011.7

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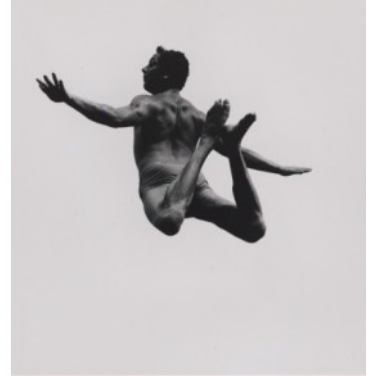
Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation 99, from the portfolio *Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation*, 1961

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Aaron Siskind 73.011.10

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Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)

Providence 68, from the portfolio *Tar Abstracts*, 1986

Photogravure

Gift of Paul Taylor in memory of Aaron Siskind 1991.044.1

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Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Westport 28, from the portfolio *Tar Abstracts*, 1988

Photogravure

Gift of Paul Taylor in memory of Aaron Siskind 1991.044.3

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Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Martha's Vineyard, 1954 (printed ca. 1980)

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph A. Chazan 1999.87.2.9

