

Harold Feinstein
PHOTOGRAPHY TRUST

Biography of Harold Feinstein

Harold Feinstein was born in Coney Island, New York, in 1931 to Jewish immigrant parents. He began photographing Coney Island and the streets of Brooklyn at the age of 15. At 16 he dropped out of school, got a room at the YMCA and began to devote himself full-time to photography. In 1948, at the age of 17, he became the youngest member of the historic [Photo League](#) and by the age of 19, Edward Steichen, director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, had purchased his work for the museum's permanent collection. According to photography critic, A.D. Coleman, Feinstein "*was considered by the photo world as something of a child prodigy.*"¹ When he died in June 2015, [The New York Times](#) declared him "*one of the most accomplished recorders of the American experience.*"²

His work was first exhibited in 1954 as part of a group show at The Whitney Museum, followed by a group show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and later solo shows at the George Eastman House (1957) and Helen Gee's Limelight gallery (1958). [New York Times](#) photo writer, Jacob Deschin, called his work "*the new pictorialism, the refinement of the craft as technically perfected language.*"³ In 1958, H.M. Kinzer, editor of [Photography Annual](#), declared a Feinstein print sale and show "*the most remarkable sale in the history of contemporary photography,*" adding, "*at the age of 26, Harold Feinstein has reached the point in his photographic career when the word 'master' is being applied to his prints by some ordinarily cautious critics.*"⁴

Throughout the 50s, Feinstein was a part of the bohemian ferment in the New York art scene. After returning from the Korean War in 1954, he became one of the first inhabitants of New York's legendary [Jazz Loft](#). During that time he [designed covers for Blue Note](#) records along with Andy Warhol and Reid Miles. In 1957, he was asked to join Jean Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett in launching the first issue of the avante garde literary magazine [Evergreen Review](#), which featured eight pages of his photographs.⁵

Feinstein was introduced to W. Eugene Smith in the early 50s and the two became close friends and collaborators. Smith asked him to create the layout for his monumental [Pittsburgh Project](#). He said of Feinstein: "*He is one of the*

¹ A.D. Coleman, "Seeing the World in Which We Live: The Photographs of Harold Feinstein," *Photo Technique*, September/October, 2013, p. 37.

² William Grimes, "[Harold Feinstein Dies at 84: Froze New York Moments in Black and White](#)," *The New York Times*, June 29, 2015.

³ Jacob Deschin, "[Feinstein's New Show](#)," *The New York Times*, November 2, 1958.

⁴ H.M. Kinzer, "[The Intimate Camera of Harold Feinstein](#)," *Photography Annual*, 1958, (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Co.), p. 162.

⁵ Harold Feinstein, "Portfolio of Photographs by Harold Feinstein," *Evergreen Review*, Vol. I, No.1, (New York: Grove Press), pp. 99-106.

few photographers I have known, or been influenced by, with the ability to reveal the familiar to me in a beautifully new, in a strong and honest way.”⁶

Feinstein began teaching from his studio at the age of 26, and his workshops quickly became popular. In 1960 he was invited to be one of the first teaching fellows at the Annenberg School of Communications in Philadelphia and after that continued to teach from his studio and at numerous institutions for the rest of his life. He was described as “*a true teaching artist...one of a small handful of master teachers whose legendary private workshops proved instrumental in shaping the vision of hundreds of aspiring photographers.*”⁷ Among his students were Mary Ellen Mark, Ken Heyman, Louis Draper, Herb Randall, Mariette Pathy Allen, Lori Grinker, Wendy Watriss, Gail Buckland and Bob Shamis.

Throughout his life he was an experimenter and innovator, often breaking prevailing rules and forging new ground. Photography magazines frequently called upon him to write articles about his methods of printing, composition and shooting. As a [master printer](#), he sometimes took liberties to get the image he wanted by using the bleaching agent potassium ferricyanide for dramatic effect, or by [creating photomontages](#) – practices that were frowned upon at the time. In the words of curator Phillip Prodger, Feinstein was “*part artist, part guru, part force of nature... His iconoclasm, individuality, and creative mischief meant that his most original contributions occurred outside easily defined circles of influence.*”⁸

Rarely did Feinstein regret his iconoclastic tendencies, with one exception. In 1955, Edward Steichen asked him to contribute seven photographs to *The Family of Man*, perhaps the most famous and successful photography exhibition in history. Feinstein declined the invitation, believing then that the photograph ought to be valued on its own as art and not become subservient to “a theme.” According to some photo historians, his decision, which he later regretted, may be one reason he was not better known later in his life. Indeed, he has been called “*one of the most seriously under-recognized senior figures in U.S. photography.*”⁹

Feinstein amassed a huge body of work over his nearly 70-year career. He is best known for his six -decade love affair with his home turf Coney Island. A review of his exhibition, *A Coney Island of the Heart*, at the International Center for Photography in 1990, said: “*Here is New York small camera school at its best; humanistic, engaging, almost intrusive... [T]his is the work of a man who loves people, takes unalloyed pleasure in seeing them enjoy themselves,*

⁶ As stated in a letter written by Smith to Dr. Patrick Hazard of The Annenberg School of Communication dated May 16, 1959.

⁷ Coleman, op.cit., p. 40.

⁸ Phillip Prodger, “Never Skin Deep,” *Harold Feinstein: Retrospective* (Paso Robles, CA: Nazraeli Press), 2012, Introduction.

⁹ Coleman, op. cit., p. 37.

*likes to get close to them – and, by rendering their physicality in tactile, nuanced prints, enmeshes the viewer in the sensual, material world his ‘subjects’ occupy.”*¹⁰

While his Coney Island work has been much celebrated, his breadth is far greater. His oeuvre includes a large collection of classic street photography, nudes, portraits, and still life. His [photographs from the Korean War](#) offer an intimate look at the daily life of draftees from basic training to the front lines.

In addition to his classic black and white work, he devoted nearly two decades to color photography, both film and digital. In 2000, he received the *Computer World Smithsonian Award* for his breakthrough work in scanography, utilizing the scanner as a camera to produce breath-taking, highly detailed photographs of botanicals, seashells and butterflies. This resulted in seven books and a sudden influx of licensing opportunities. The worldwide popularity of this new series prompted Britain’s *The Independent* to declare: “*In the realm of photography, Feinstein is what Beckham is to football or J.K. Rowling is to books.*”¹¹ Addressing the phenomenal success of poster sales, *Art Business Today* noted: “*Feinstein’s image of a white rose is probably the world’s best selling image.*”¹² His color work also includes 35mm street photography and a series he called *Metropolis* -- New York architecture shot with a prismatic lens. *New York* magazine called it “*cubism verité.*”¹³

In the last decade of his life, Feinstein was gratified to witness a renaissance of his earlier work. In 2011, the Griffin Museum of Photography presented him with the *Living Legend* award. His first black and white monograph, *Harold Feinstein: A Retrospective* (Nazraeli, 2012) won a coveted PDN (*Photo District News*) Annual Award in 2013. Recent exhibitions in the U.S., Europe, Russia and China have continued to stimulate new interest in his long career, and an international touring museum retrospective is now in the planning stages with French curator Francois Cheval.

A documentary about his life and work, [Last Stop Coney Island: The Life and Photography of Harold Feinstein](#) premiered at DOC NYC in 2018 to a sold out crowd and a great review in the [Hollywood Reporter](#). It has been garnering critical acclaim at film festivals.

His work is represented internationally and collections are owned by The Museum of Modern Art, The International Center for Photography, The George Eastman House, The Center for Creative Photography, The Museum of the City of New York, The Jewish Museum and over two dozen other institutions.

¹⁰ A. D. Coleman, “Don’t Miss...,” *The New York Observer*, Oct. 1, 1990, p. 20.

¹¹ David Osborne, “Any other name: The man behind the lens hadn’t even realized he was the creator of a global hit,” *The Independent*, August 13, 2005, p. 21.

¹² Annabelle Ruston, “Face to Face: Harold Feinstein,” *Art Business Today*, April 2007, p. 23.

¹³ “Photography: Cubism Verite,” *New York Magazine*, Sept. 4, 1995, p. 1.