

WEEGEE'S STORY

May 6 — July 23, 2004

Reception:
Wednesday, May 5th
6:30 – 9:00 PM

Ubu Gallery is pleased to present **WEEGEE'S STORY**, an exhibition of more than 220 vintage photographs offering a rare survey of Weegee's greatest images. Arguably the single most important collection of Weegee's photographs, the group reveals the range within the photographer's expansive body of work, including sensational, photojournalistic documents of gangland murders and five-alarm fires; captivating and raw depictions of urban America; and sympathetic portraits of New York City's endless parade of human oddities.

Weegee, born Usher Fellig in 1899 near Lemberg, Austria (now Lviv, Ukraine), emigrated with his family to the United States in 1910. Upon entry, "Usher" was anglicized to "Arthur," the name he kept until 1938, when he became, simply, "Weegee"—a reference to both an old nickname from his job drying prints ("Squeegie Boy") in the Acme Newspictures darkroom and to his uncanny ability to arrive first on the scene of a crime or accident—often before police and always before other photographers—invoking references to the "Ouija" (pronounced "weegee") board, a popular game of the time utilizing "psychic powers."

In 1924, six years after moving out of his family's cramped tenement apartment, Weegee began as a press photographer for Acme Newspictures. The lack of formal, published credit for his work prompted him to quit Acme in 1935 and become a freelance photojournalist. Responding to the demands of the tabloid news market, Weegee trained his lens on the crime and despair of late-1930s New York, still in the throes of the Depression and heading towards World War II. He stayed close to the New York Police Department and, in 1938, was granted special permission to tune in to the police radio frequency. Operating from a customized car – a mobile office stocked with cameras, flashbulbs, a makeshift darkroom and plenty of cigars—he often arrived on the scene before the authorities, allowing him substantial compositional leeway in his images. For nearly a decade, he worked all night long following the radio's trail of mafia shootings, auto accidents, suicides, building fires and the like, publishing the shocking images in all the major tabloid newspapers.



In the Paddy Wagon, January 27, 1942

Simultaneously, Weegee was making photographs of New York's nightlife and high society, of quiet streetscapes, and of people existing at the margins of society—from the city's ethnic minorities to its transsexuals and prostitutes—all of which generated broad public interest in his work. His growing popularity helped secure Weegee's first public exhibition of photographs in 1941, entitled "Murder is My Business," at the Photo League in New York and his first sale of photographs to a museum—the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Building on these successes, Weegee published his first book, *Naked City*, in 1945, following it in 1946 with *Weegee's People*. In 1947, after 12 years of intense photojournalistic work (his output from this period is thought to be in excess of 5,000 images), Weegee began shifting his attention to other more purely artistic interests, including avant-garde film and experimental photography. His interest in film sprang from his role as a consultant on a film production of *Naked City* and, in 1947, Weegee relocated to Hollywood, where he spent the next five years working on film and photo projects, including his "Distortions," a series of manipulated images, principally portraits.

In 1952, Weegee returned to New York, living on

47th Street until his death in 1968. He spent his last years traveling, lecturing, and continuing his book, film and exhibition projects. It was not until the 1970s, however, that Weegee's centrality to the development of modern photojournalism was properly recognized with national and international exhibitions of his work. The collection to be displayed at Ubu has recently completed a nearly four-year museum tour, with stops at the Rupertinum, Salzburg, Austria (which organized and originated the exhibition); the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, England; Magasin 3 Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden; Sk Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, Germany; the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; the Philadelphia Art Alliance, Pennsylvania; and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

The exhibition will run from May 6 – July 23, 2004, with a reception on Wednesday, May 5th, 6:30 – 9:00 PM. Gallery hours are 11:00 AM – 6:00 PM, Tuesday through Saturday (closed Saturdays after Memorial Day) and by appointment. Ubu Gallery is located at 416 East 59th Street between First Avenue and Sutton Place.

For further information or for visuals, please contact Adam J. Boxer, Gile R. Downes, Jr. or Miriam Kienle at (212) 753 4444.