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Gjon Mili: Photographs And Recollections



Synopsis

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Customer Reviews

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Gjon Mili was an MIT educated Engineer who spent most of his life working as a "Life" magazine photographer. In 1937 he and Dr. Harold Edgerton were speakers on lighting in photography at MIT. Mili was lecturing, "about artificial light sources then available, and Professor Edgerton discussed his newly developed electronic flash with the remarkably short duration of 1/100,000 second." Up to that time, Edgerton had only been able to use his electronic flash to capture very small subjects such as a drop of milk falling, a bullet in flight and humming birds. After they talked, Mili told Edgerton if he could supply ten times the amount of light he would quit his Engineering job at Westinghouse and photograph everything. That's exactly what he did. His knowledge of using the multiple "motion freezing" exposures of Edgerton's techniques led him immediately to "Life" magazine where he used the technique to explore a previously unseen and un-photographed visual world. While few people recognize Mili's name today, most of them have seen some of his pictures such as "Pas de Bourree, Nora Kaye of the American Ballet Theater, 1947" or "Traceries with lights attached to Foils, 1947" or "A centaur drawn with Light--Pablo Picasso at the Madoura Pottery in Vallaruis, France 1949" or "Nude descending staircase, 1942." One of the multiple exposures that

I'd never seen was a 1946 portrait of photographer Edward Weston walking and being so delighted with all the multiple strobes firing that his expression goes from somber at the beginning of his walk to smiling, skipping and clapping his hands together at the end of the walk. All this happens in a single multiple exposure photograph. Gjon Mili who was an Albanian who looked very much like Albert Einstein with his hair flying off in every direction--maybe from too much static electricity from his strobes? (Just joking! See the picture of Mili that I've uploaded from my book "Adventure Photographer"). Mili both took the pictures included in this book and wrote the text. Other than the text sometimes seeming a bit jumpy, probably because of the translation, it's an excellent and beautifully produced coffee table book. While Mili made his place in history with his electronic flash multiple exposures often intentionally combined with blurred motion, this book contains several photo essays of some of the other subjects Gjon liked to photograph. These subjects include, sports, dance, the theater, jazz, Pablo Casals, movie stars, The Watergate Hearings, "Eichmann: A Captive in Israel, 1961" and art and artists. The photographs are beautifully reproduced and since Mili liked taking very saturated color photographs for mood, the reproduction of those pictures is important. It would be difficult for the reader not to enjoy this dip into photographic history.

It is very well conserved, Amazing!!

Just have a quick flip through this book and you'll realize why Mili worked for Life magazine for over three decades. Pages after page of remarkable photos including several of his trademark shots using a strobe light. Though this technique was initially devised for industrial use Mili saw the potential and his photos in Life captured the public imagination. It's slightly unfortunate there is only one photo from the 1949 assignment of Picasso painting in air with a light pen (other shots can be found on the net and they are truly quite stunning). Mili was probably best known for his strobe work but as these pages reveal he was an extraordinary photojournalist. I think his second strength was his ability to capture the humanity of creative folk. There are photos here of Sean O'Casey, Raoul Dufy, George Braque, Henri Matisse, Giorgio de Chirico, Igor Stravinsky, Ben Shahn, Alexander Calder and Isaac Stern that must count as some of the greatest portraits ever taken of these people. They are not the usual studio portraits but photos bursting with life and the aura of these great artists. There is a 1949 photo essay devoted to Pablo Casals that has some amazing images of one of world's greatest cellists. As well as strobe photos and great artists Mili could turn his lens towards anything: landscapes; popular entertainers; historic ruins and sculpture (Greece, Rome, Chartres); landscapes (Carrara, Italy); politics (Watergate); current affairs (Adolf Eichmann) and more. So why

three stars? Because the books reproduction and paper are inadequate for these fascinating photos. Though the book was published in 1980 I was surprised to discover that the screen used was only 133. Supermarket flyers that come through your letterbox use this. If this book came out in the last few years and especially from two or three art book publishers the screen would be 175 to 250 and most likely duo or tritones printed on a classy matt art paper. The book's jacket is on better paper than the inside pages and the cover photo is printed with a 175 screen. So many of the mono photos have dark areas and blacks that lack any detail and the grays look washed out with no real depth. It's unfortunate that this is the only monograph about Gjon Mili because his photos are so good and he really deserves a far better reproduction than these inadequate pages have to offer.

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