

sight unseen

International
Photography
by Blind Artists

Toured by Curatorial Exhibitions



Curated by Dough McCulloh

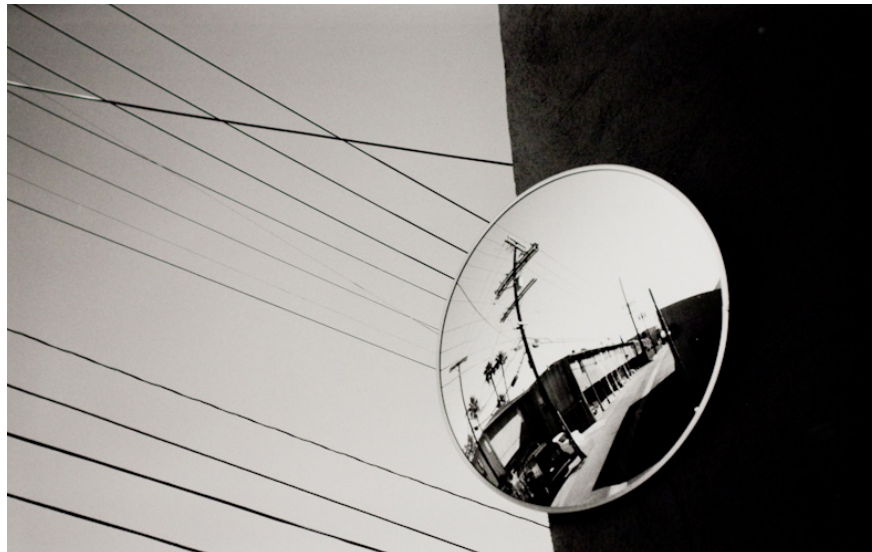
Sight Unseen presents work by the world's most accomplished blind photographers as they explore ideas about the nature of seeing.

Great art, it has been said, is not a product of the eyes, but of the mind. Beethoven composed music without the ability to hear, and blind writers Milton and Homer conjured the landscapes of the heavens and the underworld. Similarly, the artists of Sight Unseen, in bringing their inner visions into the world of the sighted, reveal a rich visual and emotionally complex blending of the physical and conceptual worlds.

The artists represented span a wide spectrum of sight impairment: most are completely blind, some are legally blind but nevertheless perceive an attenuated image of the physical world in varying degrees. All of them, with photography as their medium, navigate with their other senses to visualize and represent the space around them.

Blind photographers operate at the heart of the medium; they are the zero point of photography. These artists occupy the pure, immaculate center — image as idea, idea as image.

— Curator Doug McCulloh in *American Photo Magazine*



This exhibition was originated by UCR/California Museum of Photography, an affiliate institution of ARTSblock, the University of California, Riverside

Front page: A Close Up View, Evgen Bavcar
Above: Connected, Michael Richard
Back Page: Close of Market, Alex de Jong

WORKS

121 photographs and 8 tactile illustrations

SIZES

From 8 x 10 in (20 x 25 cm) to 48 x 57 in (121 x 144 cm)

SPACE REQUIREMENTS

500 linear ft (153 linear m)

PUBLICATION

Exhibition catalogue (UCR/CMP, 2009)

BOOKING

Curatorial Exhibitions

626.577.0044 | exhibitions@curatorial.org

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Ralph Baker

Evgen Bavcar

Henry Butler

Pete Eckert

Bruce Hall

Annie Hesse

Alex de Jong

Rosita McKenzie

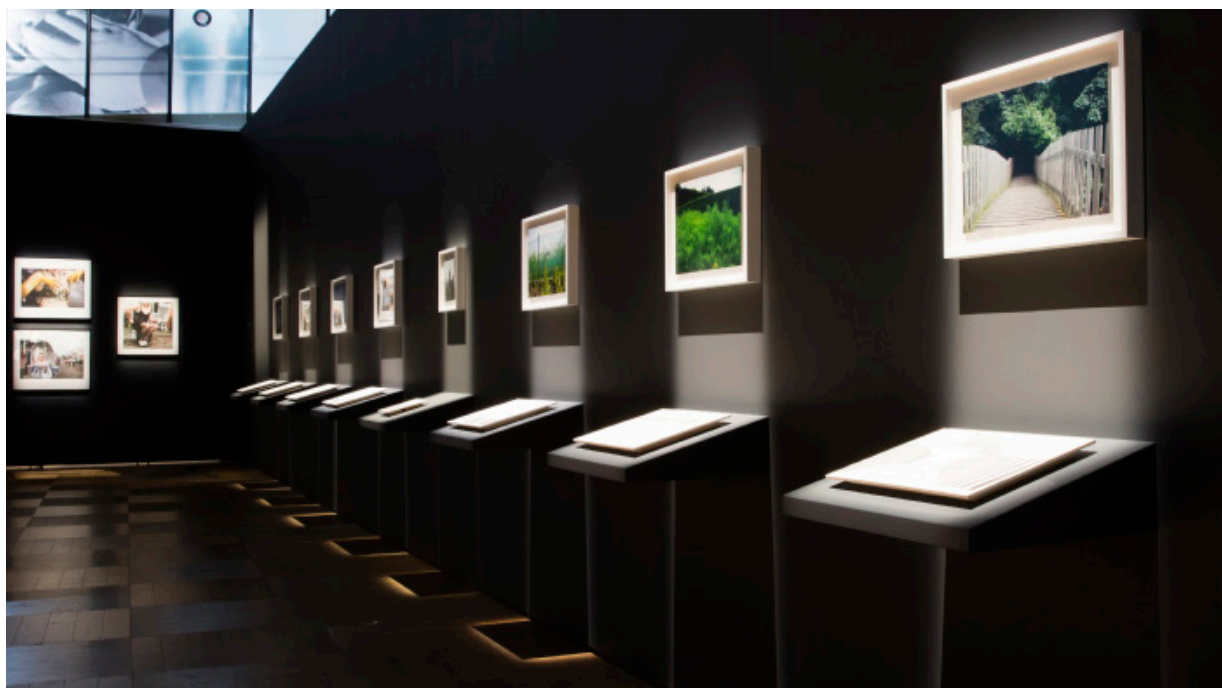
Gerardo Nigenda

Michael Richard

Seeing With Photography Collective

Kurt Weston

Alice Wingwall



Installation image, Canadian Museum for Human Rights, 2016

RALPH BAKER
American
New York, New York, USA

Ralph Baker is a blind street photographer in New York City who sells photos at public events for immediate money. He began his street photography as a teenager in 1966 with a camera from his mother - in a world where police tend to view him as an unlicensed general vendor or (as he says) a “blind common criminal street photographer.” His work crawls with life, reflecting the unkempt world that forms his reality on the city streets. Ignoring traditional visual aesthetics, he puts more importance on the idea than on beauty. Suffering two types of glaucoma that cause his retinas to die, he shrugs off questions about photography by a blind person. “Yeah, that doesn’t make a difference... My camera can see.” His work raises questions about seeing and being seen. Most people who pose for Baker don’t know he’s blind, which leads to this question: Do we present ourselves differently when we think we’re being seen?



Untitled 5, Ralph Baker



Untitled 3, Ralph Baker



Untitled 4, Ralph Baker

EVGEN BAVCAR
French
Paris, France

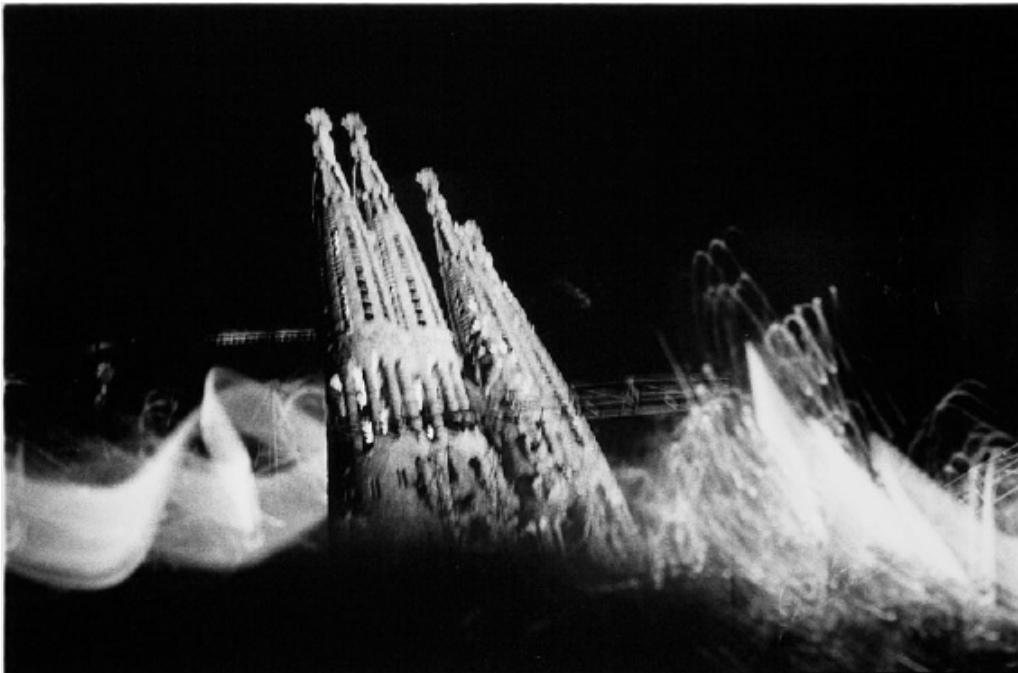
Evgen Bavcar lost his sight as a child in Slovenia from two separate accidents. A tree branch damaged one eye and a mine detonator claimed the other. He shot his first photo - of the girl he loved - at the age of 16, and felt pleasure "having stolen and captured on film something that did not belong to me. It was the secret discovery of being able to possess something I could not look at." Bavcar uses photography to show the sighted world what he sees with his mind's eye. He prefers to shoot in the dark of night which is, for him, a natural state. He now lives in Paris, where he was named official photographer of the City of Light's Photography Month in 1988. A prolific artist and intellectual, Bavcar has had more than 100 exhibitions across Europe, written several books, appeared in TV shows and documentaries, and teaches in his free time.



Umberto Eco, Evgen Bavcar



Childhood Image, Evgen Bavcar



The Eyes of the Night, Evgen Bavcar

HENRY BUTLER

American

New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

Henry Butler is driven by audio cues to capture the vibrant street life and characters in his hometown of New Orleans. Blind from birth, he triumphed over his disability to become a world-class musician and photographer. “His mind is what makes these photographs,” says longtime assistant Andrea Duplessis. “I once saw somebody tell him, ‘You can’t know what red is because you can’t see.’ He told them, ‘I know what I perceive the color red to be, and you’re in exactly the same position.’” Butler’s photography began in 1984 when, as a musician, he sat for an extensive promotional photo shoot. By the end, he decided he could do a better job. He applies the same ideas inherent in his music to his photography —be open, embrace variety and experiment relentlessly. In fact, not much intimidates this jazz piano legend with the wraparound shades, a person who has constantly challenged traditional stereotypes and barriers. “Shoot pool, throw darts? I’ve tried both.”



Showgirl, Henry Butler



Big Ol Kiss, Henry Butler



Key Bra, Henry Butler

PETE ECKERT

American

Sacramento, California, USA

Pete Eckert believes blindness is his advantage. "Vision is so strong that it masks other senses, other abilities; it even overrides visualization." Eckert - a gifted artist from California with university degrees in sculpture, art and design - learned in his 20s that he was going blind. So he switched tracks and earned an MBA, but couldn't get a banking job because of the stigma attached to blindness. He eventually returned to art and took up photography, exploring Sacramento (often at night) with a guide dog also trained to protect him. Through "light painting," Eckert has found a way to convey what he sees to the sighted world. Shutter open, he moves through the darkness, deploying flashlights, candles, lasers and lighters to build images he sees in his mind. "I feel light so strongly that it allows me to see the bones in my skeleton as pulsating energy. At times I can sort of see sound. Sometimes I can even see things from the back of my head."



Cathedral, Pete Eckert



Electroman, Pete Eckert

BRUCE HALL

American

Sacramento, California, USA

Bruce Hall was born with multiple eye conditions. Legally blind, he retains very limited sight. He grew up hearing about stars, but had never seen them - until one day when a neighbour kid let him look through his telescope. This glimpse became a turning point, directing Hall into a lifelong engagement with cameras, lenses, magnifiers, telescopes and computer screens. He treats the devices as extensions of his own body, using them to construct his world. The result is a strange form of double vision. "I always see things twice. First, I see an impression. I take [a photograph of] what I think I see, and later I can see what I saw." A resident of California, Hall is an expert diver whose underwater photographs have appeared in National Geographic. He is also involved with an ongoing project that explores the worlds of his profoundly autistic twin sons. The photographs in Sight Unseen are part of that project.



Immersed 6018, Bruce Hall



Bath Time, Bruce Hall



Exclusion 0358, Bruce Hall

ANNIE HESSE
American-French
Paris, France

Annie Hesse has lived in California, Guatemala, Spain, Cairo, London and Paris (her current home). She hitchhiked for a year through Africa, and has travelled to places as far-flung as Crete, Australia and Indonesia. A camera has been her constant companion on these restless journeys since she was a child. "The world spins by awfully fast and I obviously have a craving to soak it all up. With my vision the way it is, I can't absorb it. So the camera does it for me." Hesse sees "rough impressions" and only with her left eye. So she makes photographs based on hunch, conjecture and curiosity. Her lifelong engagement with photography moved into high gear with a degree in Fine Art, a fight against deteriorating sight, and a fast-moving career as a punk rock photographer. She's built her entire visual world piece by piece from her own photographs. Her memory is the camera's memory.



India, 2002, Annie Hesse



Eiffel Tower, Annie Hesse

Alex de Jong
Dutch
The Netherlands

Alex de Jong was already a professional photographer in the Netherlands when a tumour left him blind, making him feel like an exile from the world of sight and a stranger in the world of blindness. "Space around me dropped away. I belonged nowhere; I existed in a no-place. But my brain slowly adapted itself to not eye-seeing. I began to become the touch of my fingers, the tip of my cane, the wind on my skin, and the touch of raindrops on my face. I worked to make sense of what my body saw until I thought I could actually shoot photographs of what I felt beneath my feet." De Jong has also embraced assistive technologies to create his art. He uses software that transforms cell phone images into verbal reports that describe composition, structure, design and motion. In the end, however, technology fades into the background.



Panting Dog, Alex de Jong



Loud Heels, Alex de Jong



Wind Beings 4, Alex de Jong

ROSITA MCKENZIE
Scottish
Edinburgh, Scotland

(with tactile drawings by Criss Roden, Edinburgh)

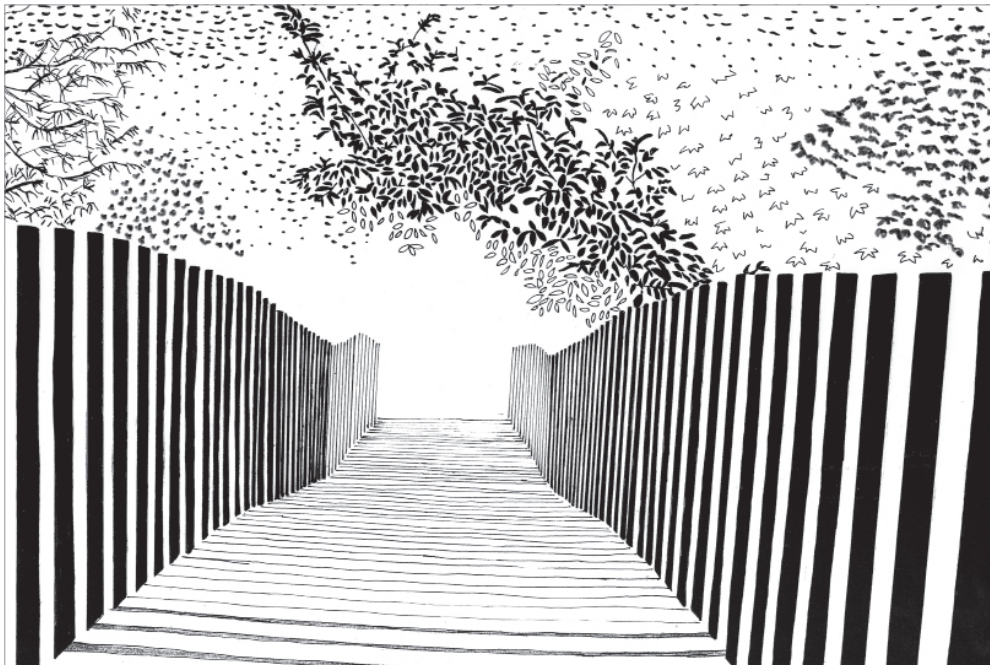
Rosita McKenzie's photography is an extension of her role as a disability activist for people in Scotland - a way to reinforce a claim to the visual world. More than just a political declaration, she wants her photos to reach the widest possible audience. Carefully considering accessibility issues, McKenzie works with other artists who create tactile drawings and ceramic pieces to accompany her photos. She also incorporates audio description, music, large-print text and braille. Edinburgh illustrator Criss Roden created the tactile drawings for McKenzie's photos in Sight Unseen. McKenzie, who lost her sight from an eye infection at the age of 12, has imbued her images with a sense of the freedom that comes with being blind. "I can be experimental because I don't see. Instead, I sense the light on my face. I hear the rustle of the wind in the trees or smell the fragrance of the flowers in the air, and I think: I've really got to take this."



Shade Tunnel and Tractor, Rosita Mckenzie



Colonies, Rosita Mckenzie



Colonies, Camilla Adams (tactile drawing)



Meconopsis with Netting, Rosita Mckenzie



Meconopsis with Netting, Camilla Adams (tactile drawing), at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights, 2016

GERARDO NIGENDA
Mexican, 1968-2010
Oaxaca, Mexico

Gerardo Nigenda, as a joke, once asked the director of a photography centre in Oaxaca, Mexico “how she would teach a blind person to take photographs.” She handed him a pocket Leica and told him “to start shooting.” The 32-year-old immediately began documenting his path through the city streets. Nigenda - who had lost his sight at 25 from diabetes - used various tools to document his route: not only the camera, but also sounds, memories, murmurs, impressions, comments, reports. He then used a braille writer to punch texts directly into the photos, narratives so crisply descriptive that they verge on poetry. In this way, he built a bridge between the worlds of the blind and the sighted. Nigenda taught sighted students in his “Non-Visual Workshop” that photography is a multisensory experience, making them aware of their own “blindness” and the sensorial and creative limitations that restricted them. He died in 2010, at the age of 42, from complications of diabetes.



In the Midst of Resting (Self Portrait), Gerardo Nigenda



Looking to the Usual, Gerardo Nigenda



The Gentle Touch of the Wind and the Enticement of the Sea Leads to Personal Interaction, Gerardo Nigenda

MICHAEL RICHARD
American
Los Angeles, California, USA

Michael Richard was left with only ten percent vision in one eye after surgery for melanoma in 2002. The same year, at age 54, he enrolled in a photography class at the Braille Institute in Los Angeles. Expecting a lecture, he was instead handed a camera. His photos are exercises in highly concentrated seeing by an artist whose sight was slipping away. They are full of unlikely discoveries, uncanny geometric balances, and small details deliberately seen. He could find a whole world in a parking garage puddle. Richard produced thousands of photos in an intense four-year burst before he died in 2006 from the same cancer that took his sight. He would put on dark glasses, hang a powerful magnifier on a string around his neck, and haunt a few square blocks of the city. His work emerged from slow patience and the optimistic position that, with enough looking, one can cut through the blur of circumstance and find a path to clear vision.



Strata Various, Michael Richard



OmniusAnonymous, Michael Richard

SEEING WITH PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTIVE

New York, New York, USA

Co-op founded in 1988

Seeing With Photography Collective in New York was formed over 20 years ago, producing work that “is a collaboration between visually impaired and sighted photographers.” Working in a darkroom, the artists paint their subjects with light while the camera’s shutter is open - resulting in blurred, luminous distortions and glowing forms. Says program director Mark Andres: “We are shooting in the dark, using flashlights for illumination, so the picture is made only where the flashlight is hitting the subject. There is no image being made in any of the places where the light isn’t hitting. The images build over time - in fragments... It is very different from a normal photographic method where you see what you are going to take. The images are constructed in your head, but also physically. Then they come together, often in very unexpected ways.” The collective has exhibited internationally, and published a book in 2002 called *Shooting Blind: Photographs by the Visually Impaired*.



Portrait in Paper, Mark Andres and Sonia Soberats



Box Portrait, Jacques, Seeing with Photography Collective

KURT WESTON

American, b. 1957

Huntington Beach, California, USA

Kurt Weston was a fashion photographer in Chicago until the 1990s, when a bout of pneumonia led to a diagnosis of AIDS. His vision began to fail. He suffered through debilitating experimental HIV/AIDS treatments, but in 1996 doctors gave him only a few months to live. Surgical implants into his eyes, intended to prevent his sight from deteriorating, backfired and almost completely destroyed his vision. Later the same year, he received a new AIDS treatment that saved his life. Small wonder that Weston's subsequent photos express feelings of anger, loss, and the stigma of disease and decay. Blind Vision is a collection of his photographs captured by a scanner. "Being considered the 'other' has always driven my art," he says. "First, being gay, then having AIDS, and now being blind. It's been like a journey into otherness. A lot of my work aims to show that all of us are the other. We all have the other in us. We are all headed toward decay and disability."



String Theory - The Space Between Us, Kurt Weston



Visor Vision, Kurt Weston



Peering Through the Darkness, Kurt Weston

ALICE WINGWALL
American
Berkeley, California, USA

Alice Wingwall lost her sight gradually over decades, giving her special motivation to collect the world through images. Now completely blind from retinitis pigmentosa, Wingwall refers to herself as “the archivist of a private memory museum.” Drawing on this visual memory bank, she builds images in her mind, shuffling and re-sorting, imagining possibilities. Only after this does she release a work into the world of the sighted. Through her photos, she lays claim to the visual world. “I was tired of people saying to me, ‘How can you take photographs when you’re blind?’ Well, I can do it. What I say to them is that the image starts in the brain.” Wingwall holds a Masters of Fine Arts degree in sculpture from the University of California Berkeley, and has held teaching positions at universities and museums across the United States. “Though I’ve lost my sight, I haven’t lost my vision,” she says, “and vision is a mental construction.”



Self Portrait at San Trovaso, Venice, Italy, Alice Wingwall



X Marks the Spot, St. Philibert at Tournous, Burgundy, France, Alice Wingwall



Joseph at the Temple of Dendur, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alice Wingwall



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