

## What I Know About Vivian Maier

from *The Vivian Poems* © Bruce Rice (Radiant Press 2020), updated in 2024.

Few artists have been subject to as many romanticized narratives as Vivian Maier. I have to acknowledge the implied intimacy when I use her first name. I do feel obliged, however, to comment on some aspects of her life and practice that took shape while I was writing *The Vivian Poems*. The story of Vivian's 140,000 plus negatives and prints, Super 8 films and audio tapes discovered in a Chicago storage auction has been told many times. Maier died in poverty in 2009. Her prints were being sold for upwards of \$5000 USD less than a decade later. When the story first broke, the media billed her as the mysterious, self-taught nanny-photographer, a savant who seemingly came from nowhere. The story is no longer as simple, thanks to research that has come out since. But there are still some "wince-worthy" lapses, as Andrea Scott noted in *The New Yorker*.

Even the parts of Maier's story that are true are suspect—not the facts themselves, but the context and the impulse to create a mythology from the traces she left behind. Vivian Maier was born in New York in 1926. Her parents were immigrants. Her mother Marie was from France, and her father, Charles, was Austrian. They married in 1919 but split up before the 1930 Census. Vivian lived with her mother. Her brother, Karl, went with their father. Karl led a difficult life, including treatment in a psychiatric hospital, followed by his death as a patient in a rest home in 1977.

Accounts of Maier's story give little space to issues of class. Vivian's early life was full of what today would be called intersectionalities: being female, poor, and a child of immigrants in a lone-parent family. This kind of language, of course, is politely sociological. It barely reflects the actual lives of individuals, the impact of the Depression that hit three years after Vivian was born, the images of Dorothea Lange and others, and the destitution in large cities.

Vivian and her mother escaped the worst of those years when they returned to her mother's home village in the Champsaur Valley in France in 1932. She was remembered there as "a pretty, blue-eyed, blond six-year-old who at first spoke no French and clung to her mother's side" and "the girl with a bike and a camera". Vivian and her mother returned to New York in 1938, narrowly missing the war in Europe. These life-defining realities go deeper than the Mary-Poppins-with-an-edge character that Vivian is often portrayed as. Children see and remember. Shifting between countries, languages, families, and communities, much of Vivian's early life was spent in a kind of serial statelessness. Perhaps the independence and force of personality she is famous for comes down to a drive for survival learned at an early age.

When Vivian went back to Champsaur in 1950 to settle a modest inheritance, she was taking pictures with a Brownie box camera. She returned to New York in 1951 and bought her first Rolleiflex with its iconic square format images in 1952. She settled in Chicago in 1956.

Maier's story is more than a treasure hunt with dodgy meetings in warehouses and a briefcase packed with negatives flown to Canada (both of which happened). The real quest is the uncovering of the work and its validation. It's a story of the resistance and hope that resonates with our own undiscovered selves. We know just enough to be able to project ourselves into her landscape. This is more than a conceit. We share what psychologists would call a phenomenological knowledge of her life. There are things we know about her choices, her gaze, and what attracted her whether it was beautiful or not, because we recognize it in ourselves and because we are human. As a poet, I have to believe that this kind of knowledge is as valid as any other. In much of what has been written about Vivian, there is an implicit hope that art somehow freed her—a drive we see in her because we recognize it in ourselves. Our guesses are as much evidence as there will ever be on the matter but they can't be discounted.

Much is made of how a "mystery nanny" managed to carry on a double life under the noses of her employers. My friend, Shelley Banks, a journalist, photographer and poet, points out that caring for the children of the wealthy has been one of the main means of survival of poor, working class women for centuries, so how could we not see Maier's life as anything but typical of the millions before and after her? And why wouldn't those millions have other abilities and ambitions? Is it really so strange that Vivian's employers, who come across as intelligent and perceptive people, knew so little about her photography? As Banks put it, Anne and Charlotte Brontë worked as governesses—does anyone imagine they discussed their novels with their employers?

An old professor of mine said when you are in a counseling session and the conversation isn't making sense, don't listen to what the people across from you say, listen to the music of the transaction. It's a sample of their lives. One watches the interviews with the families Maier worked for and regard, and even the tolerance Maier was afforded, are clear. It's evident in John Maloof's documentary, *Finding Vivian Maier*, and elsewhere. There are boundaries of family that cannot be transgressed, however, and these are clear as well. One can never be sure what was left on the editing floor, but the music I hear is that of the relationship between employer and employee. And when Vivian says half-hopefully to the Gensburgs that they should adopt her, she must have been aware that she was an outsider in other people's families and the trajectory she was on. In Robert Frost's poem, "The Death of the Hired Man," the farmer's wife says famously, "Home is the place where, when you need to go there, they have to take you in." Unlike Frost's hired man, Vivian had no such a place.

Vivian was tough because she had to be. Still, there is a tension between objectivity and warmth in her photographs of children. These are character studies in which the identity of the child is respected. One of her most iconic images is a young African American boy wearing Mickey Mouse ears. He looks directly into the camera from the window of what is presumably his father's car. It is a study of the American dream. In those eyes we see the child that is and the question of what lies ahead. The critique is undeniable, but the child behind it is an equal part of the story. The two young twins in Florida in matching dresses and hats seem to be caught in half-pose and the kind of attention twins must be used to. Perhaps they weren't quite ready, but the photograph captures a look of skepticism or maybe the kind of forbearance one

isn't used to seeing in a child. There's also that image of that young boy with coke-bottle glasses, with a striped tie and an oversized magazine tucked under his white Sunday shirt. He's dressed the way we imagine his father must dress. Like that image of the boy wearing Mickey Mouse ears, the photo seems to include the trajectory of a future life. It's disconcerting because it feels true, almost inevitable for a child who's already dressed for the part.

One of the essential qualities of beauty is its ability to make us pause before it. It arrests our attention. There is beauty in these pictures and often a sense of familiarity and undisguised tenderness. It isn't clear who shot the Super 8 film of Vivian and her Highland Park charges picking strawberries in the grassy ravine they liked to go to. Vivian seems unguarded in one of the few truly intimate images we have of her. When the Gensburg boys grew up, they continued to help Vivian in her later years, as her health deteriorated. In a moving gesture and perhaps a sense of filiality toward a difficult life, they scattered Vivian's ashes in the same wooded ravine where they picked the strawberries.

John Berger said that Art and art galleries are the domain of the privileged. Vivian never showed her photographs. In the mid-1950s, when Diane Arbus was taking classes from Lisette Model at The New School in New York, Vivian was already starting to amass her defining body of work. The default explanation for why Maier's work was never exhibited is her quirky, abrasive character combined with the fact that she was very guarded about the work itself. This was surely a factor, but how much does it really explain? Vivian was not naive. She had access to some of the best galleries in the U.S. and even has a photograph of Salvador Dali on the steps of the Museum of Modern Art. She seems to have read voraciously and many have commented on her confidence and fearlessness. Vivian knew what she was doing and what was going on in the Art world and the world at large. Given her background, she would have had almost no chance of going to art school, to find a mentor, or to walk into a gallery with a portfolio. She was one of the first women to do street photography and that, in itself, would be enough to close some doors. This doesn't explain everything, but it's a very formidable wall to get past no matter how good the art is. Very simply, Vivian didn't have the life chances of her contemporaries we know, male or female.

One of the now-adult children in Maloof's documentary says Vivian would have been horrified at the idea of others handling her work. She would have been right to worry. When the linguistics professor in the film calls her French accent "an affectation," he is figuratively and literally denying her voice. There are, in fact, other explanations for the accent, including her age when she went to France as an American child, and was fully immersed in it. The short scene with the professor can be read as a metaphor for Vivian's life. Whatever those who own her work say, whatever scholarship offers or whatever I say here, she has had no agency in any of this—not the selection of the images, the dodging, the cropping and framing, the tours, the sales, nor the display of her subjects. She has no voice in her legacy.

I like to remember that given a chance and a modest inheritance, Vivian bought her first professional camera, travelled across the States and Canada, and took an extended trip around the world in 1959 and 1960. She was a feminist and that strangely American pejorative, "a

liberal”, who sympathized with the civil rights movement and photographed in nearby black communities down the road while the families she worked for were at the beach. Despite her abrupt manner she would comfortably engage with the street people she photographed. The children remember her as being generous with her change and she would tell homeless men where they could find a shelter. There are night photographs, scenes with weather and nature, meditations on light and shadow, and a large, rarely shown subset of images from her travels. It is fair to ask how she managed to accomplish what she did, but the newspaper cut-lines and on-line promos often say more about journalists and copywriters than they do about the actual person before us. Perhaps the word “mystery” should take a hiatus.

Vivian is called a street photographer. A physical street doesn’t have to appear anywhere in such work to earn the name. Nick Turpin, the UK photographer, says street photography is not reportage; it is about issues of life in general. It’s about the photographer seeing and reacting. He says, “...they know what it feels like to take a great shot in the same way that the archer knows they have hit the bull’s-eye before the arrow has fully left the bow.” Think of the number of times Vivian must have known with certainty that she had a good photograph among the thousands of shots she never developed or printed. Maybe she simply took the shot and moved on. Somehow though, she must have felt the weight of all that work waiting to see the light of day.

Turpin speaks of the photographer’s empathy and loss of self in the moment. This is a photographer’s observation and it tells me something about Vivian that others cannot. While some narrators may be reliable, others clearly are not—especially the adults she worked for. The grown children’s recollections seem more reliable and unguarded. Their contradictions—the light, the slightly off, and hints of a troubling dark side—have the ring of truth.

It has been said that Maier was not just photographing the street; she was documenting her own life. Art is the space where the artist can be most fully herself. It doesn’t seem like a stretch to think that Vivian saw some of those lives she photographed as close to her own. Diane Arbus said those who live on the margins “wear no mask.” Maier’s photographs often capture her famous or middle-class subjects in the moment before the mask goes up. But there is no disguise for those homeless and exhausted men sleeping on benches or for the hawkers trying to scabble together a living at Chicago’s Maxwell Street bazaar. Maier validates these lives; they are worthy of art—and not the voyeuristic kind. We shouldn’t have any illusions about the fact these subjects understood what was going on. There were other photographers on Maxwell Street, for example, and they would have been used to it. Maier’s photos are free of judgment. It is not such a leap to imagine that many of her subjects had a sense of who Maier was, a mutual recognition that allowed her into their lives if only briefly.

Vivian Maier worked at her craft. Although she had the printing done commercially later on, there is also a photograph of all her developing chemicals arranged on a crowded picnic table. This is essentially a self-portrait. Pamela Bannos says in *A Photographer’s Life and Afterlife* that Maier used many cameras, not just the Rolleiflex she is famous for, and that she cropped her work. Maier also had a passion for movies. When Kodak’s Super 8 movie camera

came out in 1965 it turned personal filmmaking into a cultural phenomenon. Maier's film labels show she bought one within months of when they became available. The Super 8 was the first amateur movie camera to provide the commercial 24/second frame rate. Maier produced many audiotapes as well. She knew the technology; like any artist, she used it as soon as she could get it.

I am not the first to say it would be impossible to become an artist of Maier's caliber without a critical "take" on her own work. Much is made of the volume of her collection. This shouldn't be a surprise. The 140,000-plus negatives, prints and the other items are entirely in keeping with what one would expect from a serious photographer. This is what artists do. We keep huge volumes of work in our libraries, computer drives, drawers, studios and sheds. It is the physical affirmation of what we do and a kind of fortification against its disappearance.

Bob Carnie, a master printmaker in Toronto, pointed out how absolutely resourceful Maier must have been to keep her work together through all her moves. One of the pleasures of Maier's work is not just the people portrayed, but also the signature of place. Carnie has printed the work of professional photographers specializing in cityscapes and says that that Maier's urban images compare with the best he has seen. Over coffee in a Chicago restaurant, Ron Slattery, who was the first to buy Vivian's prints, said that she applied techniques she learned photographing mountains in Champsaur to her New York and Chicago skylines.

In those in-between moments of human indecision that Vivian captures so well, there is a precise sense of the environment and how people exist in these spaces—a seedy parking lot, the beach at Coney Island, a vacant train station, or a school sports day. The signs in the background deliberately frame the story and its counterpoint. In other images of gutters and windblown streets, there is a well-developed vocabulary. The glimpse of a headline in a newsbox becomes a critique of the folly that produced it. A scrap of paper discarded among remnants of melting snow on a suburban sidewalk has the effect of a tone poem in which the aloneness of the image-maker is part of the scene. Photographs where Vivian includes her shadow assert her presence and the act of seeing while placing the viewer in the same vicinity. In all those portraits of herself in mirrors and shop windows, Vivian is making a gesture toward herself and us. She plays with duality and seems to be making an open-ended inquiry into her own existence and ours as well.

Maier was a documentarian. Only a few photographs from the dreadful year, 1968, have been published. In the five months between April and August, the world witnessed the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and the disastrous Chicago Democratic Convention. It is said to be one of Maier's most prolific years and that her work took a darker turn about that time. The worry and grief and the body language in Vivian's photos of the aftermath of the riots and demonstrations in 1968 are still with us. Leonard Cohen said that if you put song into the air and it is still there twenty years later, it means the song is true. This is a test that Maier's work has passed.

Vivian Maier became a tragic figure in her last years—frail, living in poverty, a victim of falls, and unable to pay the rent on her five storage lockers. I would like to believe that her work consoled her in some way, but that would simply be one more narrative. One can imagine a less noble story, one that acknowledges her exhaustion and that she was fully aware the mass and the worth of what she had produced, as well as its impending loss. It's a miracle that it was saved at all.

Writers and critics have speculated on her sexuality. The fact is we know almost nothing about this aspect of Vivian's life. Her legacy is not helped by theories in search of information that cannot be had. Sometimes the art has to be enough. Her photos of undressed mannequins and their jumbled torsos and limbs heaped in storefront windows have raised some questions; and yes, mannequins are designed to evoke a certain eroticism and can be read as such. It seems to me, however, that the most obvious reading of this work is a pro femina critique of the social construction of beauty, sexuality of course, consumption, transience, waste, and the illusions we live with. This kind of reading is well within her vision and the human landscapes she portrays. Her mannequin images are clearly playing with surrealism; there is violence in the random, disembodied parts as well. She captures raunchy marquees of adult movie houses. Men look at them furtively and seem put off by the woman taking their picture, which was the kind of shot Vivian liked to get and may have provoked. At other times, the emptiness and human absence in front of these places speaks in its own way, an exhaustion of the spirit insinuated in the flat light.

When an artist has something that works—really works—they tend to make more of it. Vivian Maier developed a whole “vocabulary of strokes” with regard to the human body. *The Vivian Poems* include a five-page poem based solely on her photographs of legs and the stories they invite us to see. A more recent book, *The Color Work*, includes a picture of a woman's legs seen from behind. The frame is confined to the space between the hem of her coat and the ground. There's a red shoe on one foot and a cast on the other (p.65). This is followed by another photograph of the vulnerable, nyloned feet of an exhausted woman lying on a stone bench (p. 67) in a narrative of fatigue and anxiety that isn't easily dismissed. Flipping the pages, one sees how truly expressive the torso, hands, and legs are in Maier's work. They are all that's required to evoke the whole figure. The beauty of it, as “Vivian” says in a poem, is that people don't object when you take pictures of their legs. These are subjects that are open to her. Compare the unconscious gestures of living figures in her black and white work and the colour photos of mannequins and it all seems to be part of a wider frame, an approach to the human figure. We have to step back to see it.

As for Vivian herself, it may be that no conclusion is possible. In a documentary of the times, Hilda Gore is standing in front of the Vietnam Memorial Wall. She's holding a photograph of her husband that she is about to place there. Facing us, she says, “When you see a photograph of a person you can love that person.” This simple but moving resolution is what I take from Vivian's work. I have her say it in one of the poems because I believe it to be true. Perhaps it's what Vivian hoped for in all those reflections repeated in windows and mirrors, in her own shadow, or in that other self, captured in one of the Super 8 films: an eye-catching

woman in an elegant red coat, standing in front of a house smashed by a Crystal Lake tornado.  
The woman raises her Super 8 as she stretches to see in a window, a spy just like Vivian, so  
intent on her business she doesn't notice we're here.