
Paul Outerbridge: Command Performance, documenting a 2009 J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition, surveys the artistic career of the American modernist photographer Paul Outerbridge (b. 1896, d. 1958). This exhibition is the first significant show of the artist’s work since 1981. It includes images from the Getty, owner of the largest number of Outerbridge photographs in public hands, and works from the collections of other institutions and private collectors. With assistant curator of Photographs Paul Martineau’s intriguing biographical essay (based, in part, on the Getty’s archive of Outerbridge papers), 104 stunningly beautifully plates, a chronology, checklist and index, this catalog offers a highly visual and seductive overview. A section featuring selected photographs from Outerbridge’s California years, a period missing from earlier books, makes this publication of interest to specialists as well.

Outerbridge first earned recognition as a photographer in 1921, not long after enrolling at the Clarence H. White School of Photography in New York City. His “high end” advertising work soon began to appear in magazines such as Vanity Fair and Harper’s Bazaar. Following the aesthetic developments of his day, he applied avant-garde principles to his commercial assignments, painstakingly planning the arrangement of products, people and lighting. He spent time in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, and in the 1930s mastered tri-color carbro printing, a time consuming “handmade” process involving layers of registered prints resulting in rich, saturated colors. This medium proved ideal for his female nude studies, a passion he pursued even when the work proved too risqué to exhibit, let alone sell. He became a prominent mid twentieth-century color theorist, and authored Photography in Color, published by Random House in 1940. He spent his last years in Laguna Beach, California, before dying of lung cancer in 1958.

Despite his early success, it has taken years for Outerbridge’s oeuvre to find a suitable niche in the history of photography. In recent decades, the field has expanded to embrace the color work of Outerbridge and his contemporaries. His influence on later color photographers is now acknowledged; his staged photographs, in particular, anticipate the work of contemporary photographers like Thomas Demand and Gregory Crewdson.

Paul Outerbridge: Command Performance is highly recommended for all academic and research collections supporting studio photography, design, and art history of the modern period. It is a wonderful complement to Paul Outerbridge: New Color Photographs from Mexico and California, 1948-1955 (Nazraeli Press, 2009), which emphasizes more recently discovered Kodachrome work from the last two decades of Outerbridge’s life.

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