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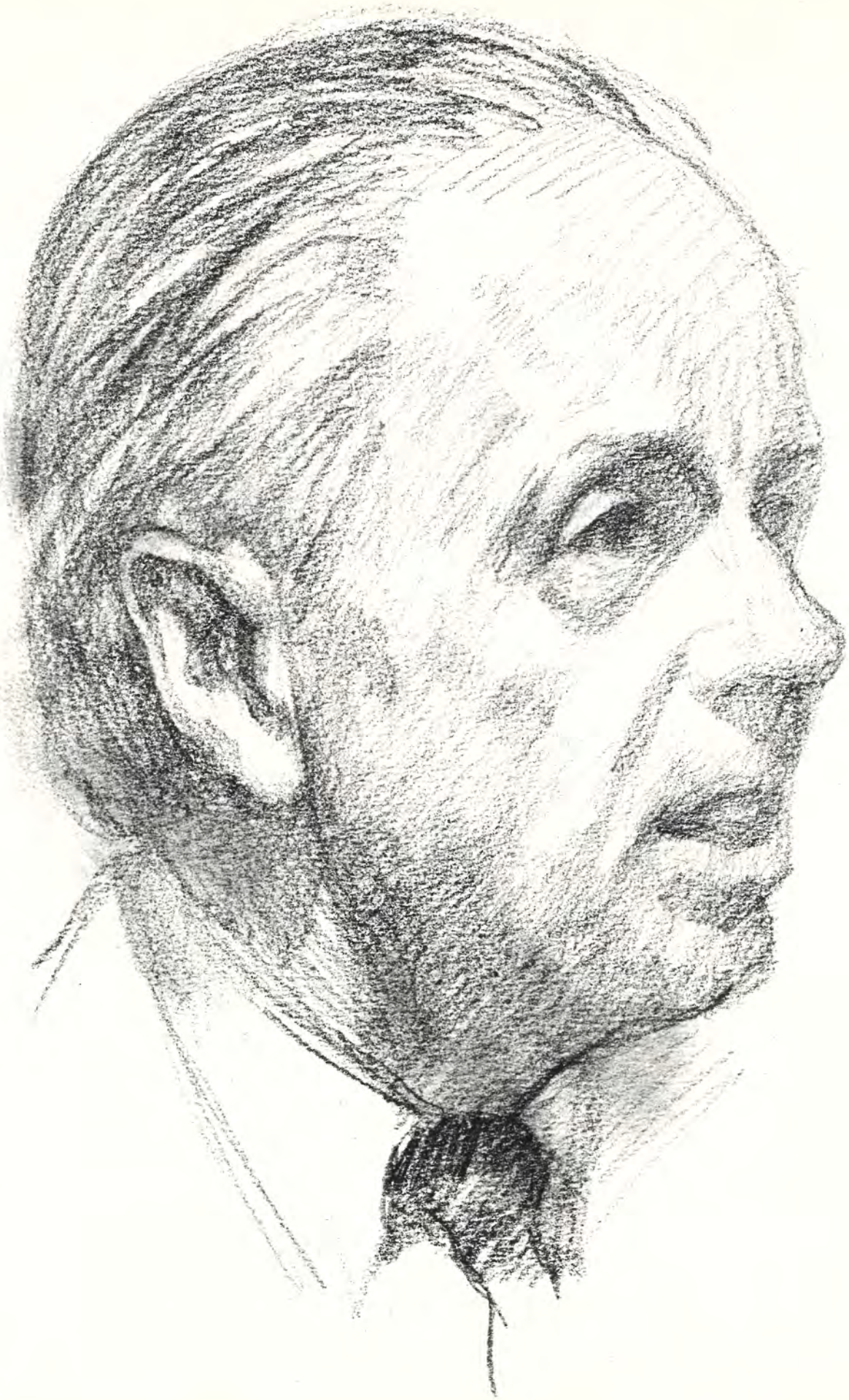
Cover: Photograph by Gordon Munro.
Dancers Mia Rosal, David Cuevas and Haru Aki were photographed for an illustration for Danskin tights.
See "Inside Advertising," page 84.

FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS



Daniel Schwartz

Hugh Edwards

An unheralded mentor to great photographers.
by Charles Leroux

"Discovering America" is the current exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago. The show is subtitled "A Tribute to Hugh Edwards" because it comprises over 150 prints acquired or exhibited during the years (1959–1970) when Edwards was curator of photography. More important, the show includes work by many photographers who were given their first major show by Edwards: Robert Frank, Art Sinsabaugh, Robert Riger, Danny Lyon, Marie Cosindas, Dennis Stock and more. The exhibit, which is open February 3 to March 25, gives belated recognition to one of America's most perceptive, influential and, until now, unrecognized arbiters of good, possibly great, photography.

"What show?" Edwards demanded, knowing perfectly well what show. He wasn't being impolite. On the contrary, he is known for his exquisite manners. But Edwards doesn't much like tributes. "The less said about many things," he allowed, "the better." Edwards has always been a doer of, rather than a speaker about, and has looked upon the two as separate and probably mutually exclusive. If others want to commemorate that relatively small portion of his 75 years which was centered around photography, well, he can't very well stop them, but he won't help much, either.

Edwards' well-known aversion to the limelight sometimes exasperates his friends, but they respect and even admire it in him. Every person who agreed to talk about Edwards for this article expressed mixed feelings—a desire to be part of any tribute to a man they feel is richly deserving, and a reluctance to interfere with his privacy. A circle of such friends is in itself a tribute. One photographer turned another light on the situation. "I think he appreciates the show," the photographer said, "but he probably doesn't want to be held responsible for it."

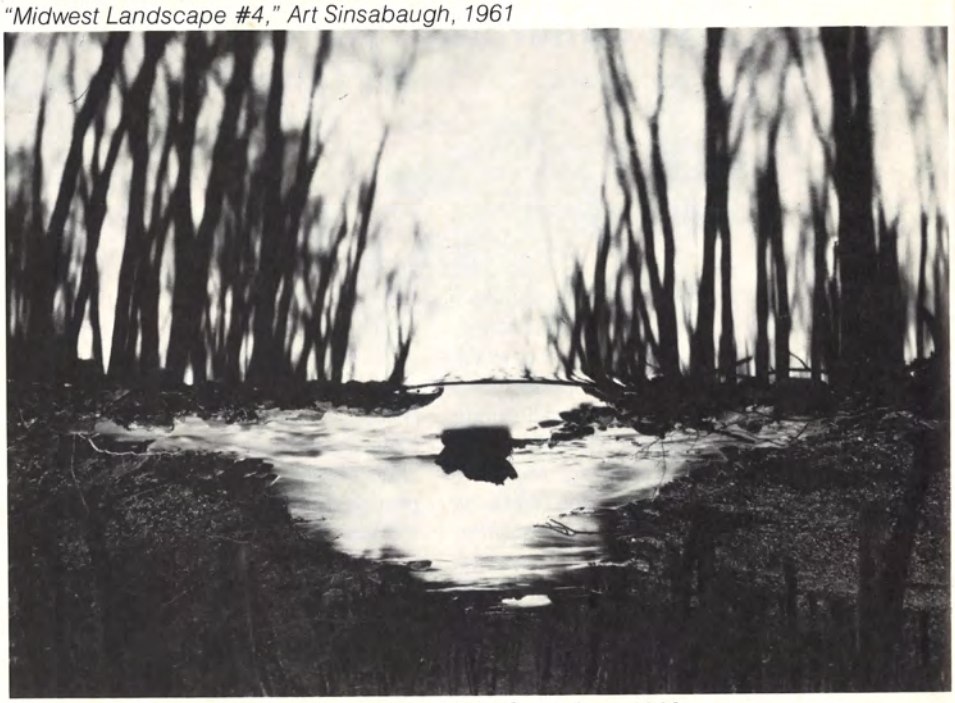
Edwards' dealings with photography, and the world as a whole, are marked by a certain foxiness, a tangential approach. "He doesn't like to talk *about* the things that are important," said a protegé. "He likes to talk *around* them." Danny Lyon remembers, "After two or three months' work, I'd take photos to show him. The photographs were the last things he'd talk about, but every once in a while he'd stop at a picture and say 'Oh, my.' He once told me he respected me because he never saw me carrying a camera."

Edwards is a Kentuckian, and proud of it. He was born in 1904 in Paducah, which is just a twist of the Ohio River away from being in Illinois, but is nonetheless part of the Bluegrass State. His father was a steamboat engineer (the penalty for misrepresenting him as a "pilot" or "captain" is a lecture on the precise application of these titles). Edwards never attended college, but has taught himself a variety of subjects and languages. He enjoys reading James Fenimore Cooper in French, and taught himself Italian primarily to savor Alberto Moravia in the original. His taste is eclectic, but more important, it is surehanded and enthusiastic. "He never stops to wonder whether he likes something," an associate said. "He knows it instantly."

Edwards also has a certain unpredictability, probably inherited from his father. When the elder Edwards began applying silver paint to his house, a "shotgun cottage" of rooms laid out in a straight line, his neighbors became agitated. They didn't know that the silver paint was the finest steamboat undercoating available for the eventual white finish coat. Although his intent was, in this case, conventional, this was a man capable of painting his house silver.

In his career, Edwards has caused reactions similar to those of the Paducah neighbors. His show of Lyon's biker photos, which was mounted at the same time as a Manet exhibit, brought the Chicago Outlaws to the Institute one crowded Sunday afternoon, all leather, denim, metal, hair and gristle. Robert Riger's photographs of the violent world of professional football often brought daily attendance of 900 or more, and once attracted the Chicago Bears to the gallery. "Some people at the Institute had the look of little old ladies nervous about whether to put away the china," recalled Art Sinsabaugh.

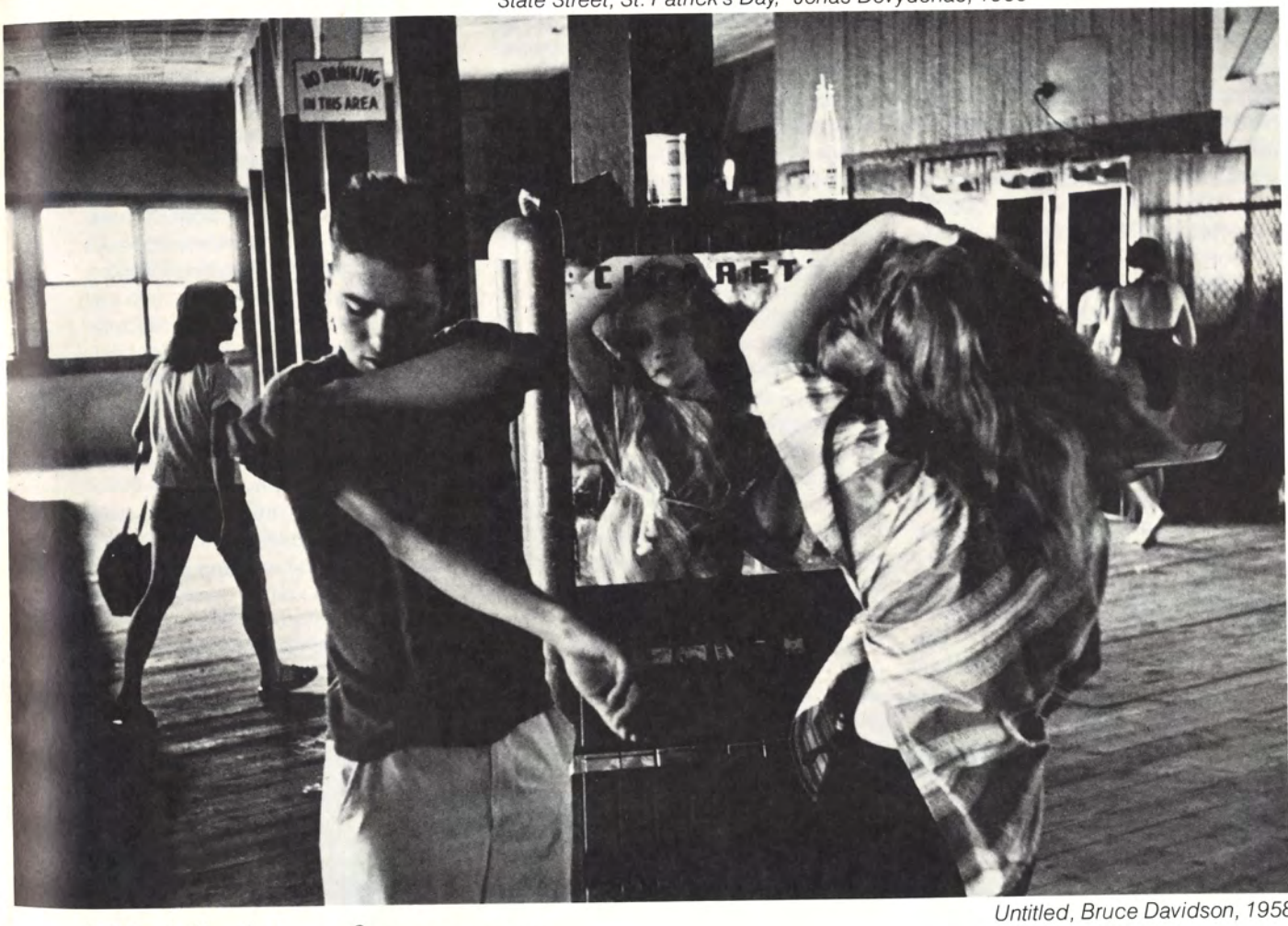
"Midwest Landscape #4," Art Sinsabaugh, 1961



"Redding Woods, Redding, Connecticut," Paul Caponigro, 1968

"Covered Car—Long Beach, California," Robert Frank, c. 1955

"State Street, St. Patrick's Day," Jonas Dovydenas, 1966



Untitled, Bruce Davidson, 1958.

Highlights of a career.

In his 11 years as curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, Hugh Edwards gave many photographers their first important showcase. Shown here are pictures from some of the photographers represented in the recent tribute exhibition. Photographs courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

To shock has never been Edwards' goal, although he has done it often enough. He began his tenure quietly, with an exhibit in the fall of 1959 called "Masterpieces of Photography from the Museum's Collection." Three months later he showed work by Ray Metzker, who was then working for his master's degree at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Metzker's photographs of Chicago's Loop were the first of many exhibits by photographers whose work represented "those quiet and undisturbed moments which may expose more of human beings and their dissimilarities than the abnormalities of upheaval and distress."

In 1960 Edwards showed the work of a landscape photographer from Wisconsin named John Szarkowski. He followed that with "The Artist in His Studio" by Alexander Lieberman, an eccentric New Yorker who had photographed artists at work. In 1961 Edwards brought Robert Frank's work to the Chicago audience for the first time, and in 1962 Robert Riger's football photographs stunned the public. Simpson Kalisher's photographs of railroad men won special affection from Edwards, who wrote "Mr. Kalisher never dyes anything with sentiment, and if you give his results a little of your thought, you will find they are the statement of the same elusive truths which have occupied a long line of writers from Villon through Jean Genet."

In 1963 Art Sinsabaugh's landscapes and Dennis Stock's photographs of James Dean were exhibited. The following year saw recent work by Walker Evans, then at *Fortune*; 1965, Bruce Davidson. In 1966 a young woman named Marie Cosindas called up Edwards and asked to show her portfolio. He wasn't very encouraging on the phone, but after looking at six prints he said, "We must have a show." It would have been Cosindas' first major exhibit in this country except that, because of scheduling problems, the Museum of Modern Art in New York beat the Institute by a few months.

Interspersed in the heavy exhibition schedule was the usual complement of established names: Eliot Porter, Aaron Siskind, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Eugene Atget. But throughout the long, long list ran a constant thread of young photographers whose special interests were Chicago and the working and middle classes, "a large part of the American population which was being overlooked or intentionally disregarded . . . a large majority (which was) relegated to a vast penumbra from which they were only occasionally recalled for intervals of satire or ridicule." His final exhibit, "Thomas Eakins as a Photographer," combined several favorite themes, showing an essentially American artist who was also a distinguished painter.

"Perhaps," Edwards wrote in one of his rare sessions at the typewriter, "we have reached a large public which might have remained unconscious of photography as a revelation of themselves and their surroundings or have been repelled by it as some impossible-to-approach manifestation for only a snobbish elite."

Snobbishness has never so much as touched the sleeve of Edwards' coat. He is a slight, immaculately dressed, white-haired gentleman whose conservative exterior masks an insatiable curiosity. David Travis, the Institute's curator of photography since 1972, returned home from shopping the secondhand-goods stalls of Chicago's Maxwell Street one day and put an old Everly Brothers 45 on his phonograph. "I said to him, 'That's the Everly Brothers,'

Hugh Edwards in his apartment, 1966.

Jonas Dovydenas

"Anything can be art, but very little is."

and he said, 'I know—I have all their records.' " At one time Edwards also had 600 Duke Ellington recordings, the largest private collection, it was said, in the world. And Edwards stood in line for hours to get tickets to the only Chicago concert given by Elvis Presley.

When Edwards became fascinated with a roller rink in south suburban Harvey, Illinois, he moved to an apartment near the rink and spent a year taking photographs there with his Rolleiflex. The photos were never shown publicly. Were they good? Says Travis, "They were absolutely terrific." But to those photographers with a penchant for preaching about their work, Edwards has one reply: "Anything *can* be art, but very little is."

Art Sinsabaugh remembered being taken by Edwards to a movie around the time of Sinsabaugh's 1963 show of long, low Midwestern landscapes. "We went to that desert film, *Lawrence of Arabia*. I found out later that Hugh had seen it 20 times or more. He was impressed with the visual images, and he liked to watch other people's reactions to those images."

Images, rather than people, have seemed to hold the stronger appeal to Hugh Edwards. His aversion to publicity is partly the result of his Southern breeding, but also fits in with a definite, conscious commitment to photographs. He will say, "This is a great photograph," not "a great photographer." He will also say, "Greatness is in the photograph, not in the person." He doesn't care about technical details and is not interested in personal histories. "Homer, Shakespeare, Balzac . . . and most artists who are remembered, were not striving to portray themselves," he wrote, "and yet their personal characters and individualities show through their works with a transparency far more revealing than if it were the principal aim; they identify themselves freely and surpass those who have made intentional confessions and self-revelations."

Sam Carini, Associate Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Institute, recalls how Edwards detested arguing academic questions. " 'Photography is *not* a fine art!' he'd say to people who'd try to bring up that boring question. It was his way of cutting off further debate." Carini has known Edwards for 30 years, ever since the day when Edwards, who had come to Chicago to study the piano, took a job at the Institute selling exhibition catalogues. He was then engaged in the department of prints and drawings," Carini said, "and developed one of the keenest eyes and most balanced judgments of anyone. Going to photography from—he would hate me for saying this—the 'fine arts' was a great advantage for him."

This "advantage" enabled Edwards to see reminders of a Michelangelo tomb figure in a Lyon photograph of an adolescent boy draped over the fender of a car. Writing about Robert Riger's football photos, Edwards praised "the nobility of the complicated gesture, not merely a split fraction of movement, stopped dead. This was something we believed possible only in the hands of geniuses of draughtsmanship like Géricault and Degas and did not demand it of the camera, which showed already so much our eyes could not comprehend."

In 1963 Edwards wrote in what was, for him, an unusually flamboyant manner, that "what is wanted is photography *as* a fine art not *in* the fine arts." Although he avoided that particular debate whenever possible, he meant to say that photography should simply be accepted as another form of artistic expression, not as a latecomer grudgingly admitted into some sort of club. He noted that critical interest in photography was relatively new and that "we are at the beginning of something which involves much and, although Goethe believed the beginning of anything is always good, it is often so only in retrospect. However, a lively enthusiasm, new beliefs, even a small smug satisfaction are justified when we look at the strained absurdities of much of the most fashionable painting and sculpture, the expectorations and drippings, the kiddy pop-art and anti-art, the head-on crash with which so much has ended, for we can be grateful the camera has not yet reached this state of senility, and that still photography and the cinema are actually the media triumphant."

Looking back now, Edwards says he enjoyed his curatorship at the time he had it, a time of discovering new territory, a time of pioneering rather than of paving the roads the newcomers had cut. The Institute's directors and trustees "never made anything impossible, or even interfered, and they have been far from indifferent." In 1962 he brushed aside a chance to become curator of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art (the position was taken by John Szarkowski), perhaps fearing the glare of public attention that he was largely able to escape in Chicago.

"My aims," he said, "have been simple enough, and now I believe it has been well they have remained so. I wanted people to look at as many kinds of photographs as possible and become able to identify the unique and excellent in any guise in which they might appear."

The photographs of the tribute exhibit show life in America in the 1960s. They are clear-eyed, uniquely American views, "suggesting the possibilities of the unusual which may be latent in the commonplace." As a curator, Hugh Edwards was ahead of his time by being so much a part of his time. "He is interested in photography," said Lyon, "because he is interested in life. Life is what photography is about." The ordinary life of everyday people has a realism which, Edwards says, "does not arise from some private, internal, esoteric affair which, because it is so small, has to be loud, aggressive or pretentiously insane in its exposition. It is stated in images of undistorted truth which are large, deep and general."

Having said he didn't want to talk about the exhibit in his honor, Edwards offered another possibility. "Let's sit down sometime," he said, "and talk about steamboats." ■