

camera work



revised edition

35 photographs by john fraser

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Rob Stevenson scanned the images and formatted the book.

My thanks, again, to Findlay Muir, whose own extensive camera work is a trove crying out for exploration.

Camera Work is for Findlay Muir and Barbara Bickle.

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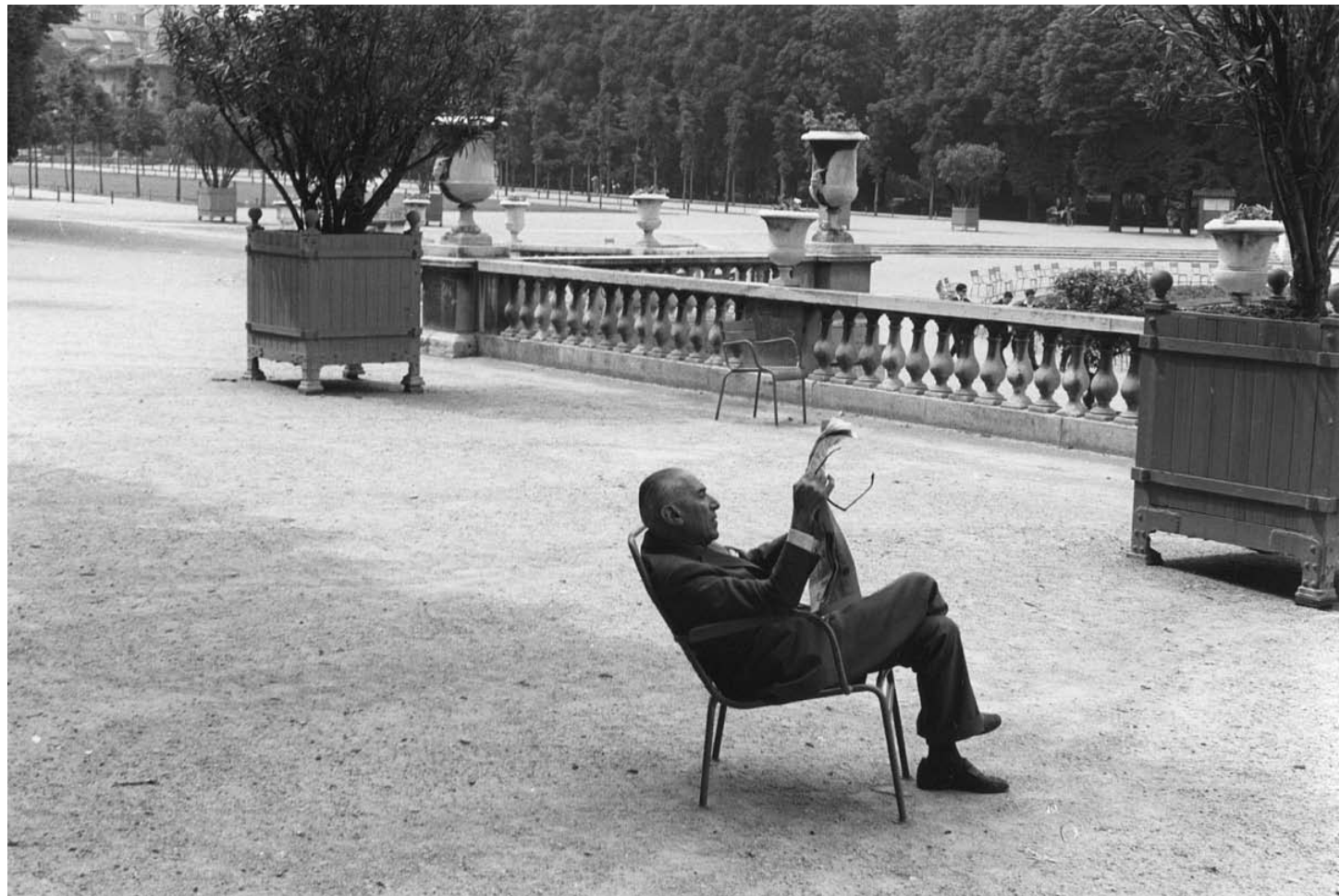
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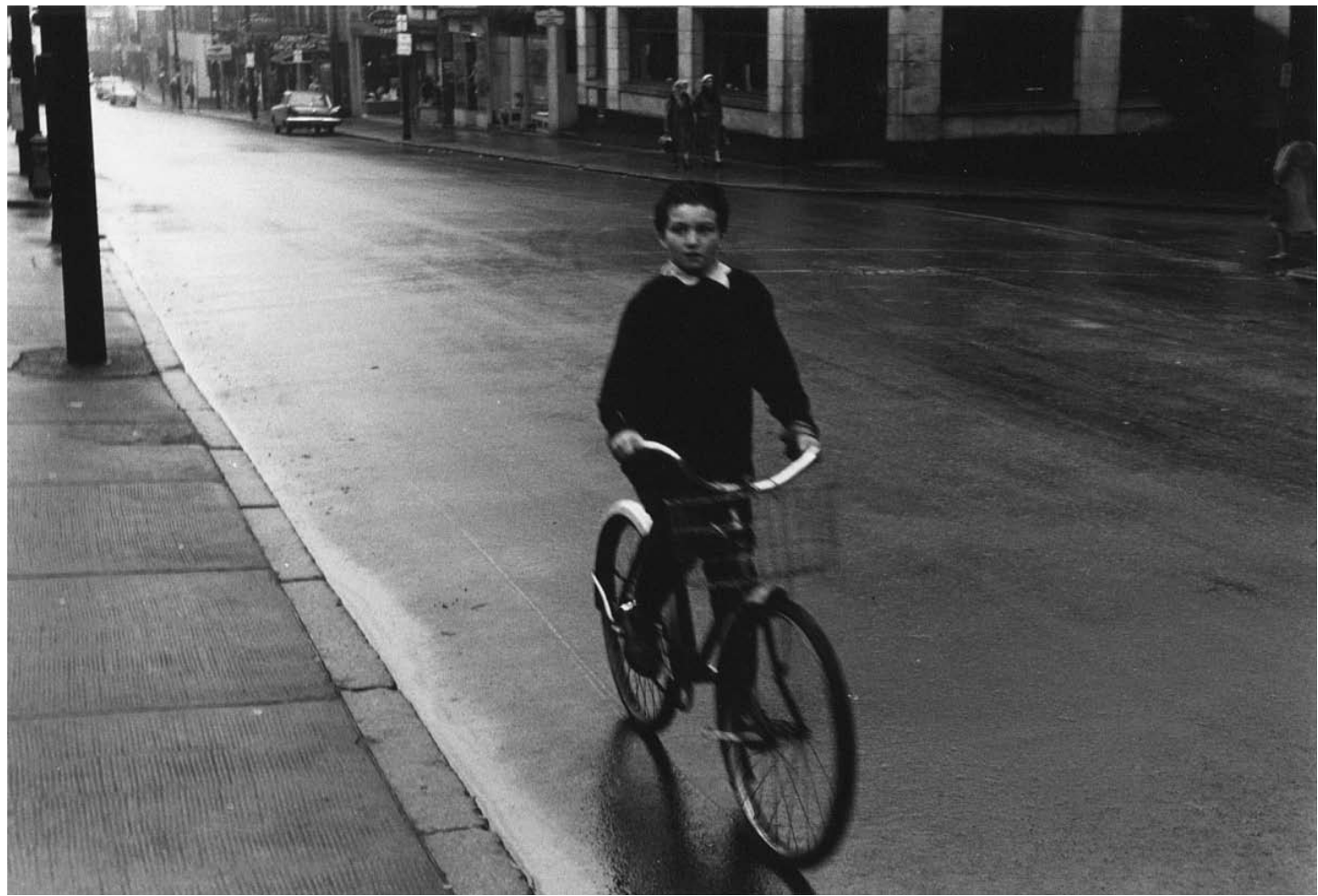
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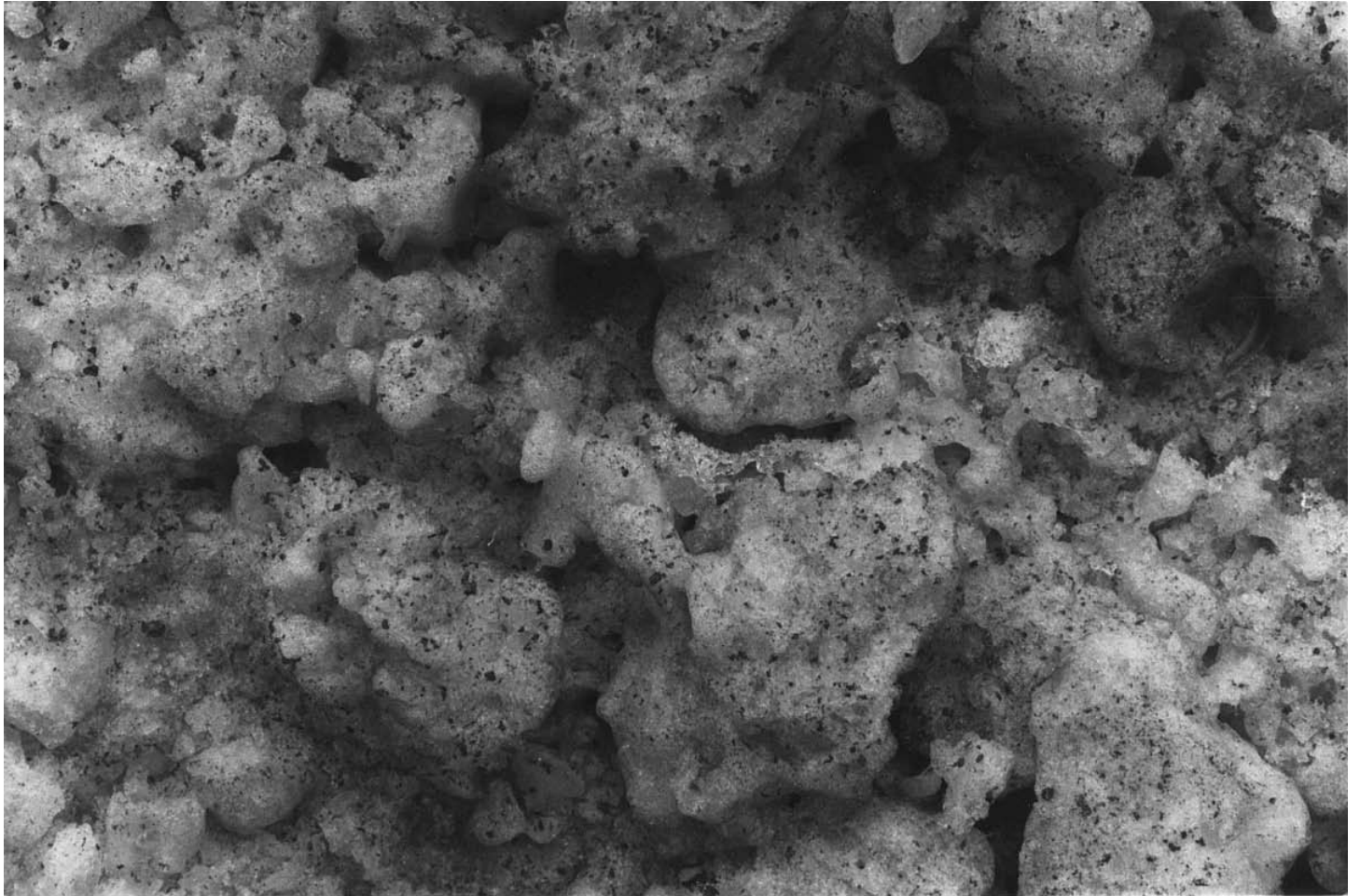


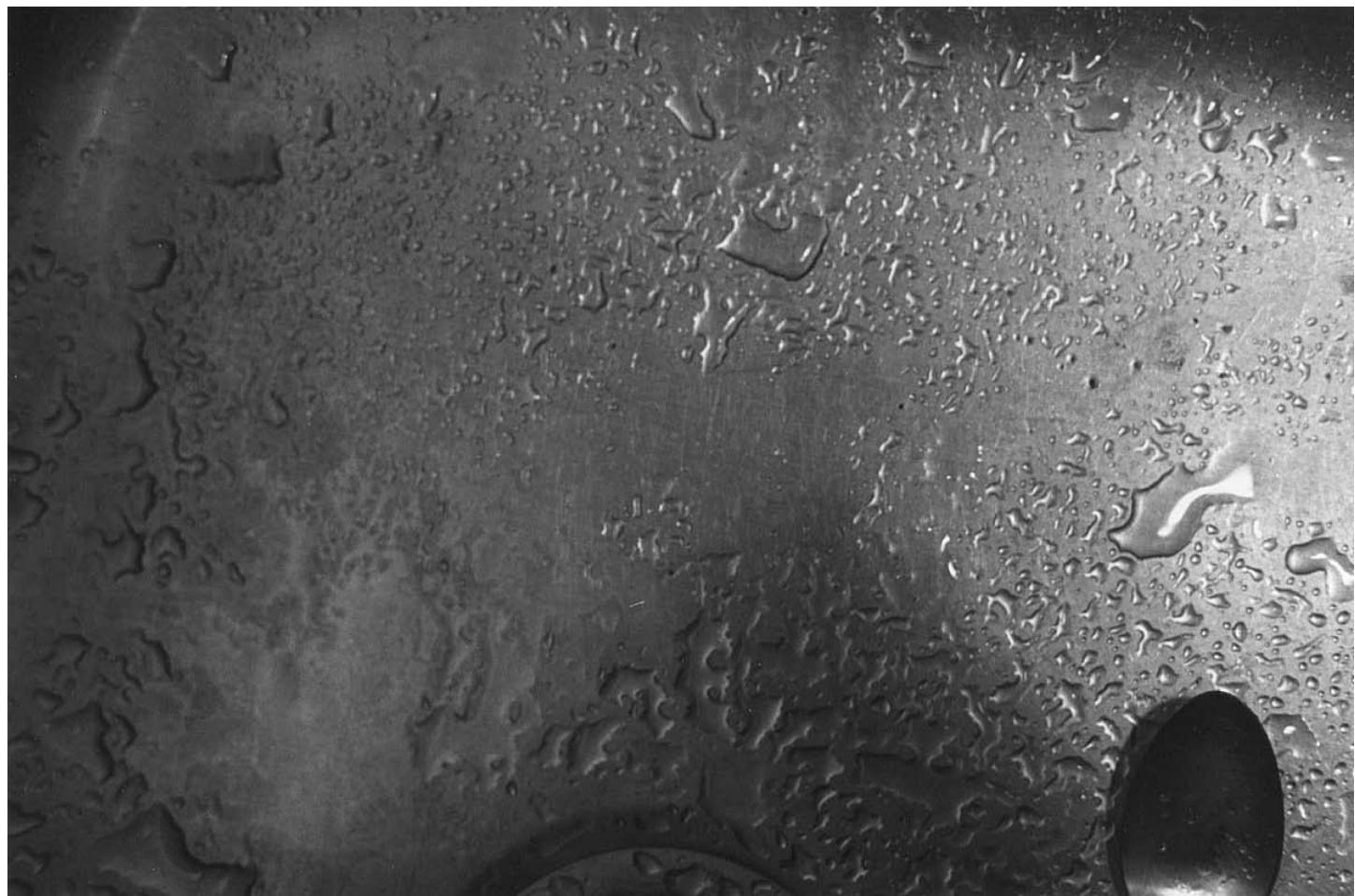
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Afterword to the revised edition

The first version of *Camera Work* contained too much illustrational sludge. In the revised one here, the best of the images are allowed to speak for themselves, in a more dynamic sequence.

An old British army adage from barracks days used to be, “If it moves, salute it. If it doesn’t, paint it white.” When I carried a camera I shot the moving and the stationary indiscriminately—shot without regard to whether they were “signature” subjects or not. In the winter things dwindled down at times to what was in the kitchen sink. But an image is an image, regardless of subject.

E.M. Forster tells of an old lady who, when informed that logic enables you to organize your thoughts so that you can express them clearly, asked plaintively, “But how can I know what I think until I see what I say?” For me it was, “But how can I know how I see until I see what I saw?”

This is my third and final book of photographs. Having talked in the Afterword to *Moments* about my take on photography, I won’t repeat myself now. But *Camera Work* is a different kind of book from the other two.

Moments is dramatic and largely shows individuals with expressive faces caught momentarily in relationships with one another or with the photographer. Its units are a little like sequences of movie stills. Or, at times, imagist poems. The

groupings seem to me original.

Until the 20th century, faces were the common denominators in lots of great and good art, just as they've been in the unforgettable moments in lots of movies. *Interfacing* is about faces, with, if I dare say so, a wider range of expressions than is common with that kind of concentration. Though I know nothing practical about music, the different "movements" in it, miniature like Webern's, give it the feel of a musical composition for me.

Camera Work is more abstract, more thematic, more an interweaving of various manifestations of energy and order, present and past, nature "raw" and "cooked." There is no message that I'm aware of, and no irony. There are traces here and there of photographers who have mattered to me, as to many others, from whom one learned how to look. There are touches of *l'insolite*, that poetic French concept that isn't adequately rendered as the strange, the curious, the unexpected, the surprising. There are escapes from what Wallace Stevens called "The malady of the quotidian."

The water glimpsed through cluttered vegetation is the Mississippi, not quite the usual take on the Father of Waters. The fire in the curious dark shape in the cemetery is thawing the ground for a grave. I was the photographer at the wedding of the two Minnesota artists. The self-focusing Canon EOS Rebel took the pic of the crutches. I held it down at my side, and didn't need to crop. Cropping can be done brilliantly. Man Ray was a Grand Master of it. But I was never into that kind of decision-making.

With the tiny Leica viewfinder, you couldn't see all the details until there had been darkroom enlargements. Sometimes everything coalesced and you had expressive form, not formalism—an essentializing, an image. But you had to shoot and shoot, not wait for Mr. Right to come along. It was a relief to learn that Cartier-Bresson would sometimes shoot thirty or more rolls of film in a *day*. He had seemed to inhabit such an amazing visual world. But of course he had gone where the action was.

I was an amateur in the sense of loving the medium and being free to pick and chose subjects and equipment, but not, at least in my best pics, amateurish, an important distinction. The quality of a photograph isn't affected by who took it. But it helps to have looked at a lot of good and great pics because you love to look and because you hope, the camera being so uniquely easy to use, that some day you might be lucky and achieve something yourself that would be remembered.

Digitalization has expanded possibilities amazingly. But darkroom work used to be exciting. It was where you started discovering what you had seen. And maybe, to some extent, who you were.

2017

About the photographer

JOHN FRASER (1928– was born in North London, went to a country grammar school, did two years as a clerk in the RAF, read English at Oxford, taught school for two years in Haifa, and was enabled to come to America by Mike and Norma Zwerin. In 1961, after getting a PhD at the University of Minnesota, he and the artist Carol Hoorn Fraser (1930–1991), who had married him in 1956, moved to Nova Scotia, where he taught for thirty years.

At Minnesota, where Carol was doing an MFA and taking top juried prizes, he used the Photography Department's darkroom. Jerry Liebling and Allen Downs occasionally glanced at prints of his. He gained the friendship of Robert Eugene Wilcox, that man of total humorous integrity who ended his life after an operation took photography away from him. Irwin Klein, who would also die tragically, was a fellow graduate student, but they spoke only occasionally, and never about photography. Ben Klein's *Irwin Klein and the New Settlers* (2016) is a lovely memorial to him, created with heroic persistence.

Downs and Liebling used a shot of Fraser's to accompany a *NY Times Magazine* piece about their satirical brief documentary *Pow Wow*, showing the University marching band practicing in the rain. Jerry invited him to bring his used Leica IIIB to a slaughter-house shoot that fell through at the time. Later, Fraser's "Atget and the City" (1968) "brought a new level of scholarship to the discussion of Atget's work" (John Szarkowski, MOMA). *The Yale Review* published his "Photography

and the City.” Several of his handmade Throwaway Books are in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. He has a large website, with images on it.

He gave up photography at the end of the Sixties because of the demands of an academic career. Twenty-five years later, acquiring the lovely lightweight Canon EOS Rebel and being able to use the excellent Carsand-Mosher darkroom facilities gave him a new lease on photographic life for a few years.

Over time he took lots and lots of pics with insufficient content or botched form, and wasted acres of printing paper. But the workhorse 50mm lens meant that you couldn't count on the camera to create an illusion of energy, and he didn't crop or do fancy printing. Occasionally content and form came together, and the felt life was there that it was all about.

2017