

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 28, 2006

Maria Friedlander and William Gedney

Filed under: [artists & family](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:54 pm



Maria Friedlander, New City, New York, 1971 (Lee Friedlander)

In response to my recent post on [photography and parenting](#) Brandon Sorg mentioned Maria Friedlander's foreword to *What Was True, The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney*. While I've long treasured this book, I'd never read the foreword. What a shame. Maria Friedlander's prose is pure and honest and worthy of a lengthy excerpt:

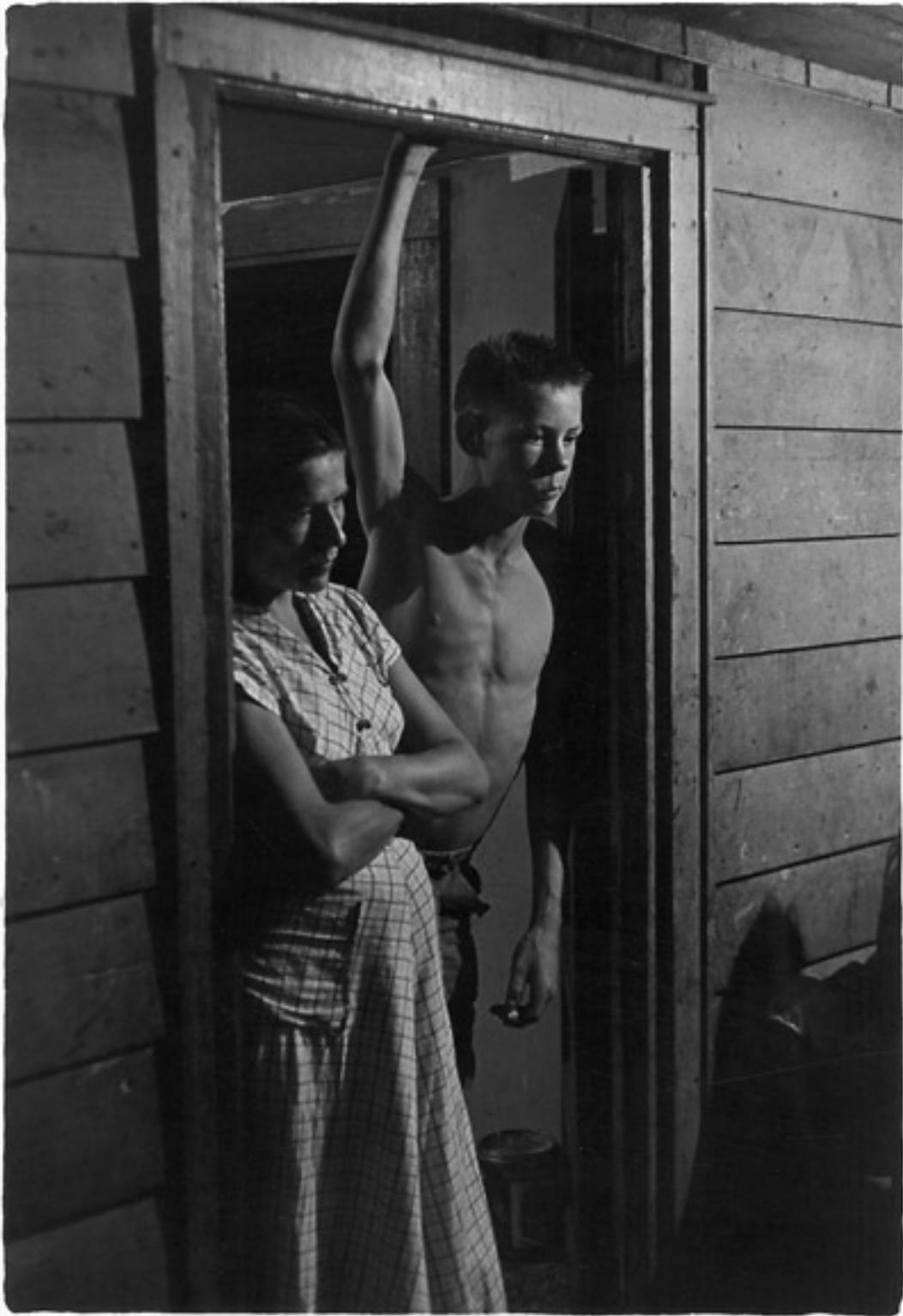
Most of the time we spent with Bill [William Gedney] was in our own home. He seemed content and comfortable in our family setting and, in fact, began to express a growing interest about our particular domestic style. Specifically, Bill began to question me about what it was like to be married to someone as focused on his work as Lee is. How did I handle Lee's lengthy trips away from home? What was it like to rear our children within this framework? Even as he questioned, I had the sense that Bill already had romanticized my role in my marriage. He often expressed his feeling that to be a truly committed artist one had to be free to pursue one's work, and the fact that Lee was able to do it while involved in a full family life must mean, according to Bill, that I was some kind of perfect wife for an artist. I told Bill it was not that simple. Photography was the fulcrum of Lee's life and I had accepted that for myself and for the children. It was an interesting life, I told Bill, one that could be so traditional and then way out there in the world – exciting and also very lonely. I had discovered that it

was calmer and more fun at times for me to stay home with Erik and Anna than to accompany Lee on his working trips. On my own with them, I was free of the pressure to behave and make the children behave in ways to accommodate Lee and his work. I could experience a sense of freedom when I didn't have to deal with Lee's self-absorption, but I could also be angry with him for being away and miss him in equal measure. I told Bill that's what life was like, all of the above, sometimes all at one time. But I had the feeling Bill preferred the myth of Saint Maria

How brave of Friedlander to write so honestly for a book introduction. This intimacy is a perfect match for the Gedney's own diary entries. Here is something Gedney wrote in his notebook on March 27th, 1969:

Go to a dinner for Edward Steichen. I do not relate to the affair or the people, dull speeches, pompous, etc. I sit next to Mrs. Harry Callahan. She is nice, a homebody I suspect, totally uninterested in art outside of her husband's work. She works as a secretary. Her husband when they were first married attempted to get her interested in photography but she had no interest; she said she never held a camera in her hand. I bet she is a perfect artist's wife and good mother.

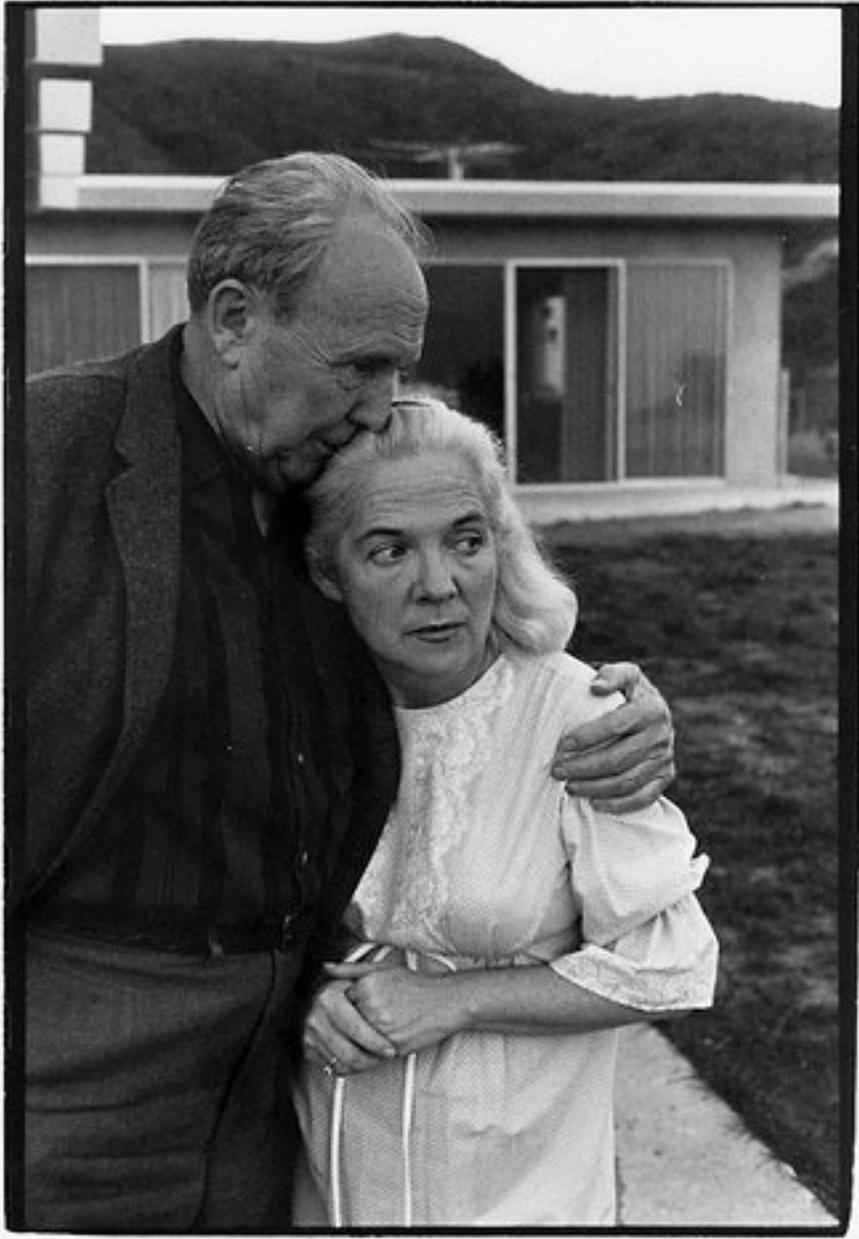
Apparently Gedney had some strong feelings about wives and mothers. Thanks to the wonderfully rich Duke University [website devoted to Gedney](#), I was able to find a few of his unpublished pictures that hit on this topic. As usual, Gedney's images are emotional yet restrained glimpses of real human tenderness:



Mother standing with son in doorway, 1964



Mother giving son a haircut, 1964



Roy Harris and wife, 1967

3 Comments

1. 100 years ago Yeats wrote that one must "choose perfection of the life or of the work", but that's a very unreconstructed "choice" that we should have moved beyond by now. Women have rarely had this choice, and — as Maria writes in her foreword — get unfairly "sainted" by sentimentalists for allowing it to the driven men they share their lives with ... Absentee fathers choosing career over family is Old News, and regrettably not unique to photographers. Don't look for models, Alec — be a model!

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — September 29, 2006 @ [3:41 am](#)

2. I'm glad to hear I'm not the only one who doesn't read all forwards in the photographic books I own. Recently a curator in London told a friend who was putting a book together, "Don't bother with text, nobody ever reads it"

Comment by [Tadhg](#) — September 29, 2006 @ [5:52 am](#)

3. Not that I can answer any of the question raised on this issue, but knowing from interviews that you are an avid user of the ipod, I suggest that you listen from National Geographic Magazine's best of archives (The Best of National Geographic Magazine, <http://podcast.nationalgeographic.com/best-of-ngm/>) a piece called Gabon's Coastline.

It is a piece on a project by photographer Michael Nichols. He took along his whole family to Gabon for a six month project, and the piece has a lot of consideration on being both a travelling photographer and a father.

Comment by [Retry](#) — October 2, 2006 @ [2:53 am](#)