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## The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg bathes beats in light

by Robin Laurence on March 4th, 2015 at 9:58 AM

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### The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg (1953-1996)

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In Allen Ginsberg's 1957 poem "Kaddish", memorializing his mother, Naomi Ginsberg, he intones "the key is in the light...the key is in the window." He was quoting a letter she wrote to him from the psychiatric hospital where she died—and her words seem to resonate

throughout this photographic exhibition.

Existentially titled with a later remark by Allen Ginsberg, “We Are Continually Exposed to the Flashbulb of Death,” the show surveys some 200 black-and-white photos he took in the 1950s, ’60s, ’80s, and ’90s. It is striking that a number of them are shot in interiors using natural light, the subject posed near a window or the photographer aiming his camera out of one.

This means that some of the famous beat poet’s famous beat friends, lovers, and colleagues are illuminated by sunshine streaming through glass. In an early and arresting portrait of William S. Burroughs, taken in Ginsberg’s Lower East Side apartment in 1953, bars of sunlight and shadow slant across the writer’s long, pale face. In a beautiful 1986 image, shot in another of Ginsberg’s Lower East Side flats, poet and critic Rene Ricard is bathed—beatified, perhaps—in light from a window, as are the roses and lilies standing in a glass vase on the table near him.

Ginsberg also recorded the view from his kitchen window—trees winter-bare or in full leaf, clotheslines, blowing curtains, and the back yards and rear façades of old apartment buildings, crowded together in time and space. In the caption at the bottom of the print, he writes, “I had tea every morning [for] almost a decade looking out my kitchen window before I realized it was my world view, August 18, 1984.”

Although best known as an avant-garde poet, Ginsberg was also a composer, a social and political activist, a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, a benefactor of friends and colleagues, and a dedicated taker of pictures. In 1953, at the age of 27, he bought a secondhand Kodak Retina camera for \$13 and began to shoot photos of the people that mattered to him.

Often, people and place are seen in significant conjunction, whether we are looking at Jack Kerouac smoking on the fire escape of a New York City apartment building; Neal Cassady hugging his doomed girlfriend Natalie Jackson under a movie-theatre marquee in San Francisco; Gregory Corso, Paul Bowles, Peter Orlovsky (Ginsberg’s lifelong partner), and Burroughs squinting, possibly stoned, in the brilliant sunlight of Tangier; or poets Gary Snyder and Joanne Kyger with a monk in a temple garden in Japan. Many photos were taken in low-rent rooms or apartments in New York, San Francisco, Paris, and Benares—and there is the powerful sense of the importance of the homes, however modest, however briefly inhabited, where the beat generation wrote, ate, slept, made love, and enacted the daily dramas of their lives.

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There are also a few self-portraits, often nude, alone or with one or two others. Ginsberg depicts himself lying on a rumpled bed, sitting on a kitchen chair, posed like a Hindu holy man on a rocky beach, and repeatedly reflected in motel-room mirrors. Such images record his physical journey from slender youth with thick hair to bald and potbellied elder. In a final self-portrait, taken in 1996, a year before his death from liver cancer, Ginsberg's beard, scarf, and dark hat and suit (purchased, as most of his clothes were, in a thrift shop) lend him a sombre, rabbinical air. What emerges in the exhibition is not only an intimate record of Ginsberg's life and times but also a remarkable portrait of what the show's intro panel describes as "the interwoven lives" of the beat generation of writers.

Of special interest is that Ginsberg captioned all these prints by hand. Written in thick black ink, often many lines long, the captions enhance the archival nature of the photos while establishing a charged relationship between words and images. As the show's curators point out, Ginsberg's "snapshot poetics" were a means of honouring the sacred nature of everyday life and relationships, while also remarking on the transitory nature of existence. That's one premise, to which we might append Naomi Ginsberg's words. A 1986 photo shows Burroughs as an elderly man, wrapped in a trench coat, looking frail and diminished, shoulders slightly hunched, hands folded, standing in a hallway in front of a window. An aging delinquent. An aging angel. So, yes, the key is in the light, the key is in the window.

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