

AT THE GALLERIES: Renowned Beat poet Allen Ginsberg's striking photos at MSVU

ELISSA BARNARD

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Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, 5 Turner Terrace (1956), is part of the Ginsberg exhibit at the MSVU Art Gallery. (TONI HAFKENSCHIED)

I met Allen Ginsberg once. Stupidly, I did not take his picture.

Fortunately, Ginsberg took thousands of black and white pictures, and 116 of them are at the MSVU Art Gallery, from snapshots of his celebrity beat generation friends like Jack Kerouac to a photo of the first car he and his lifelong friend and lover Peter Orlovsky bought, nicknamed The Hearse.

Ginsberg, cited in the catalogue as the last poet to be a household name, clearly loved people, and as his life progressed, his camera became as important to him as his pen.

Beat fans can get their fill of favourite characters. Ginsberg got his first camera, a second-hand one, when he was 27, two years before his landmark reading of Howl in 1955. From 1953 to 1963, he made numerous portraits of himself (sometimes naked) and his friends, including the beat writers William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Gregory Corso and Kerouac, pictured from a robust handsome youth to an older, craggy face Ginsberg said was like his father's.

Ginsberg rediscovered his beat pictures in the 1980s and reprinted them with scrawled, handwritten stories so the viewer not only gets an insight into who, when, where but also into Ginsberg himself.

This show is beautifully laid out, with lots of information and a free mini-catalogue.

Ginsberg, who died in 1997, had two links to Nova Scotia. One day in 1970, hailing a taxi in New York City, he met Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was his guru and led him to take Buddhist vows.

Trungpa, who established Gampo Abbey in Cape Breton, moved his home and headquarters to Halifax in 1986. That year, Ginsberg did a performance of spoken poetry, chants and harmonium blues at Dalhousie University in Halifax, and that's when I interviewed him.

While there are few pictures of women in this show, there is one of poet Anne Waldman, co-founder with Ginsberg of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics in Boulder, Colo., and a key image of Cassady with his girlfriend, Natalie Jackson, an overlooked beat generation woman, the year before her suicide.

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Ginsberg also became good friends with celebrated American photographer Robert Frank, who lives in both New York and Mabou.

The very last picture Ginsberg took, which is on display in a case upstairs, is of Frank and Orlovsky.
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Catalogue essayist and exhibit co-curator Barbara Fischer points to Ginsberg's belief in photography as a sacred practice but also as a secular one "infused by his homo-erotic desires." His early pictures of Burroughs lying on a bed waiting for him are striking.

Photography was also a celebration of "ordinary chance or ordinary magic." And, writes Fischer, "We should not forget that Ginsberg's beat memories are Jewish memories as well. While he always maintained some distance from Judaism, what the poet-photographer took from his conflicted relationship to his inherited religion was its injunction to remember — Zachor! — and he transferred it to photography.

"We are continually exposed to the flashbulb of death": The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg (1953-1996), on view to Nov. 8, is organized by the University of Toronto Art Centre & Justina M. Barnicke Gallery with the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

Co-curator John Shoesmith gives an informal tour of the show Saturday at 7:30 p.m., after a choral reading by volunteers at 7 p.m. of Ginsberg's famous poem Howl. Howl and Other Poems was published in San Francisco in 1956 and he was initially charged with obscenity, so gallery visitors are forewarned about language.

The photographs are a selection from a donation of 8,000 prints in the Rossy Family Foundation gift to the University of Toronto Art Centre and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, where Shoesmith is a librarian.

I AM NSCAD has taken over all three galleries in NSCAD University's Anna Leonowens Gallery on Granville Street in Halifax.

The exhibit started with a call to alumni to submit work and won't end until a street party and sale on Oct. 9 at 5 p.m. In between, there is a chance to see 166 artworks from paintings to clothing to ceramics to jewelry to video art.

I AM NSCAD is an overwhelming and fun show. It celebrates the diversity of the college over the years with submissions from graduates from the 1970s to the 2010s. The artists come from all provinces and territories in Canada and several countries, including the United States, Panama, Hong Kong, England, Belgium and India.

There is no strict adherence to theme; how could there be? A couple of artists have painted their NSCAD studios but most demonstrate where they are in their work today. Heather Sayeau exhibits her gorgeous peony paintings, Sophie Lavoie a giant, undersea watercolour, Wayne Boucher a new painting including photographs of his wife walking the dog in winter and Mary Ellis a psychologically charged drama of entrapment, enchantment and exquisite detail.

I AM NSCAD was co-ordinated by NSCAD alumna Kelly Markovich (MFA 2011). The gallery has been renovated with a Fountain family donation given to the university in 2014. Funds raised from the sale of works go the NSCAD Alumni Association scholarship fund. Gallery hours are Tuesdays to Fridays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 4 p.m.

The latest word on the constantly delayed **Annie Leibovitz** exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia is definitely not in 2016. The Swiss bank UBS has commissioned Leibovitz to do portraits as a continuation of her 1999 series Women. Her new photographs are going to London, Tokyo, San Francisco, Hong Kong, Singapore, Mexico City, Istanbul, Frankfurt, New York and Zurich throughout 2016. The gallery received 2,000 photographs from the Mintz family in 2013 and initially suggested 2014 as a possible date.

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