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Capturing Beat Culture's fleeting moments

Allen Ginsberg's poetic images on view in new exhibit at Presentation House Gallery

Jeremy Shepheard / North Shore News

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Timothy Leary and Neal Cassady in Merry Pranksters day-glo painted bus, 1964, gelatin silver print, 50.8 x 40.6cm, gift of the Rossy Family Foundation and copyright the estate of Allen Ginsberg. Photo Supplied

"We Are Continually Exposed to the Flashbulb of Death:" The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg (1953-1996), Presentation House Gallery, Feb. 21 - April 5. Curated by Barbara Fischer and John Shoemith. Opening reception Feb. 20, 7 p.m. For more information visit presentationhousegallery.org (<http://presentationhousegallery.org>).

Before the best minds of his generation were destroyed by madness, poet Allen Ginsberg caught the radiant cool eyes of angel-headed hipsters and the philosophizing mouths of platonic conversationalists in the light of hundreds of camera flashes.

Presentation House Gallery is set to unveil several of Ginsberg's photos - many of which include his handwritten reminiscences - in an exhibition opening Saturday.

Nearly 18 years after his 1997 death, Ginsberg is recalled as the conscience of the Beat Generation, the wordsmith who immortalized the fury and futility of his time. Howl, his best known poem, contains a vision of Zen New Jersey, boxcars and bop Kabbalah that came to define and inspire generations of young men who sought transcendence in loneliness, jazz and speed - both vehicular and pharmaceutical.

The subjects of Ginsberg's photos include merry pranksters and mad ones, including On the Road author Jack Kerouac, vagabond muse Neal Cassady, and consciousness expansion proponent Timothy Leary.

On one level, the photos are pictures of friends, but on another they're documents of a movement, according to exhibition curator Barbara Fischer.

"He's very much conscious that he's part of a historic moment with the emergence of the Beat Generation," Fischer explains.

The beat writers are largely seen as a precursor to hippies, a crowd of black coffee and Benzedrine hep cats that let their consciousness stream out in a flow of click-click-dings on giant typewriters.

The restlessness of the beat movement gives Ginsberg's photos an added poignancy. For a fraction of a second Kerouac, that patron saint of the highway, is still - smoking a cigarette with his back against a doorway, his stream of consciousness frozen.

Ginsberg took photos of friends like singer/songwriter Bob Dylan and actor Warren Beatty, but for Fischer, some of the most intriguing pictures are the ones Ginsberg took of himself.

"He's very frank about his own body and pictures himself as this aging man. I find them quite moving," she says of the self-portraits.

Ginsberg's earliest pictures are 1940s drugstore prints, but at the encouragement of photographer Berenice Abbott, he started to take photography more seriously, using a large format camera and developing his own prints.

Abbott also encouraged Ginsberg to annotate his pictures, something he undertook in the 1980s. Those handwritten "and sometimes very poetic" notes add a layer to the exhibition, according to Fischer.

"The poet is a photographer and the photographer is a poet," she summarizes.

Having grown up in Germany, Fischer says she was quite taken by how many young people, particularly young men, are drawn to Ginsberg as a "counterculture hero."

The poet offers a "spiritual quest that counters much of the materialism and capitalist culture and militarism" offered to young men, she says.

Taken together, the photos document "a social revolution that came out of the closet" in the 1950s and continued to resonate through the AIDS crisis and into the ongoing gay marriage debate, according to Fischer.

Leafing through Ginsberg's photos is a bit like turning the pages in a diary, according to Fischer. "He records

these moments of intimacy of a very tight-knit circle of friends," she says.

"He seemed to have been conscious of the fact that his time was a fleeting moment." Those fleeting moments of William S. Burroughs, Lucien Carr and Kerouac are captured in a body of work that Ginsberg never expected to exhibit - at least, not on Earth. "He talked about the pictures being made for his public in heaven," Fischer says.

The exhibit is scheduled to run until April 5.

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