

Press release

Larry Sultan – *SF Society*

22 August – 22 November 2013

To kick off the new season, gallery focus21 will display a series of eight monumental pictures by the American photographer, Larry Sultan, (1946 - 2009). These photographs were created in 2007 and 2008 and originally appeared in the American magazine, *W Magazine*, yet their precise depiction clearly transcends the conventional editorial contribution to a magazine. Sultan was asked to make a contribution about San Francisco high society. The author of the texts accompanying the pictures then stated: "At a time when high society was declared extinct elsewhere, it still exists in San Francisco as presumably the last place in the USA, in which it is not only vivacious but also important for society. Those from the worlds of business, culture, philanthropy and politics meet there as guests of illustrious families, among others at the forefront, the Gettys".

With his San Francisco society pictures Larry Sultan acknowledges the history of the bourgeois portraits, which began with Dutch paintings in the 17th century. It is immediately clear how much Sultan is aware of this art historical tradition, when one, for instance, views the arrangement of the relationship of the foreground and background, the positioning of the figures within the picture frame or the entire palette of colors.

The core of Sultan's portraits skillfully symbolize *the today*, such as when he photographs the philanthropist and grand dame of society, "Dede Wilsey", in a green dress and includes an anonymous employee at her side in a pink evening dress. In all democratic countries, as is also the case in the USA, visual tensions primarily arising from the contradictions of society are provocative. And Sultan exploits these masterfully: "Scarlett" from *Gone with the Wind* meets "Eliza" from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in a photograph compressed into a single genre picture.

In another picture of Gordon and Ann Getty, Sultan shows us the difference between the high society of today and that of yesteryear. Although much is not correct, it makes this picture all the more impressive. At first it is clear that the photographed room corresponds more to theater paintings than to original historical European architecture. The woman stands a bit tensed in the foreground, whereas Larry Sultan has placed the man in a leisurely pose in the background. Both wear *laisse-faire* clothing and thereby embody the post-modern slogan: "anything goes". Nevertheless, Larry Sultan accomplishes this masterfully, the construction of the entire picture bespeaks the impression of the power of money.

The artist and photographer was born in New York City in 1946 and lived on the American west coast until he passed away at age 63. He became internationally known through several bodies of work, including "Evidence" (1977 – a ground breaking usage of found photographs), "Pictures from Home" (1992 – an investigation of his parents' life in the suburbs of Los Angeles) and "The Valley" (2004 – photographs taken in and around homes in the San Fernando Valley near Los Angeles where adult films were being made) and "Homeland" (2008 – sweeping California landscapes staged with Latino day laborers). Today Larry Sultan is considered a classic of the latter photographic history of the USA. His works were and are exhibited internationally, in the USA, England, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, Belgium and also in Switzerland.

Larry Sultan was a five-time winner of the National Endowment for the Arts and of the coveted Guggenheim Fellowship. Larry Sultan, was also a professor of art, and lectured at the renowned California College of Arts and San Francisco Art Institute.

The exhibited photographs are on loan from the Fine Art Invest Fund (www.FAIF.ch).

Vernissage: 22 August 2013, at 6 p.m.

Introduction: Prof. Klaus Honnef, Bonn

Curator: Thomas Zander

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