

FOR ROGOVIN, A BITTERSWEET 'HARVEST TIME'

By MARK SOMMER - News Staff Reporter

"The seeds we planted were the photographs I took, and now they are being recognized not only in the U.S., but all over the world," says Buffalo photographer Milton Rogovin.

The photographer is surrounded by his images during the opening of "Milton Rogovin: The Forgotten Ones" in the New-York Historical Society in upper Manhattan. His life's work has been photographing the working-class people of Buffalo; but life in the city has not always been easy, including attacks by the House Un-American Activities Committee during the 1950s "Red Scare."

Milton Rogovin, Buffalo's renowned social documentary photographer, is accustomed to training his trusty Rolleiflex camera on others.

Now the focus is on him. A five-decade retrospective of the 93-year-old Rogovin's portraits of poor and working-class people from Buffalo's Lower West Side is on exhibition through mid-October in the New-York Historical Society in upper Manhattan.

Rogovin has had major shows before, but this one has prompted significant media attention, including most of a recent arts cover in the New York Times, as well as stories by the Washington Post and National Public Radio. A segment on the "Today" show is airing Monday, and one on "CBS Sunday Morning" is scheduled for Aug. 17.

"As Anne and I were saying recently," he said of his wife, "this is 'harvest time' for us. The seeds we planted were the photographs I took, and now they are being recognized not only in the U.S., but all over the world."

Rogovin sat at the kitchen table in the brown stucco and wood house on Chatham Avenue that he and the former Anne Setters moved into in 1948. It's where they raised three children, and where Rogovin mixed chemicals in the basement dark room to produce his striking gelatin silver prints.

But there's now an incalculable void -- in that house, and in Rogovin's heart.

Anne, his soul mate for 61 years, who stood by him when he was a target of McCarthyism in the 1950s, supported him as his optometry business dwindled and later when he turned to photography full time, succumbed to cancer three weeks ago.

Anne Rogovin shared her husband's vision, assisted him in his work and often propelled him forward when his ambition or spirit lagged. She was nationally regarded in her own right, for self-help books about children and innovative classroom work for children with mental retardation.

Her loss is not a subject Rogovin wants to address right now. Fortunately, there are plenty of diversions, as acclaim over his work reaches new heights.

He is, in his twilight years, a man increasingly regarded throughout the world for his stunning, humane photography.

"Milton is widely recognized as one of the leading photographers today, taking into account his whole body of work," said James Wood, director of the Art Institute of Chicago, which staged a show of Rogovin's work in 1993. "He has, in one sense, survived the demands of a long career with a remarkable consistency, and his reputation has grown with exposure."

Judy Keller, associate curator in the department of photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Santa Monica, Calif., said Rogovin is now a standard-bearer for the social documentary tradition. The museum owns about 100 of Rogovin's photographs, and Keller has selected 40 from a series on miners for a planned February 2004 show.

Slices of Buffalo life

"The rich have their photographers. I photograph the forgotten ones."

Those words greet the visitor inside the New-York Historical Society's "Remembering the Forgotten Ones" retrospective. Nearby, a map depicts Buffalo and the location of the Lower West Side. Information on the city concludes: "2003 -- Despite thriving educational and arts institutions, Buffalo continues to struggle, with 26 percent of its population still living in poverty."

The pictures, organized across five rooms by subject, reach back to the high-speed photos Rogovin took from 1958 to 1961 in storefront churches on the East Side -- photos in which he captured the spiritual transports of African-American worshippers.

Rogovin began his photography career at 48, and historian W.E.B. Du Bois wrote the introduction when some of his first photographs were published in 1962 in the photography magazine *Aperture*.

That same year, Rogovin began to photograph coal miners in Spain, Mexico, Scotland, China and France, as well as the Appalachian Mountains. Those pictures turned up in his first book, "The Forgotten Ones."

The New York exhibition is based in part on a show mounted by the Burchfield-Penney Art Center that concluded in March. There are portraits of blacks, whites, Hispanics and Native Americans on the Lower West Side; factory workers, shown in steel mills and iron foundries, and at home; and members of the Yemeni community in Lackawanna.

"I wanted to reveal that these are ordinary people just like the rest of us, and we should not ignore them," Rogovin said.

Rogovin's most celebrated work, "Triptychs," is centrally represented. The portraits, heralded as are all of Rogovin's work for capturing the humanity and dignity of his subjects, covered a six-block area of the Lower West Side, after the Italian neighborhood had become mostly black and Hispanic.

Many of the people photographed were caught up in unemployment, drugs, alcohol and prostitution, and were wary of outsiders. Yet the Rogovins earned their trust. They did so by never asking questions and by giving them prints in exchange for their cooperation. Yemeni people in Lackawanna, for example, were eager to be photographed so they could send pictures back to their families in Yemen.

"At first people on the West Side thought I was from the FBI. But gradually as I took a photograph and gave it to them in a week or two, they realized I wasn't, and they'd stop me on the street and say, 'Hey, take my picture,'" Rogovin recalled.

Wood said Rogovin's humility was the key to his extraordinary access.

"These are vulnerable people, but he manages to almost instantly gain their confidence," said Wood, who was chief curator of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery when, in 1975, he gave Rogovin his first of two one-man shows there. "How does he do that? That's part of the mystery of his genius."

Jose Esquilin, the subject of a triptych, said the Rogovins presented themselves as modest, caring people with unshakable integrity, brimming with enthusiasm.

"Milton and Anne were the nicest people I ever met," he said. "He is a really soft-spoken man. He came up to me and put his arm around me. I felt really humbled around him."

Monica "Kiki" Cruz, whom Rogovin first photographed when she was 3, agreed.

"It made everybody happy when Milton came around," said Cruz, now 34. "He and Anne made us feel really important. He made my mom feel like a movie star."

Rogovin offers another factor -- his camera.

"Instead of pointing at somebody, it looked down," he said. "I think that was a very good thing. It was not a threatening type of camera. Sometimes people would say, 'When are you going to take my picture?' I took it already."

And Rogovin never posed anyone.

"The way they're standing or what they're wearing, to me it's just right," he said. "I don't know what it means, 'just right,' but to me it is."

He also would take no more than three or four shots, in contrast to photographers who take dozens. He used a simple, bare-bulb flash, correcting the lighting if need be in the darkroom.

Newest work is 'Quartets'

Rogovin began the "Triptychs" project in 1972 at 63, and, at his wife's urging, returned at intervals of roughly 10 years. Tracking people down was tricky. The couple would return to the corner of Virginia Street and West Avenue, take out a box of photographs and ask residents for help in locating people.

"Triptychs" was published in 1994. By then, Rogovin had overcome heart surgery and prostate cancer. For the show's newest work, "Quartets," Rogovin worked as late as December 2002 to add a fourth photograph to several of his subjects. He was able to do so after laser surgery removed from both eyes the cataracts that had forced him to put down his camera in 1997.

Accompanying the show's photographs is an audio recording, in which the soft-spoken Rogovin reminisces about some of the people he photographed. The voices of several subjects can be heard, too.

James Williams, 32, is one of them. He was photographed at ages 2, 14, 21 and 29.

For Williams, going to New York to see the exhibit at the media preview meant taking his first airplane ride and first trip outside of Buffalo.

"It was really an overwhelming situation, with the flying, the big city, and to be able to meet people and say some nice words for Milton and Anne," Williams said. "People would come up and ask, 'Is that you, could you sign my book?' Reporters came up and asked me questions. It was really exciting."

A few telling artifacts from Rogovin's long career are encased in glass.

His Rolleiflex is there. So is an Oct. 3, 1957, edition of The Buffalo Evening News with the headline "Rogovin, Named as Top Red in Buffalo, Balks at Nearly All Queries." Also in the case are blacked-out FBI files and a transcript of his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Rogovin, a first-generation New York Jew born to Ukrainian parents, graduated from optometry school at Columbia University in 1931, during the Great Depression. The poverty and suffering he saw left an impression.

He became politically active, advocating for such issues as social security, unemployment insurance and voter registration for African-Americans.

After taking an optometric job in Buffalo, Rogovin opened his own shop in 1938. In 1942, the same year he purchased his first camera, he got married and was drafted.

The 'Red Scare'

After serving in World War II as a corporal and optometrist from 1942 to 1945, including a 16-month stint in England, Rogovin returned to Buffalo and helped reorganize the Optical Workers Union. He was also a member of the Buffalo chapter of the Communist Party, where his main function was disseminating literature to different chapters.

It was the era of the "Red Scare," and Rogovin and a few other Western New York residents were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee and grilled about suspected leftist activities in Western New York.

"Are you, this minute, a member of the Communist Party?" a committee member asked him.

Rogovin declined to answer that and most other questions, citing constitutional grounds. The caption under the newspaper photograph of him being sworn in read, "Milton Rogovin: He gave little information."

The article was one of five in that day's newspaper about the suspected presence of communists in Western New York.

Like many people who declined to give names, the hearings had a profound effect on Rogovin and his family.

The optometry business Rogovin owned with his brother, Samuel, was immediately and permanently affected. Business dropped in half, and political differences irreparably strained the brothers' relationship.

Milton and Anne Rogovin were shadowed and sometimes questioned by the FBI. A next-door neighbor gave names to the congressional committee in closed session. Another wrote down license plate numbers of visitors to the Rogovins' home.

"It was a tough situation, and Milton stood up. All sorts of pressures were put on him to become an informant, and he didn't crack," recalled Emanuel Fried, a local playwright who was a union organizer at the time.

Like many on the political left, Rogovin regarded the committee hearings as an ideological witchhunt. He didn't admit his affiliation with the Communist Party for years, but was -- and still is -- drawn to the socialist ideal of equality, full employment and free medical care, even though he had little regard for its actual application in the Soviet Union.

"I guess a lot of people were in the same situation. (Playwright Bertolt) Brecht, (Chilean poet Pablo) Neruda -- they defended the Soviet Union but didn't like Stalin," Rogovin said. "The ideal of socialism was dear to them and dear to me, especially when you see the inequality that exists in our society."

When Rogovin worked on his mining series, he found authorities he encountered on a trip to the Soviet Union to be the least cooperative.

"That was the only country where I took all the photographs and tore them up. That's not a place I wanted to show," he said.

While the Rogovins had no qualms about standing up to McCarthyism, the hardest thing was seeing their children ostracized.

"Instantly, I had no friends," recalled Ellen Hart, the Rogovins' eldest daughter, who was 12 at the time of the hearings. "I didn't have one friend from seventh grade all the way through high school."

Paula Rogovin, who was four years younger, was told by her best friend that she was no longer allowed to play with her.

Rogovin said he never considered moving from Buffalo.

"Not at all," he said. "This is the place where we felt comfortable in. Anne had been born in this area. Especially when I was doing my photography, I found it to be an ideal place. There were factories here, steel mills, and also the Lower West Side."

Rogovin was recently shown a copy of the HUAC transcripts. It was his first look at them since the hearings nearly 46 years ago.

"That's just a rough period, that's all I can say," Rogovin said, letting out a warbled laugh.

A people's artist

Rogovin has received plenty of recognition over the years.

He has had shows in major museums around the world, and his work can be found in more than 20 museums and over 100 magazines. In 1998, the Library of Congress acquired 1,500 of his photographs, as well as all of his negatives and contact sheets -- the first photographer so honored in 30 years.

But in recent years, the Rogovins seemed just as genuinely happy for Milton's artwork to be displayed inside Buffalo's Humboldt Station, or on the walls of Columbus Community Health Center -- both places with their share of "the forgotten ones."

"That's where I wanted my photographs to be shown. People come off the trains and see the photographs -- friends, neighbors. That's what I want," Rogovin said.

Rogovin caused a stir last week when he entered Hispanics United, a community center near his old familiar corner, Virginia and West. He was warmly greeted by people he hadn't seen in years, and within minutes, a half-dozen older women were pointing out friends or family on the pages of "Triptychs."

Rogovin stood among them as the pages flipped, his smile radiating joy.