

Speech given by Twan Huys at the opening of the exhibition *Saul Leiter: New York Reflections* on October 23, 2011

[Translator's note: This speech was given in Dutch. Because the quotes were translated into Dutch and then back into English, they no longer reflect the original English wording.]

It should have been Saul Leiter standing before you today, with his inseparable assistant Margit Erb. In August I met with both of them in the backyard of Saul Leiter's apartment. Under no conditions would he consent to an interview with me: "I can't explain my work. Go look at the pelicans in the New York Zoo. They'll be of more use to you."

"Well then, why don't you come to Amsterdam for the opening of your exhibition," I replied.

"Not a good idea," Leiter said. "I'm moody, and that's no fun for the people around me. I'm definitely not coming."

So now here I am with the thankless job of saying some well-chosen words about the work of Saul

Leiter. Why me? Because, like him, I am passionate about the city of New York, and I am passionate about his work. His photographs are eye candy. I think everyone falls in love with Leiter's work at first sight. I was just looking at a montage of his photographs on YouTube, set to background music from the Miles Davis album *Kind of Blue*. Leiter's photos and Davis's music form a perfect match.

Leiter has been living in New York's East Village for more than fifty years. "In the 1950s and 60s, you ran into everyone here," he told me. "Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning—they were all just around the corner." Oddly, fame did not come to Leiter until fairly late in his life. Born in 1923, the same year as Diane Arbus and Richard Avedon, Leiter left Pittsburgh for New York in 1946. He established himself as a fashion photographer at *Harper's Bazaar* and *Esquire*. "Pure pornography," his father, an orthodox rabbi, called his son's work.

Why didn't his photographs find their way to museums and galleries until so late in his life? Leiter is modest about his own achievements. Unlike Richard Avedon, he's not what Americans

call a relentless self-promoter. He doesn't brag about what he's accomplished; he makes countless prints of his work; and he lets museums choose freely from his photographs rather than keeping an iron grip on his images.

That afternoon in New York, after he had overcome his aversion to our interview, he spoke enthusiastically and at length about his life and work. "Maybe I could have been as famous as Richard Avedon," Leiter said. "But people often become insufferable once they're successful. My work was motivated mainly by the desire to keep collection agencies and the IRS off my back." He always keeps his work and life in perspective, so much so that you almost start to wonder what's so special about his oeuvre.

When he invited me into his apartment, I got the answer. We walked in the door, and with a twinkle in his eye, Saul Leiter pointed to a small photograph of a woman looking into the lens with a very sensual expression. It sizzled with erotic energy. She looked ready to jump the photographer at any moment. Hot and steamy. "What do you think?" Leiter asked. Only when I took another, closer look did I recognize the

woman in the photo as his very professional, rather conservatively dressed assistant Margit, who was following me into the apartment that very moment. "Great work," I said to Leiter. Behind me, Margit let out an embarrassed laugh.

Saul Leiter shows us images that we've passed by without a second thought, whether it's the splendor of the city or his assistant's erotic gaze. Maybe what he does makes life more beautiful and more bearable. And that's just what many critics have disliked about it.

"Some people," Saul Leiter told me, "think I should have done more to capture the tensions of city life. But that doesn't interest me at all. A starving baby in Africa may be just the thing for the cover of the *New York Times*, but I'm looking for images of beauty." And with a hint of fatigue in his voice, he added,

"Happiness is looked down upon;  
agony is in style;  
being miserable is a sign of intelligence."

Fortunately, the Jewish Historical Museum has an eye for the beauty of his work. And the good news is that, even if Saul Leiter isn't here in person

today, his assistant Margit e-mailed me this week and told me he's coming to Amsterdam in December or January to give a talk and sign his books. If you'd like to have a terrific evening, make sure to come back to this museum then.

Thank you.