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R.I. Arts Award to honor Siskind

By BERT WADE COLE

Aaron Siskind, who redirected 20th Century photography in the 1940s, will be presented the Governor's Arts Award — Rhode Island's highest cultural honor — Friday in ceremonies at the State House.

The event also will mark his 80th birthday and 50th anniversary as a professional photographer.

Governor Garrahy, the Rhode Island Philharmonic, the Newport Artillery, Grucci (the "First Family of Fireworks") and thousands of Rhode Islanders are expected for an Aaron Siskind celebration at 8 p.m. on the south grounds of the State House.

"I think it's going to be cold out there," says Siskind, a former New Yorker who taught at the Chicago Institute of Design and the Rhode Island School of Design.

However, good spirits are likely to dispel the chill night air. "A lot of people in Rhode Island know and love me dearly and I feel the warmth," Siskind says.

THE STARLIGHT pops concert on the State House lawn after the ceremony will feature salutes from the Newport Artillery and a fireworks display. Those planning to attend are encouraged to bring blankets.

Grucci, winner of the International Firework Competition in Monaco, is the Long Island company that provided extravaganzas at this year's Brooklyn Bridge celebration and at President's Reagan's Inauguration.

"We wanted this touch of the spectacular because we want people to turn out and take pride in the number of professional artists who have worked in this state since the time of Gilbert Stuart," says Tom Ahern, director of information for the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts.

The Siskind celebration is sponsored by the council, the Rhode Island Heritage Commission, the Rhode Island Commodores and the Outlet Company.

A display of Siskind's work, mounted by Malcolm Greer, a former recipient of the Governor's Arts Award, will be in the State House rotunda.

Siskind has made his home in Providence since 1971, when he was appointed adjunct professor at RISD. He retired from teaching in 1976, but not from work.

He used his talents as a photographer, first to make social statements. As he became intrigued by abstractionists, his work developed an aesthetic quality in which the contents became a background issue, Ahern explains. Photography followed Siskind's lead.

"He is an outstanding artist. His selection for the award was a great opportunity to make an event," says Ahern.

SISKIND SAYS he's probably already received enough awards for any lifetime. "Honorary doctorates get to be a little bit the same. You have to stand there smiling and you don't get a chance to talk back," he says.

Friday night's event promises some differences.

"So much will be going on that it will take people's minds off me," Siskind says. "I just feel it's a celebration of art, and photography is a part of the world of art. I'm glad the bureaucracy recognizes art for whatever reason. I'm glad they are celebrating and bringing art to the attention of the people.

"And," he adds, "I particularly like parties and celebrations with fireworks."

The public is invited. In the event of rain, the pops concert will take place Saturday night at the same hour and location.