

MAKING MECCA: RINK'S EARLY SAN FRANCISCO PHOTOS

BY JONATHAN DAVID KATZ

Talk to just about anyone in the queer community in San Francisco, and they know Rink, at least by reputation. Go to any queer demonstration, street fair, bar event, film screening, or protest march, be it early in the morning or late at night, and Rink's there, his face hidden behind a camera, crouched down to get the best shot. If you're lucky enough to know Rink, he'll say hi in that hyperkinetic way of his and then regale you with the scandal du jour, the latest political dust up or who's been spotted on his knees in some restroom.

He always gave the impression, at least to me, of being everywhere at once, of knowing exactly what was going to happen, often long before it did. He must know half of San Francisco by name. And he's been doing this for over 30 years, making him the dean of San Francisco's queer photographers.

To see Rink's voluminous output in a gallery context is to flirt with skewing his mandate, which was, and has always been, reportage. Rink is a photojournalist, but as with other photojournalists like Frank

Capra, Dorothy Miller, and the incomparable Henri Cartier-Bresson, the prosaic term "journalism" doesn't do full justice to the work. That we are showing Rink at the Leslie/Lohman Gallery as a photojournalist, in an historical exhibition chronicling the transformation of San Francisco into the epicenter of the gay and lesbian movement (yes, New York, sorry, you had Stonewall, but San Francisco is still the epicenter), in no way conflicts with also showing Rink as an artist. In this exhibition of but a tiny percentage of Rink's nearly half a million images, you can assess his photographic eye for yourself. Like Cartier-Bresson, Rink seems to have a gift for being there at the right moment, not only to catch the action, but also to catch the image that is rich enough, dense enough, strange enough, to tell, like all memorable photos do, a complex story without words.

After college in 1969, Rink moved to San Francisco, having first lived for a few months in New York. He was an army brat born in Gainesville, Florida. His parents, after socializing with fellow of-

Rink Foto,
*San Francisco Gay
Freedom Day
Parade, 1978*
B/W photograph
27" x 30"



ficers who happened to be black, earned the enmity of the KKK and they were almost literally run out of town. They moved north to Georgetown in Washington, DC. Rink and his boyfriend—then still teenagers—traveled throughout the countercultural art scene of the late sixties, meeting Andy Warhol at the Factory and Studio 54, Truman Capote at parties, flirting with Leonard Bernstein on the beach at Fire Island. Rink's first celebration of his birthday in his adopted city of San Francisco took place on June 27, 1969 and was interrupted by a phone call from a friend in Greenwich Village relating the Stonewall riots in real time.

After meeting and befriending the lyrical photographer Imogen Cunningham in the early 1970s, Rink found himself amazed by her frank and beautiful portraits, male nudes, and flowers. He remade himself as a portrait photographer, but soon, getting caught up in the then-nascent LGBT political movement, instead turned his focus to the rich fabric of queer social and political life, chronicling San Francisco's seismic self-transformation into the queerest city in the world in the space of a decade. One of the first photos in the exhibition, fittingly, is a shot of Harvey Milk's camera store. Before beginning his political career by becoming the first openly gay elected official in the US, Milk ran a well-known camera store in the Castro, and Rink was a regular cus-

tommer. Over time, the two became friends, and Rink, who had moved to the city earlier than Milk, introduced the future politician to his friends and some early political supporters. Rink held fundraisers for Milk's campaigns, and his very first public exhibition took place in 1974 in the large plate



Rink Foto,
Inauguration
(George Moscone &
Harvey Milk), 1977
B/W photograph
16" x 20"

glass windows of Milk's camera store at 575 Castro Street of the 1974 Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade. That storefront exhibition was the very first mirror of the newly queer Castro, a political self-reflection that would in time prove run of the mill, but in 1974 was still exhilarating for some and shocking for others.

The Castro wasn't the site of San Francisco's first queer neighborhood: the Tenderloin holds that distinction. But the community in the Castro was different, made of newer immigrants to the city, many of whom

had been already radicalized by the antiwar and civil rights movements. Yet the Castro was still an old Irish enclave, and the assertive, immigrant queers and the old timers mixed uneasily. When in 1977 Anita Bryant began her campaign to turn back the clock on Dade County Florida's queer civil

rights legislation, wrapping herself in the sanctimonious garb of the Christian Right (now so familiar from but at that point still largely untested), those same windows where Rink had his first queer exhibition were shattered by homophobes.

Rink is just Rink, no last name used, a self-nomination of a piece with the immigrant's tendency towards self-reinvention, a trait commonly encountered as San Francisco made itself over into a queer utopia. The great historical value of Rink's work is the nearly day-by-day chronicling of

Rink Foto
Two lovers meet in person, after a year-long relationship over the phone, mid-1970s, B/W photograph, 16" x 20"



the gradual and occasionally violent birthing of the San Francisco we know today. With a nose for transformative people and events, Rink presciently captures such iconic figures as Robert Mapplethorpe, Divine, and Sylvester very early in their careers, well before their reputations were made outside the queer communities in which they first achieved renown. But the celebrity-driven aspect of photojournalism was never Rink's mode and with equal alacrity, he pictured then nascent social and political organizations, political movements, and community institutions. He's especially proud of his early and continuous focus on the richness and diversity of our communities. A true son of his bar-

rier busting parentage, Rink always went out of his way to chronicle important developments among women and people of color, long before the term "diversity" became linked with the idea of community.

For all its emphasis on the particular codes, customs, and commonalities within diverse queer communities, Rink's photos transcend the particular for the general, an imaging of a common humanity legible in its full emotional range from fury to tenderness to loneliness, triumph, and abandon. There's a lovely image of four men shot from behind, framed and announced by a street sign bearing the words Castro made before that word, and that sign, itself became iconic. They're linked arm in

arm, except that one man has his finger intimately hooked into another man's back pocket, the kind of telling gesture that announces intimacy as a casual, private familiarity here made public as political statement. Or there's another image of the protest march against Anita Bryant, with protesters flanking her visage with the likes of such mass murderers as Hitler, Stalin, the KKK and Idi Amin. But what makes the photo work is the man in front, bowler hatted and cape bedecked, evoking, almost subliminally, the image of the drummer in the celebrated patriotic painting *The Spirit of '76*, by Archibald Willard (completed for the 1876 centennial celebrations of the American Revolution), as if to suggest that this queer

protest is the true heir to the American promise of liberty from tyranny.

Rink's portraits of Harvey Milk seem especially prescient, born of the kind of intimacy of long association. In one particularly compelling image, Milk is photographed back-to-back, politicking with San Francisco mayor George Moscone. The two men now linked in death as common victims of Dan White are here figured in terms of their shared political mastery, their shared ideology, their shared palpable humanity, a trait perhaps even more in evidence in a casual image of Milk as a secular saint. Again and again, Rink exhibits a gift for capturing the most resonant detail in the flux of the moment: two mustachioed young men protesting the Briggs Initiative (which would have prevented queer people from teaching in public schools for fear of teachers "recruiting" children into homosexuality, and was, in a great political upset, soundly defeated by the voters after a vigorous campaign), here depicted with a child lovingly, unexpectedly, perched on one man's shoulders; two African-American men in radical farie garb, smiling, whose warm eyes radiate, farie-like, commingled acceptance, vulnerability and fellowship; Robert Mapplethorpe in full leather conversing with a man in a suit; the 1974 Gay and Lesbian Pride parade, the first in San Francisco with ample female (and child) presence. These are por-

traits of people to be sure, but they're also portraits of the ineffables—of politics, love, sexual desire, and aspirations for the future. Rink's great subject has always been the slow, difficult building of a better world, one, in which, if we're not yet able to experience that, future, we can at least see it figured—a quiet utopianism populating the image of the everyday.

San Francisco: The Making of a Queer Mecca—Early Photography by Rink Foto is at L/L Gallery from September 16–October 24, 2009. It was curated by Julia Haas, and developed and supervised by Jonathan D. Katz.

Jonathan D. Katz is an art historian, a community and political activist and a member of the Foundation Board.

For more information, visit Rink's Web site: www.rinkfoto.com.



Rink Foto, *Harvey Milk with the Castro Camera cart*, mid-1970s, B/W photograph, 14" x 11"