



Larry Merrill

Pedestrian Photographs

L a r r y M e r r i l l Pedestrian
P h o t o g r a p h s



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Pedestrian Photographs © Larry Merrill
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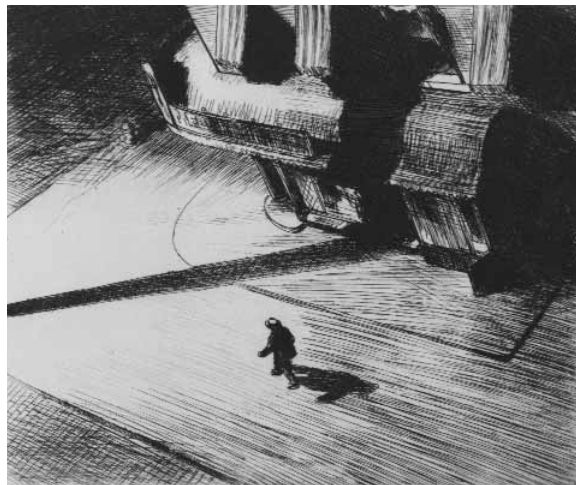
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For Susan.

Some of the best artists are the best observers. They notice what the rest of us pass by, and recreate those details just convincingly enough to leave us wanting more. Mystery hovers at the edges, for example, in the furnishings of Edward Hopper's spaces and the melancholy expressions of his people, and we are captivated by the quiet perfection of their synchrony.

Hopper was described by John Updike as a painter whose work speaks from "sunlit solitariness" and "quite personal silence."¹ A visit to the recent retrospective at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts underscored for me Updike's words, but led me, also, to reconsider images that had been top of mind for me most recently, the photographs of Larry Merrill. The experience of being immersed in Hopper's work triggered my ability to "see" even more fully the strength of Merrill's work, which may or may not have been influenced by a lifetime of knowing Hopper's paintings. (In reality, no artist working in the realistic tradition in America in the 20th century could have escaped the influence of Hopper, whether conscious or not.) Both use man-made spaces as sets in which people act out microslices of anonymous dramas, unaware that the artist is watching. While Hopper could compose his stage sets with paint and canvas over weeks and months in his studio, Merrill must be more like a collector in search of an elusive and moving target—his work depends heavily on his ability to anticipate or recognize in a split second the right subject and the right composition, and then point and shoot.

¹John Updike, *Still Looking* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 187, 193.



Above: Edward Hopper, American, 1882–1967, *Night Shadows*, 1921, Etching. Gift of Sister Magdalen LaRow in honor of Robert Gianniny, 89.52

Below: Larry Merrill, *NYC 2004* (p. 27)

Against New York City backgrounds, Merrill's people wait for buses, talk on cell phones, and navigate streets and sidewalks while they unselfconsciously function as elements and extensions of street design as well. Noise and activity frequently surround them—what could be more symbolic of noisy intrusion than the cell phone in public space?—but as in Hopper's painting, the mute button is pushed and the strollers, talkers, waiters, smilers freeze, caught for all time in their awkward humanity, leaving the viewer to construct the rest of the narrative. Meaning-makers that we are, we habitually fall into the habit of storytelling, and so risk overlooking the richness of color and composition—the strong diagonal, the omnipresence of the black and white palette punctuated with sharp bursts of color, the textures and the distinctive quality of light.

Merrill and Hopper part company along the way, particularly in their approach to women. Hopper's women are often disengaged and disappointed. Devoid of energy, they seem trapped within their lives, perhaps extensions of the emptiness that characterize the rooms in which

they're painted. Merrill's women, by contrast, are free and autonomous, with the world wide open to them—from the elderly woman whose profile is topped with a picture hat, to the tourists at ease on a city street-corner. He approaches them with tenderness, aware that he is taking advantage of their lack of self-consciousness, and we can nearly imagine him asking for forgiveness for focusing on their too-tight white pants and their unmanicured feet. Tenderness mixes with humor, as the pedestrian in flip flops is nearly mocked by the glamorous legs in large scale in the advertisement above. Merrill never misses an opportunity to poke fun, but he does it gently.

Historically, Merrill continues the tradition of the artist as voyeur—not necessarily in the erotic sense, but by disregarding the good manners that most mothers taught with the admonishment “Don't stare!” It is by staring and using the camera as a tool for doing so that some of Western culture's finest artwork has emerged. While we may experience a temporary thrill because, in these works, we can look ceaselessly at people from whom, in real life, we would ultimately have to look away, the experience can also be an opportunity to practice artful staring. Immersion in Merrill's work, enriching for its own sake, can remind us to use our own eyes to observe, frame and compose; to select from the stage set that is our world a visual vocabulary of details and qualities that characterize the subjects that enliven, intrigue, and engage us.

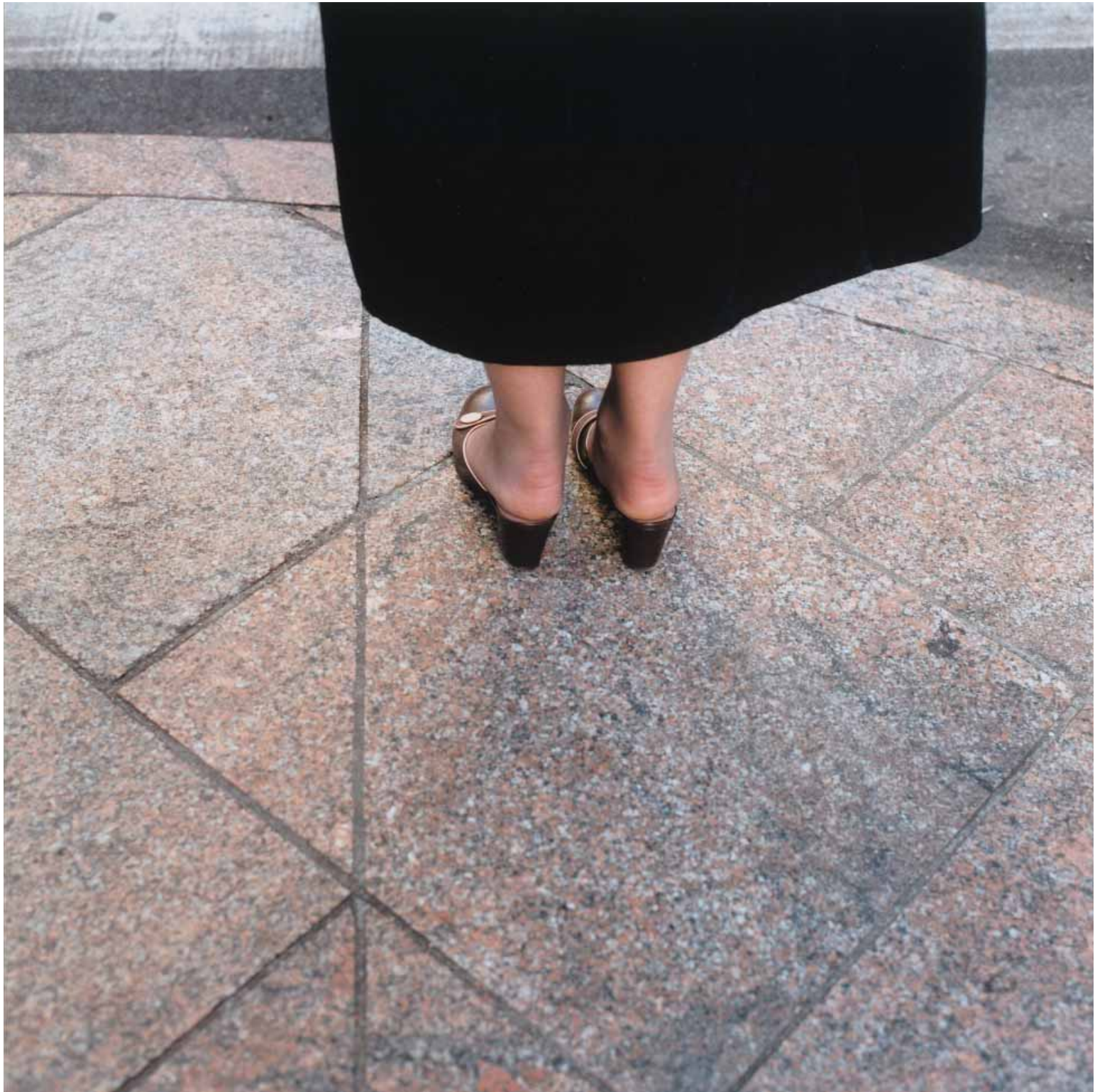
Marjorie B. Searl

Marjorie B. Searl is Chief Curator at the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, where she organized the travelling exhibition Leaving for the Country: George Bellows in Woodstock. She edited and wrote for the Gallery's first catalog of its collection of American art, Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Permanent Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester.

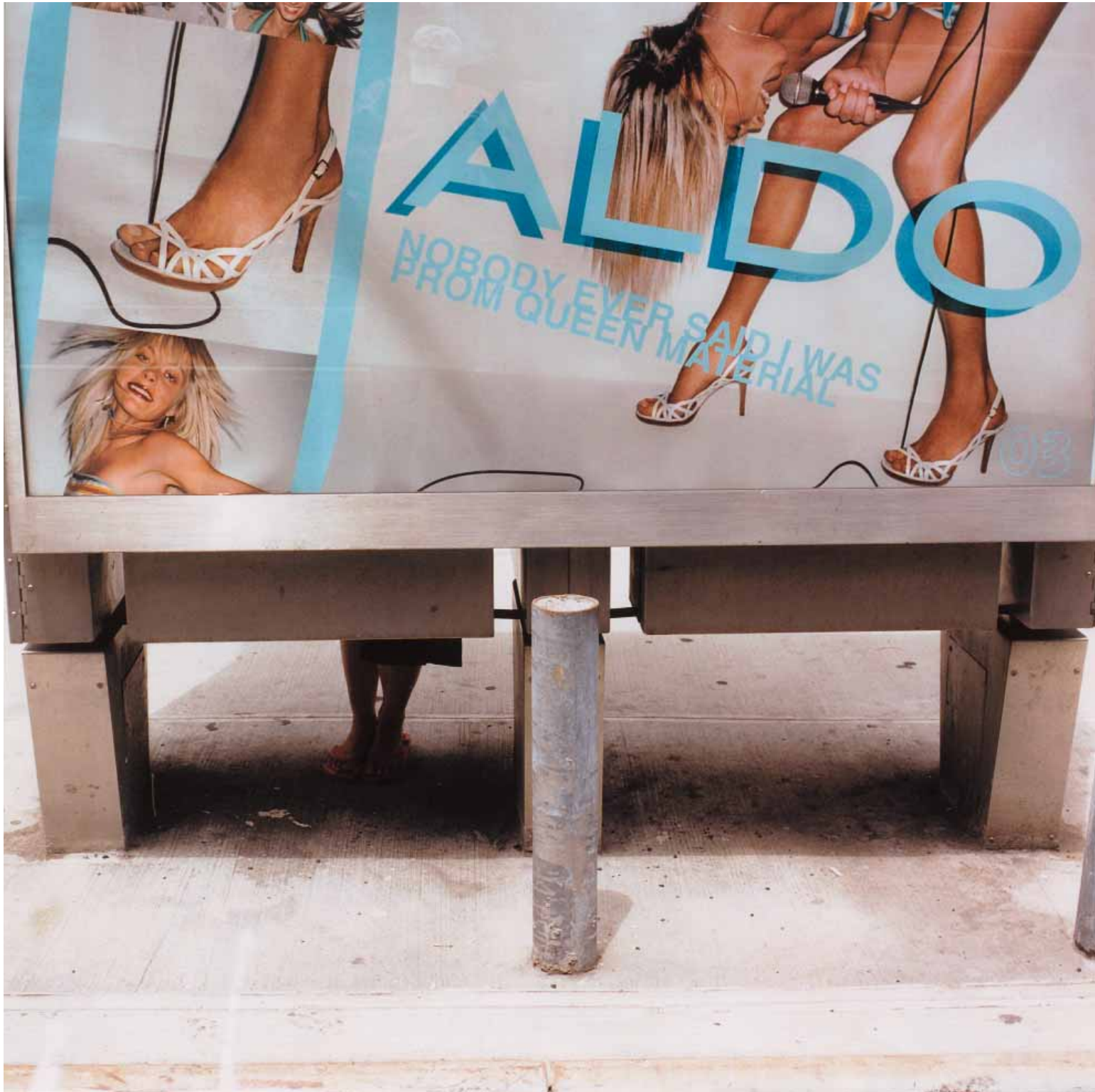


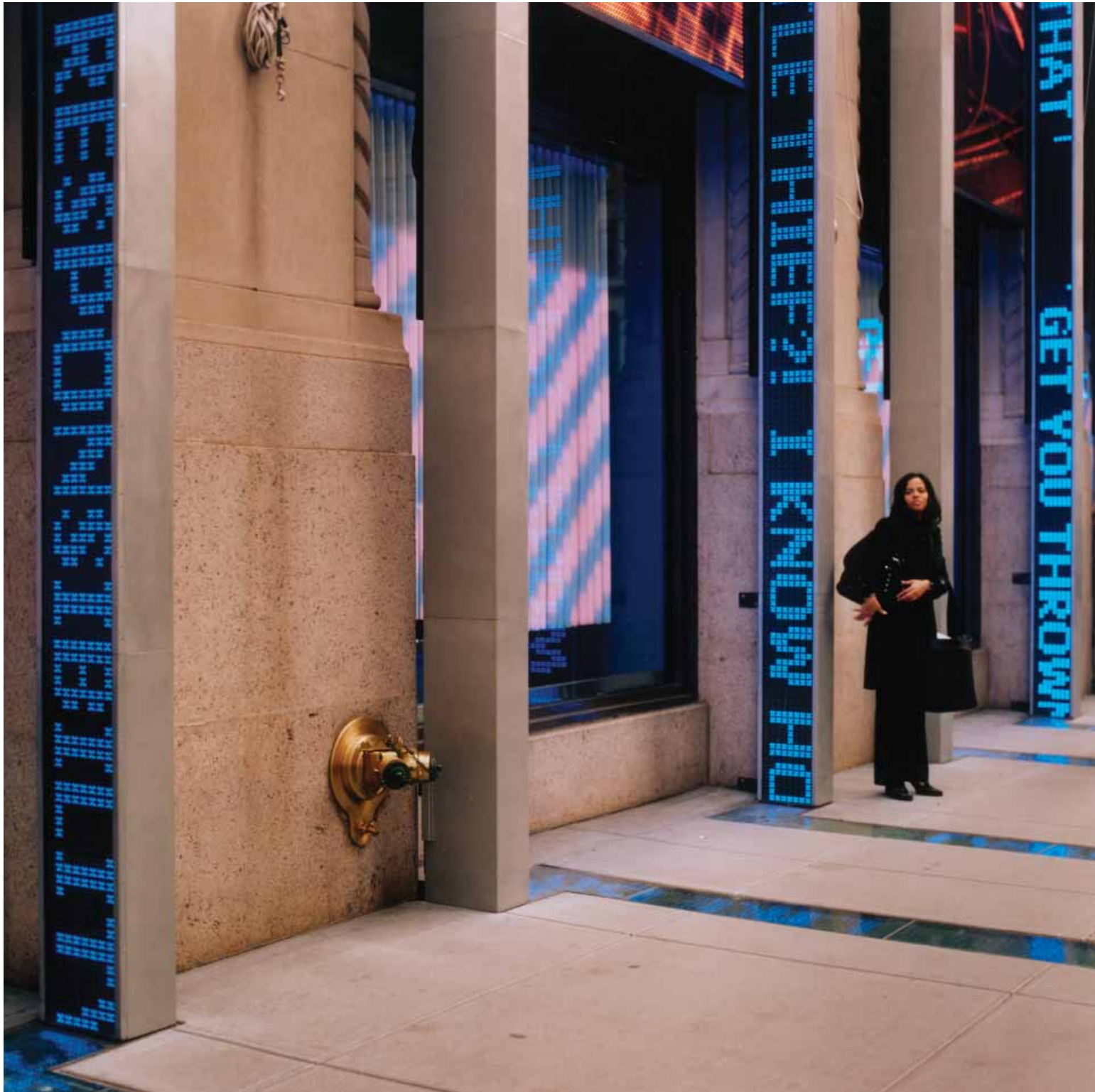
Larry Merrill, NYC 2006 (p. 36)

Photographs

















Larry Merrill

Larry Merrill was born in Brooklyn. He has had solo exhibitions at Bard College, the George Eastman House, the Manes Gallery in New York, the World Bank Headquarters in Washington, DC, the Yale University Global Fellows Program, the ARTECO Institute in Cumberland, MD, and the M. Early Gallery in Rochester, NY.

His work is in the collections of the George Eastman House, The Israel Museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Museum of the City of New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, TX, Yale University Art Gallery, and the World Bank.

He was guest curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art of *The Camera and the Photograph: Images in Light*, in the Uris Education Gallery. He has photographed for the World Bank in Senegal, Peru, Haiti, and Bhutan.

Merrill lives in Rochester, NY.

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