VIEWS

RRY CALLAHAN AT 100

was a young man, Harry Callahan encountered two very different people, nom would change his life. The first was Ansel Adams, whom Callahan met rough a camera club workshop in Detroit. Adams not only taught the ne-year-old Callahan a great deal about technical approaches to phing the American landscape, he also liberated the young man to feel that phy was a livelihood to which it was worth dedicating his life. Five years e Chicago Institute of Design, Callahan met László Moholy-Nagy, the n refugee and great Bauhaus artist. Heavily influenced by the ivists, Moholy-Nagy was a pioneer of experimental, often sentational modes of photography that privileged the investigation of light e as subject. Adams and Moholy-Nagy were, if not opposites, perhaps influences on which Callahan's own innovative practice was founded.

ibition *Harry Callahan at 100* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, s the centennial year of Callahan's birth with—naturally, one hundred—hs that range from the 1940s to the 1990s. It's a concise survey, and one pts to display Callahan's unique gamut of work; no matter how far he e limits of abstraction, the collection appears to argue, this photographer s be connected to the natural world. With the exception of the later color hs, it's hard to disagree: Callahan glides between an organic and graphic h incredible ease and sensitivity.

1912 in Detroit, Callahan was the son of a rural farmer turned le man. His first job was as a clerk in the shipping department at the Corporation; it was not only the location where he took his first hs, the plant was also the place where he met his wife and longtime eanor. It was the most American kind of story: he was a recent Michigan out, she a seventeen-year-old secretary. Together they produced the of photographs—husband as maker, wife as model—for which Callahan

Callahan's images are the most sublimely tender, and yet also the most curiously detached. Despite the grace of those images, his and Eleanor's relationship remains profoundly unknowable. Possibly Callahan's strangest images, and the most out-of-character, are his photographs of women on the street, made in Chicago in 1950. Shooting with a lens preset to focus a distance of four feet away, the resulting images are tight—usually cropped between the hairline and the chin—of unsuspecting female passersby. The contrast-heavy printing is also harsher than is Callahan's normal style, and one gets the sense of an undercurrent of mild hostility toward his subject for the first (and perhaps only) time in his photographic œuvre. (Philip-Lorca diCorcia's project *Heads*, made half a century later in 2000–2001, owes this series a grand debt.) For all his groundbreaking experimentation, Callahan was a photographer—and a man—of tremendous restraint. Even in his images that employ photographic trickery—multiple exposures, extreme contrast, or camera movement—there is always an economical simplicity; Callahan knew better than to do more merely because he could. This modesty carries over into his explanations of his process, which were spartan, and to his own teaching practice (first at the Institute of Design in Chicago, and eventually as the Chair of the Rhode Island School of Design's Photography Department), which, for a quiet college dropout who once described himself as "not very literary," was agony. Callahan's world, though not unemotional, was immensely private. But through this exhibition, for just a moment, we get to see inside.

—Carmen Winant

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