

Interior Drama: Aaron Siskind's Photographs of the 1940s,
November 14, 2003-January 25, 2004

This exhibition celebrates the 100th anniversary of the birth of Aaron Siskind, one of the most acclaimed photographers of the 20th century. While institutions across the country honor his achievements this year, RISD's Museum has special reason to commemorate him. In addition to his influential role as an artist, Siskind (American, 1903-91) was also a dedicated professor at RISD (1971-76). After his retirement, he established the Aaron Siskind Center for Photography here at the Museum. His desire was to allow access for students and visitors wishing to study the collection, to which Siskind was a generous donor.

The Museum's rich holdings of Siskind's work from the 1940s are highlighted by the current exhibition and augmented with generous loans from public and private collections. During this fascinating decade, Siskind shifted from documentary photography to the personal, metaphorical images for which he is best known. Siskind and many other American artists found that the events of World War II (1939-45) required a profound rethinking of their work, an inward turning. The title of the show, *Interior Drama*, is taken from a 1945 article that Siskind wrote for *Minicam Photography*: "The interior drama is the meaning of the exterior event." It also suggests Siskind's private struggle to find his own voice in photography distinct from the dominant trend of documentary work.

Later, in a 1963 interview with photographer Jaromir Stephany, Siskind stated:

In working in a documentary style I was always trying to search and find out what kind of meaning you could get in a picture of that kind, you see. I was beginning to feel that I wasn't getting...anything really personal, anything really powerful, really special, you know. And also, in examining it I find that I wasn't made for it really. Because my documentary pictures are very quiet and very formal.

Aaron Siskind, *Credo*, 1950 (first published in *Photo Arts*, vol. 1, no. 4, May 1951, p. 45)

When I make a photograph I want it to be an altogether new object, complete and self-contained, whose basic condition is order...unlike the world of events and actions whose permanent condition is change and disorder...First, and emphatically, I accept the flat plane of the picture surface as the primary frame of reference of the picture...but the object serves only a personal need and the requirements of the picture. Thus, rocks are sculptured forms; a section of common decorative ironwork, springing rhythmic shapes; fragments of paper sticking to a wall, a conversation piece. And these forms...take their place in the final field of the picture...disassociated from...customary neighbors and forced into new relationships. What is the subject matter of this apparently very personal world? It has been suggested that these shapes and images are underworld characters, the inhabitants of that vast common realm of memories that have gone down below the level of conscious control. It may be they are. The degree of emotional involvement and the amount of free association with the material being photographed would point in that direction. However...what I am conscious of and what I feel is the picture I am making, the relation of that picture to others I have made and, more generally, its relation to others I have experienced.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)
Gloucester, 1949
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.25



Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)
Arizona (wall), 1949
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.18



By 1949, in addition to making photographs, Siskind had been teaching English in the New York public school system for 23 years. Anxious to pursue his photography more expansively, he took a sabbatical. Siskind's dealer, Charles Egan, suggested that he visit Frederick Sommer, an artist working in Prescott, Arizona, whom Egan also represented. Shortly after the end of his January 1949 show at the Egan Gallery, New York, Siskind headed west in his Model A Ford. Meeting for the first time in Arizona, Siskind and Sommer quickly developed a productive and dynamic relationship. Siskind stayed in the area for three months, meeting with Sommer daily, occasionally making trips with him in search of materials for their work. Sommer was one of the few photographers whose art Siskind "could look at and feel a real sympathy and relationship to my own."

As Siskind made his way back to the East Coast, he photographed along the way and by summer was back on Martha's Vineyard. He had been offered a position teaching photography at Trenton Junior College one day a week for \$1000 a year. As much as Siskind longed to devote himself to photography, it was difficult to give up the financial security that had come with his many years of teaching in

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the New York school system. As he deliberated with his good friend, sculptor Jane Teller, he mentioned that he would take the risk if only he could earn twice the amount. She generously offered to make up the difference, and Siskind ended the decade teaching photography, a profession he would continue from 1951 to 1971 in Chicago at the Institute of Design and from 1971 to 1976 in Providence at Rhode Island School of Design.

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

New York 8, 1948-1949

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.12



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

Iron Work (NYC), from the series *Iron Work*, 1947

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.3

One discrete series upon which Siskind concentrated around 1946 and 1947 took as its subject decorative ironwork from pre-1900 architecture in New York. Siskind related this project to his fascination with the gingerbread detail of cottages in "Tabernacle City." Both series reveal his lifelong interest in subject matter that connects to past human endeavors. "The great variety [of ironwork] exhibits a lively imagination. And if, as I suspect, the designers and makers were often one (or, working so closely together, as a unit) we have here something of the nature of a folk art, expressive of the culture in which it operated." (Siskind, essay for Guggenheim Fellowship, 1945 or 1946, in Deborah Martin Kao and Charles A. Meyer, *Aaron Siskind: Toward a Personal Vision 1935-1955*. Chestnut Hill [Massachusetts]: 1994, p. 55).



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

Gloucester 1H, 1944

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.2

In the summer of 1944, Adolph Gottlieb, a painter and friend from Siskind's college years, found a studio for Siskind in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Shortly after Siskind arrived there on July 25, he wrote to Barnett Newman, another artist and mutual friend, describing this experience (letter in The Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation archive): "Spent a couple of days getting the place in shape...and exploring the wharves. Since then pounding away at the pictures everyday (drunk with the wealth of material)."



The summers of 1944 and 1945 were a breakthrough period for Siskind as he discovered subjects that could be transformed into photographs with fresh and enlarged meaning. Siskind wrote in 1945: "Last year I spent the summer at the famous New England fishing village of Gloucester, and made a series of photographic still-lives of rotting strands of rope, a discarded glove, two fish-heads, and other commonplace objects which I found kicking around the wharves and beaches. For the first time in my life subject matter, as such, ceased to be of primary importance. Instead, I found myself involved in the relationships of these objects, so much so that these pictures turned out to be deeply moving and personal experiences" ("The Drama of Objects," first published in *Minicam Photography*, vol. 8, no. 9 [June 1945], p. 20).

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

Hand B, 1939

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.2

Before Siskind started making photographs in 1932, he pursued music and poetry. Around 1940, he began to work more experimentally during his summers on Martha's Vineyard in an intensive search for a way to make pictures that could equal those more abstract art forms in their rich layered meanings.



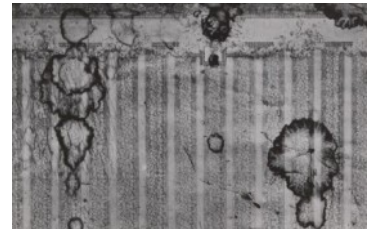
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Like many artists of the New York School, Siskind turned to surrealist art, which seemed to offer a relevant response to the horrors of World War II (1939-45). Siskind stated, "Surrealism freed us to accept certain strange shapes and gave us many examples of how to interpret this crazy, irregular, unexpected, irrational world" (Siskind, quoted in Carl Chiarenza, *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors*. New York/Tucson: 1982, p. 188).

Much of Siskind's work of the early 1940s uses strategies typical of surrealists. Objects are placed together in odd combinations, figures are portrayed in fragments, driftwood is photographed in a way that suggests bones, while images of seaweed refer to stream-of-conscious writing (automatism). Perhaps most importantly, Siskind has departed from the planned approach developed in his earlier documentary work. He now searches in a contemplative, intuitive manner for images that encourage free association and imaginative responses.

Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976, Photography)
Kirkland, Arizona, 1949
Gelatin silver print
Mr. and Mrs. Julius Bloom Photography Fund 73.005

"I remember we [Frederick Sommer and I] went to another place. It was down in the desert...There was once a mine and there was a house there that was falling apart. I went in. It was just made for me. There was torn wallpaper, and stained wallpaper, and canvas behind the wallpaper, just real juicy stuff. He [Sommer] let me alone. He let me work...When we got all through he just cut down a piece of the wall and took it home with him...He didn't take very much but he used everything." (Siskind and Frederick Sommer in a conversation, RISD Photography Department, December 4, 1984, audiotape with the RISD Library archive and the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson)



RISD MUSEUM

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

Kirkland, Arizona 3, 1949

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.12

As Siskind made his way back to the East Coast, he photographed along the way and by summer was back on Martha's Vineyard. He had been offered a position teaching photography at Trenton Junior College one day a week for \$1000 a year. As much as Siskind longed to devote himself to photography, it was difficult to give up the financial security that had come with his many years of teaching in the New York school system. As he deliberated with his good friend, sculptor Jane Teller, he mentioned that he would take the risk if only he could earn twice the amount. She generously offered to make up the difference, and Siskind ended the decade teaching photography, a profession he would continue from 1951 to 1971 in Chicago at the Institute of Design and from 1971 to 1976 in Providence at Rhode Island School of Design.



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

Untitled, from the series *Harlem Document*, 1932-1940

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Matrix Publications, Inc. and Alpha Partners 83.031.23

For most of the period from 1933 to 1941, Siskind was a member of the New York Photo League. Through this organization he learned about technical aspects of the medium and about making images that could be used to promote social change. In 1936, Siskind was asked to lead the newly formed Feature Group. This documentary production unit of the League created and developed projects about the disparity between socio-economic classes, including the best-known and largest of their series, "Harlem Document." As with all Feature Group projects, the photographers worked collaboratively, discussing ideas for pictures and reviewing them together after they were printed. For "Harlem Document," they also worked with African-American writer Michael Carter, whose text unfortunately has been lost.



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

Martha's Vineyard (seaweed), 1948

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.1



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

New York, 1947

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.4

One discrete series upon which Siskind concentrated around 1946 and 1947 took as its subject decorative ironwork from pre-1900 architecture in New York. Siskind related this project to his fascination with the gingerbread detail of cottages in "Tabernacle City." Both series reveal his lifelong interest in subject matter that connects to past human endeavors. "The great variety [of ironwork] exhibits a lively imagination. And if, as I suspect, the designers and makers were often one (or, working so closely together, as a unit) we have here something of the nature of a folk art, expressive of the culture in which it operated." (Siskind, essay for Guggenheim Fellowship, 1945 or 1946, in Deborah Martin Kao and Charles A. Meyer, *Aaron Siskind: Toward a Personal Vision 1935-1955*. Chestnut Hill [Massachusetts]: 1994, p. 55).



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

Gloucester (starfish), 1944

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.5



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

New York (peeling wall), 1948

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.17

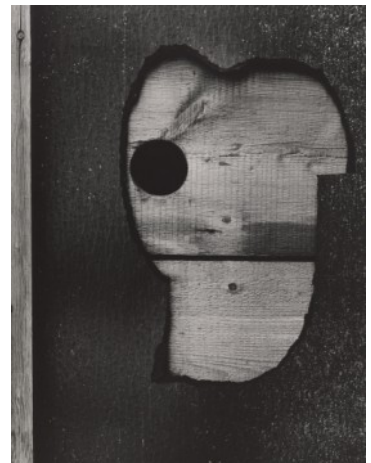


Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Gloucester, 1944

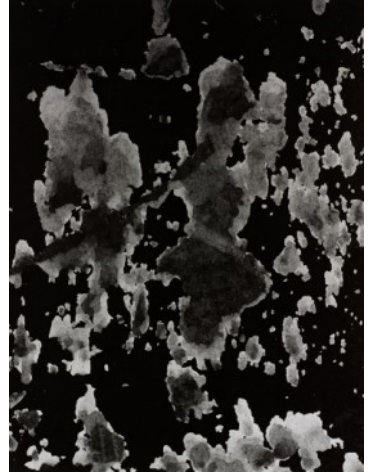
Gelatin silver print

Mr. and Mrs. Julius Bloom Photography Fund 73.003



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Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)
Chicago 21, 1949
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.22



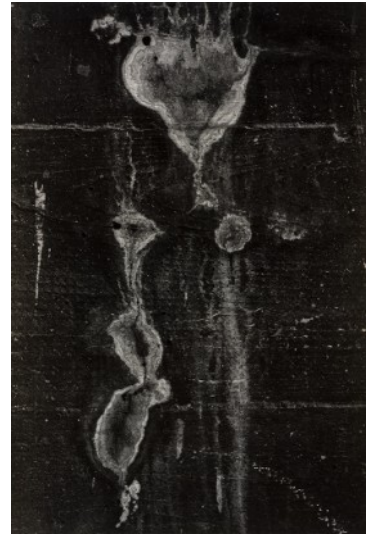
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Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Chicago 8C, 1949

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.17



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

Gloucester (Boys playing), 1944

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.9



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

Untitled, from the series *Harlem Document*, 1932-1940

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Matrix Publications, Inc. and Alpha Partners 83.031.20



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

Untitled, from the series *Harlem Document*, 1932-1940

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Matrix Publications, Inc. and Alpha Partners 83.031.18

"Most Crowded Block in the World" was a photographic study that followed the "Harlem Document" with the intent of giving a fuller picture of everything that happened within one densely populated block of Harlem.



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

Gloucester, 1944

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.13



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

Untitled, from the series *Harlem Document*, 1932-1940

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Matrix Publications, Inc. and Alpha Partners 83.031.17



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

Chicago, 1947

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.22



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

Humboldt, Arizona 9, 1949

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.15



RISD MUSEUM

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

Arizona (Cactus), 1949

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Richard L. Menschel 77.146.1



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

Gloucester 28, 1944

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Emanuel and Edithann Gerard in honor of Jed Fielding
1992.061.2

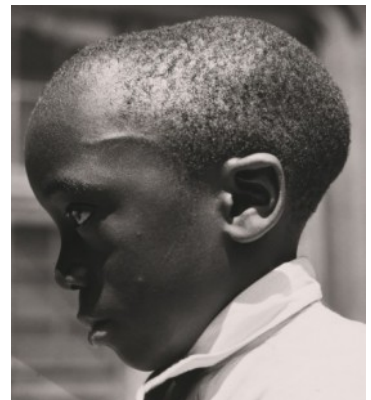


Aaron Siskind, American, 1903-1991, (RISD Faculty 1971-1976,
Photography)

Untitled, from the series *Harlem Document*, 1932-1940

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Matrix Publications, Inc. and Alpha Partners 83.031.48



RISD MUSEUM

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

Granite Dells (Az.), 1949

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mr. Robert B. Menschel 77.145.18



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

Overall View of Demolition Site, from the portfolio *The End of the
Civic Repertory Theatre*, 1938

Gelatin silver print

Jesse Metcalf Fund 2000.37.5



"Actually what I was interested in was a study in decay and death and things like that you see, but it went almost beyond the building itself. [I] used what was available like the classic[al] symbols, the heads and these columns...so that it becomes symbolic in its impact...I was attracted to shadows because it was related to the effect I was trying to get. I didn't know any photography like that at all." (Siskind, in taped interview with Carl Chiarenza, June 21, 1970, audiotape with the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)

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

Columns in Rubble, from the portfolio *The End of the Civic Repertory
Theatre*, 1938

Gelatin silver print

Jesse Metcalf Fund 2000.37.3



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

Façade, from the portfolio *The End of the Civic Repertory Theatre*,
1938

Gelatin silver print

Jesse Metcalf Fund 2000.37.4

