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Aaron Siskind at age 85 remains focused on his art

By BILL VAN SICLEN
Journal-Bulletin Arts Writer

AARON SISKIND IS A busy man. The world-renowned photographer, who celebrates his 85th birthday today, is in such demand (both personally and professionally) that he rarely has time to do what he does best - explore the world with his camera.

His modest home in the Oak Hill section of Pawtucket has become a mecca for younger photographers, many of whom studied with him during his years at the Chicago Institute of Design and the Rhode Island School of Design. His phone rings constantly and there is always a pile of mail on his desk waiting to be opened and answered.

His list of honorary awards and degrees grows longer every month. And galleries and museums never seem to get tired of selling and exhibiting his work. He has also kept a team of young studio assistants busy for the last year or two years re-issuing many of his classic photographs in new platinum print and photogravure editions.

It's no surprise, then, that Siskind greets a post-Thanksgiving visitor with a quick "Hello. I'm on the phone," then disappears into his kitchen. When he reappears a few minutes later, he explains that the caller is a magazine writer who's interested in doing a story on him. "I told him I thought it was a good idea," he says.

Obviously, Siskind has lost none of his personal charm or natural high spirits. He still holds court regularly at Leo's restaurant in downtown Providence, and keeps up a busy social schedule, ranging from gallery and museum openings to dinners with friends and colleagues.

He is also deeply involved with the Aaron Siskind Foundation, a non-profit group he founded in 1984 to promote the study and appreciation of 20th-century photography. The foundation sells prints donated by Siskind, then uses the money to finance a variety of projects — from research grants to...
Siskind

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university archives such as the Aaron Siskind Resource Center at the Rhode Island School of Design museum.

(In honor of Siskind's 85th birthday, the RISD Museum and Aaron Siskind Resource Center are hosting a small rotating exhibition of his photographs, beginning with selections from his classic 1935 series, "Harlem Document," and ending with examples of his work from 1940 to the present. The exhibition continues through mid-January.)

Siskind has also been at work on a new series of photographs — close-ups of the wandering tar lines on the Waterman Street bridge between Providence and East Providence. Although Siskind has been fascinated for years by the tar marks, which are formed when road crews seal cracks in the pavement, finding a way to photograph them wasn't easy. "I didn't want anyone using me for a speed bump," he says.

Sunday mornings

He solved the problem by working on Sunday mornings, when traffic was light, and by having friends (usually Providence sculptors Hugh Townley and Richard Fleischner) park their cars on the bridge. The cars created a barrier behind which Siskind could work in safety.

"People must have thought I was crazy," he says, "Here was this old guy out on Sunday mornings — and even once on the Fourth of July — taking pictures of the pavement.

This photo of pealing paint was shot by Aaron Siskind in 1949.

They probably thought I was an inspector for the highway department or something." The resulting photographs, which make the tar lines look like swipes of black paint on a gritty gray canvas, will be shown in New York at the School for Visual Arts in early February. Siskind says he can hardly wait, especially since it's been several years since he's had a show of new work in a major art center like New York.

"It's always nice to have a show, period. But there's more excitement and anticipation when the work is new. You know, when you're an artist and you're getting on in years everybody wants to show the stuff you did when you were young. That's not necessarily bad, but if you're still a working artist — and I consider myself a working artist — you want to say 'Hey, wait a minute, I've got this new stuff.'"

The tar pictures are in keeping with Siskind's revolutionary work from the 1940s and '50s, when his close-ups of peeling paint, torn posters and wisps of seaweed introduced photography to the brave new world of abstract art. By focusing on lines, shapes and textures rather than on people, places and things, Siskind helped free photography from its traditional role as a simple recorder of events.

Shapes and textures

"Everything's related," Siskind says of his work, past and present. "No matter where you go or what you do, you can't escape yourself. Sometimes that's good and sometimes it's not. But there's no getting away from yourself. The reason my new photographs look like my older photographs is because I took them. It's that simple. I've always been fascinated by shapes and textures, and that's what I photograph."

Siskind says that the biggest changes in his life over the past few years have been financial rather than artistic. Although considered a modern master since the 1950s, he has only been in the last decade or so that he has become financially secure. "It wasn't until people started collecting photographs the way they collect paintings and sculpture that old photographers like me could afford to retire," he says.

Looking ahead to his 86th year, Siskind says he'll probably have to cut back on his work and social schedules. His concentration and stamina aren't what they used to be, and there are painful cataracts on his eyes that will have to be operated on before Christmas. "I'm going to have to start acting my age," he says: "I guess it's about time."