

"This World Is Not My Home: Danny Lyon Photographs" is curated by Toby Kamps, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

This exhibition is generously supported by Nina and Michael Zilkha, David and Anne Kirkland, Mark Wawro and Melanie Gray, H-E-B, the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, and the City of Houston.

#### Notes

1. All quotes Danny Lyon, conversation with the author, January 26, 2011.
2. Lyon worked with McCune to produce *The Autobiography of Bill McCune*, and the two remained friends until McCune's death in 2007.
3. Rice Museum, Rice University, Houston. "Conversations with the Dead: An Exhibition of Photographs of Prison Life by Danny Lyon, with the Letters and Drawings of Billy McCune #122054," September 10–October 11, 1970. John and Dominique de Menil, Dominique in particular, became involved in a number of Lyon's projects over the years and funded his first feature-length film, *Los Niños Abandonados* (1975).

Cover: *Chicago*, photos: 1965, montage: 1990s. Gelatin silver contact prints and enlargement print, All works by Danny Lyon © 2012 Danny Lyon/Magnum Photos. Courtesy of the Edwynn Houk Gallery and dektol.wordpress.com

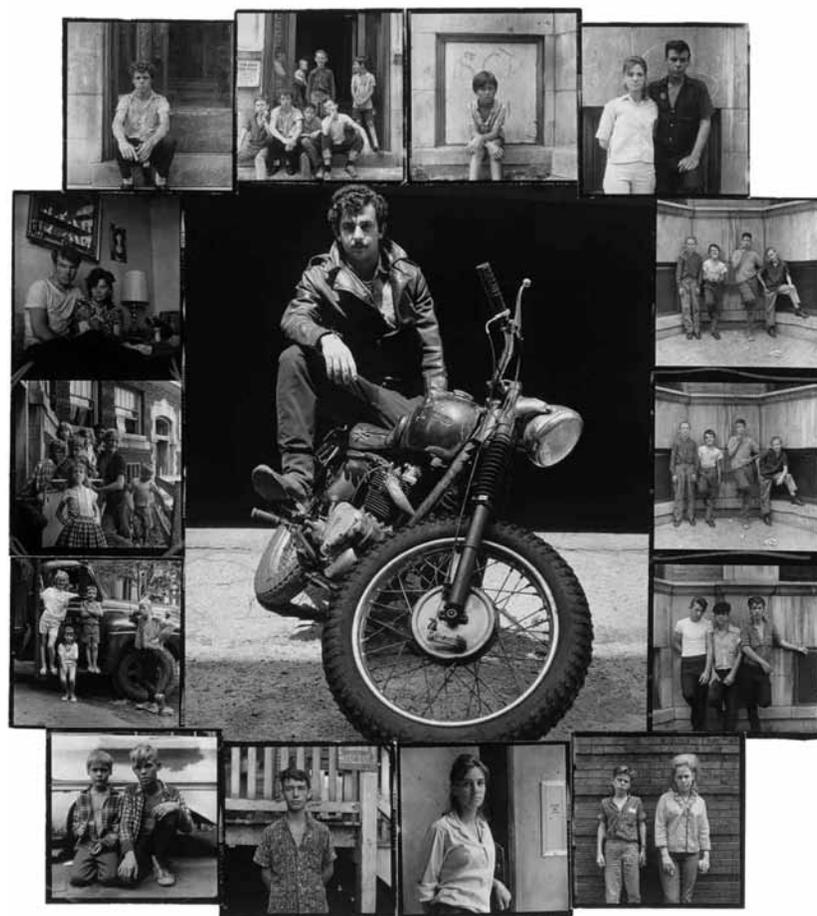
## THE MENIL COLLECTION

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# This World Is Not My Home: Danny Lyon Photographs



THE MENIL COLLECTION

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"I started out trying to become a documentary photographer, but then something else happened."<sup>1</sup>

—Danny Lyon

"This World Is Not My Home: Danny Lyon Photographs" surveys the artist's wide-ranging, socially engaged imagery from the early 1960s to the present. Drawn from the Menil Collection's extensive holdings of Lyon's work and his own archive, this exhibition commemorates the artist's seventieth birthday as well as Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil's 2010 gift of seventy-five important photographs.

Lyon began his career while a student at the University of Chicago. In 1962, after seeing an image of University of Michigan student newspaper editor and activist Tom Hayden being beaten during a voter registration drive, he hitchhiked to the segregated South to try his hand at photojournalism. There, he documented marches, sit-ins, and Civil Rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Lyon soon became the first official photographer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and his hard-hitting, iconic images from this pivotal time launched him onto a creative path dedicated at its outset to, in his words, "destroying *Life* magazine"—to providing powerful, genuine alternatives to the hollow pictures and stories permeating the American mass media.

Lyon was inspired early on by the "absolute realism" of photographer Walker Evans, the propulsive prose of Beat generation writers, and the photo scrapbooks created by his father, a Jewish physician who emigrated from Germany in the 1930s. With the support of Art Institute of Chicago Photography Curator Hugh Edwards, an early mentor, Lyon developed the restless, searching, and compassionate vision that permeates his work. After returning to Chicago, he joined the Outlaws motorcycle gang, becoming a participant-observer documenting the rallies, races, and carousings of a hard-living and hard-partying subculture. The resulting book, *The Bikeriders* (1968), includes transcribed interviews with the bikers and serves as a predecessor to the subjective, first-person "Gonzo Journalism" popularized by writer Hunter S. Thompson. The book not only reflects Lyon's belief that objective reporting is a myth, but also honed his eye for what he calls "bleak beauty," a tough, poetic factualism.

He continued his experiments in serial photography with *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan* (1969), which documents the enormous tracts of historic architecture being demolished prior to the construction of the World Trade Center and the colorful teams of "house wreckers" doing the dangerous work. Next he headed to Texas where, after spending a week photographing and tape-recording a group of young transvestites in Galveston, he drove to Huntsville to see a prison rodeo. Using a press pass, he was able to speak with inmates roping cattle and working as clowns, and they suggested he document life in the penitentiary. Lyon persuaded director Dr. George Beto to grant him access to the prison, where he



*Kenny and Slex, Bushwick, 1986.* Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Copy photo: Adam Baker

produced haunting, heartbreaking images of hard time and hard labor published in *Conversations With the Dead* (1971). He got to know a number of inmates while working on the project, including self-taught artist Billy McCune.<sup>2</sup> He also met Dominique de Menil during this period. Impressed by his work, she organized an exhibition of Lyon's Huntsville photographs and McCune's drawings, foreshadowing a sustained relationship between the artist and the Menil Collection.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1970s, Lyon started to divide his time between New York City and Bernalillo, New Mexico, where he photographed his mostly Chicano neighbors and his own growing family. Many of these images became components of the montages he began to create a decade later, juxtaposing old and new, black-and-white and color photographs. Intricate and personal, they commemorate figures from his life and work. The montages serve as a poignant counterpoint to Lyon's more ideologically driven series. He has continued to advance his dynamic, journalistic approach to photography over the years, documenting political turmoil in Haiti; the vanishing surf fishermen of Long Island; Native American reservations in the Southwest; drug-hustling teens in Bushwick, Brooklyn; and life in China's polluted and chaotic Shanxi Province. Most recently he has traveled to New York, Oakland, and Los Angeles to photograph protesters in the "Occupy" movement.

The title of this exhibition comes from a hymn of the same name that Lyon recalls singing with a friend one night on a Chicago beach in 1963. The friend passed away shortly afterwards, and the lyric both memorializes the loss and evokes Lyon's sustained engagement with those on the margins of society. A lightning tour through an inspired photographic life, "This World Is Not My Home" celebrates fifty years of Lyon's unique, self-described "romantic realism."

—Toby Kamps, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art