

#73 June 2022 Cameraderie
Marion Palfi (1907-78)



Marion Palfi described herself as a “social change photographer.” The following summary from the University of Arizona Center for Creative Photography (CCP, see below) page on Palfi tells her story:

Some of the issues she addressed include racism, Native American living conditions and relocation, juvenile delinquency, elder housing, the infringement of prison inmate rights, the effects of child neglect and abuse, the rise of gangs, and the persistence of poverty and slums. *Throughout her years in America, Palfi eschewed a more lucrative career, producing photojournalistic work that conformed to popular expectations, and chose instead to pursue imagery that challenged notions of the American Dream.* [italics mine]

...

The [CCP] archive contains materials from major photographic projects from 1945 to 1978, correspondence between Palfi and friends, photographers, scholars, writers, publishers, and governmental and private institutions on subjects including her philosophy of using photography to influence social change, her sales of photographs, and *her mostly unsuccessful efforts to publish her work.* [italics mine]

From the Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marion_Palfi

Palfi's photography explored the concepts of social injustices in America. She created many photographic studies that focus on racial injustice against African Americans, poverty in cities, and racial discrimination against Native Americans. *She originally had trouble getting her photographs displayed or show cased because many Americans refused to address these social justice issues within their own society.* [italics mine]

Palfi was the first photographer to arrive in Greenwood, Mississippi at the beginning of the town's civil rights protests in 1963. She photographed the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee offices after they were burned down, went to the residence of Dewey Green, and met with activists. As protests increased in violence, she was told to leave Greenwood. *Following her time there, her photography was used by the US Department of Justice to support lawsuits against segregation in Greenwood and Leflore County.* [italics mine]

Palfi attended [the] March on Washington (August 28, 1963). She additionally chronicled, in photography, the opening of Prince Edward County schools in 1964, and the end of Massive Resistance. Palfi marched at Selma in 1965 with Martin Luther King Jr.

The CCP includes Palfi's work in their online collection. Here is the link to the 1136 image in her online gallery: <https://ccp.arizona.edu/artists/marion-palfi> . Have a look through these pages of images—I looked at every one—it is fascinating to take a deep dive into a photographer's "body of work." Note that each image has an "ENLARGE IMAGE" button.

After Palfi arrived in the United States in 1944, she became engaged with social causes; here is another quote from the CCP page:

A crucial first project, "Great American Artists of Minority Groups and Democracy at Work," was sponsored by the Council Against Intolerance in America. Through this assignment, she met Langston Hughes, the American poet, who became an ardent supporter. He would say of her work, "A Palfi photograph brings us face to face with hidden realities that its surface only causes us to begin to explore." Her close ties with Hughes allowed her to establish a circle of friends that included John Collier, Sr., Eleanor Roosevelt, Edward Steichen [#9, Sept. 2013], and Lisette Model.

Here are several images typical of Palfi's work:

In the Shadow of the Capitol, Washington, D.C. 1946-1948, ca. 1946.



This may be around 4th or 5th streets SE.

Case History, 1955-57.



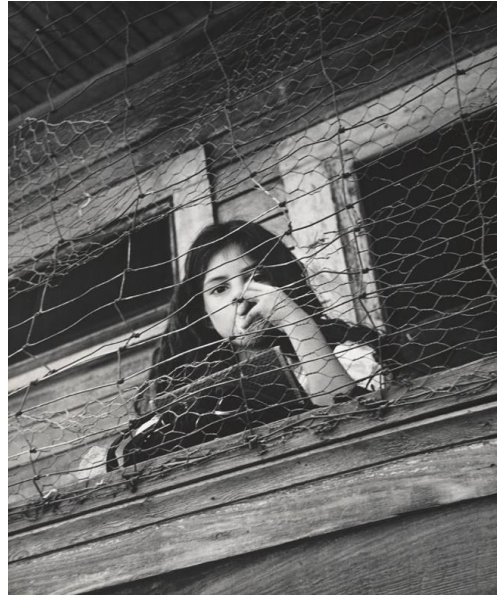
Palfi made an extensive record of the situation of the aged. There are about a dozen pictures of this woman in the CCP archive of Palfi's work.

Chicago, 1950-51.



It is hard to believe this is someone's home.

In the Hollows, Los Angeles, California, 1946-48.



Evidently a slum neighborhood of Los Angeles at the time.

Detroit, Paradise Valley, 1946-49.



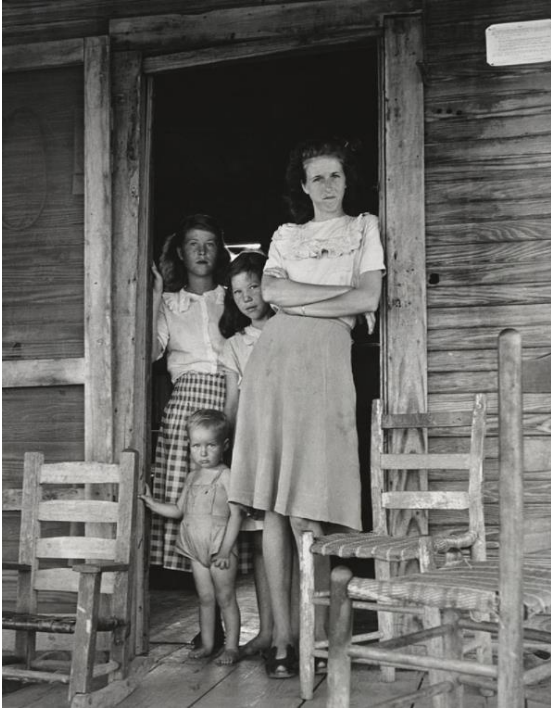
There seems to be little difference between the wash on the line and the rubbish on the ground.

Relation to Nature, Navajoland, 1967-69.



Palfi photographed every minority—black, brown, Puerto Rican, Native American, immigrants, poor, orphans, elderly, public charges. It is easy to understand why her images had little commercial success, and she was not well-published.

Sledge, Mississippi, 1950-51.



There is a many-layered story in this woman's face.

Langston Hughes and his aunt Toy Harper, 1944.



As noted in the articles, Palfi was friends with Hughes and many other activists.

Woman checking school children for immunization scars, 1967-69.



I am showing this image because it resonates with a current news issue today—the past forcing of Native American children to be separated from their parents and sent to boarding schools, in both the USA and Canada. I can't tell for sure if this is one of those schools, but the image reminds me of the current news stories on this subject.

Palfi was an activist using photography as her tool; many of her images are documentarian and (I think) compositionally unimpressive (although I have chosen mostly dramatic ones for this article). But her role as an activist was admirable, especially as the sources note that she did not have success with publication—which appeared to be her choice. Might we all be so dedicated to our chosen moral missions!