

Photography [+ Add to myFT](#)

Photographer Arlene Gottfried: moments that reveal the life of a city

On show in her native New York, her street photographs capture people with their humanity bared



Great Art Collections Deserve Great Planning

Explore our guide for valuing, appraising and transferring your art collection to ensure that it lives on as you intended.

[EXPLORE THE GUIDE](#)



NORTHERN TRUST



A little boy with curls aflutter gazes forbearingly at the photographer, who must be crouching low to meet his eye. He straddles the ruins of what was once a bicycle, now missing a seat and wheels and just about every other component that makes it a machine. The boy doesn't seem to mind. It's just a twisted metal skeleton, but it's his, and he's riding it proudly on a New York street.

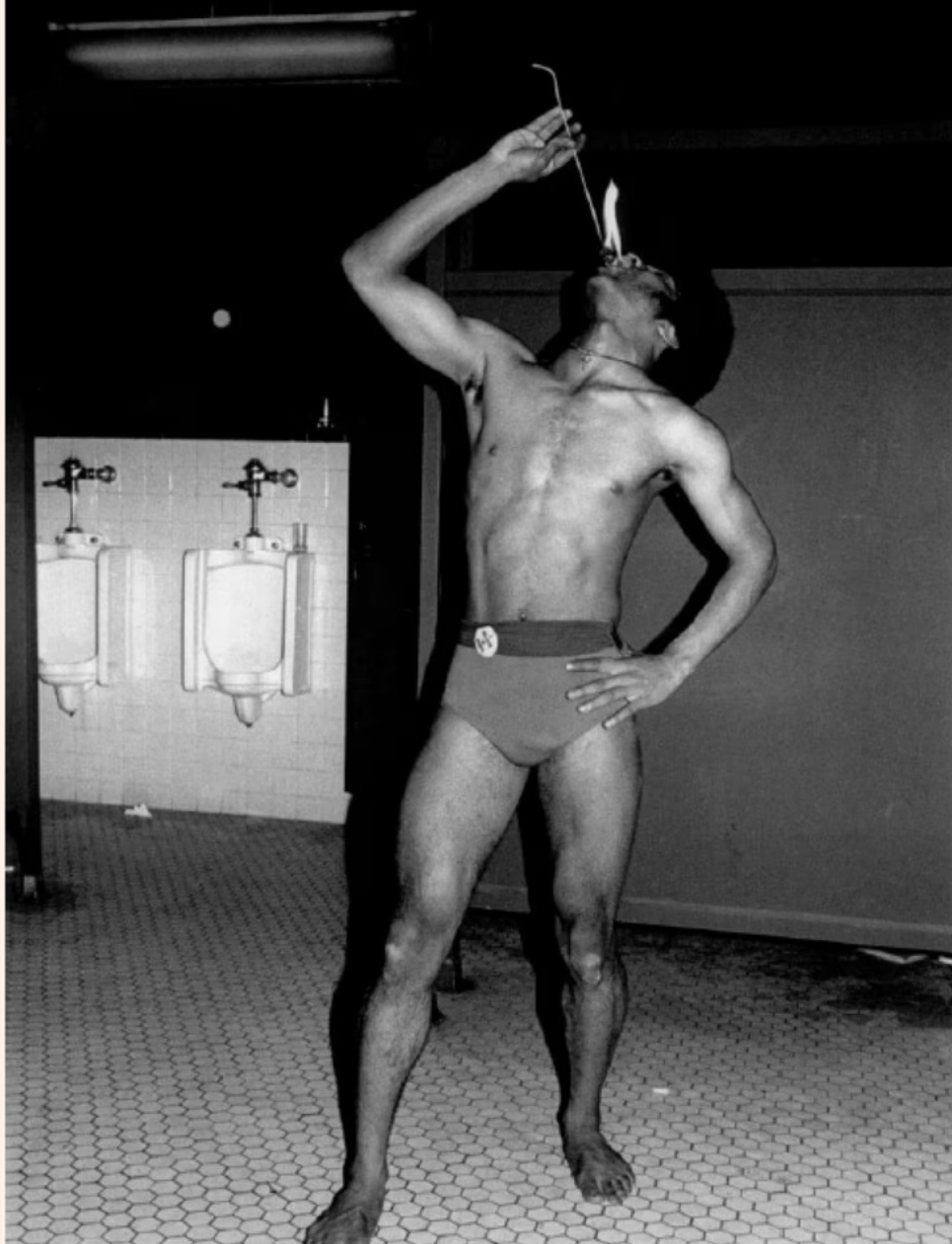
Arlene Gottfried, who took that photo in 1978, had a knack for catching people with their masks off and their humanity bared. And the New York Historical makes an apt home for her work, since the city was her world and her subject.

"I wander around and I see things that just speak to me, in one way or another," she said. "My photographs were like souvenirs; I liked to collect moments and remembrances." Mostly, she gathered fellow New Yorkers who displayed the guileless good humour that often takes visitors by surprise. There are no hardened cynics on Gottfried's mean streets.

Instead, we get sweet characters like the white-haired lady with spectacles and a pleated skirt, grinning girlishly as she swings a jump rope over her head. Her delight seems gloriously out of step with the bleak scene of warehouses and corrugated-tin shacks at her shoulders. Gottfried found eloquent juxtapositions of joy and drabness indoors, too — for example, in the very fit and nearly naked man who obliges her with a private fire-breathing performance. It takes a minute to notice that the spectacle takes place against a row of urinals in a men's toilet.



Save



The show offers a slender anthology of these vignettes, a selection of a selection. When Gottfried died in 2017, she left behind 15,000 pictures. The Historical Society acquired 300 and is displaying roughly 30.

Gottfried was born on Coney Island in 1950, when America's Dreamland was already sliding into picturesque decay. Older photographers such as Robert Frank and Diane Arbus regularly trekked out to the ocean-facing edge of Brooklyn to satisfy their cravings for seediness. The neighbourhood teemed with exhibitionists, making it the ideal training ground for a budding but fearless photographer. "I never had trouble walking up to people and asking them to take their picture," Gottfried recalled, with prim understatement.



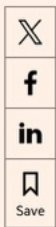


'Eternal Light Choir Performing' (1980) © Estate of Arlene Gottfried

Sometimes, it was the subjects who demanded to be photographed. For a while, around 1980, she hung out at the unofficial nudist enclave of Riis Beach, in Queens—and encountered a Hasidic Jewish man, swathed in black from fedora to leather shoes. But it was the other man in the picture, a bodybuilder in the buff, who choreographed a double portrait on the sand: “Take a picture of me with him, because I am Jewish, too,” he demanded.

That unforgettable shot — the naked and the clothed, the shaven and the bearded, Adam and the Talmudist — isn’t hanging in the gallery, but it does make an appearance in the museum’s brief video about the artist’s life, and on the cover of her 2008 book, *Sometimes Overwhelming*.

When Frank and Arbus converged on the grittier parts of the city, they were slumming; Gottfried, on the other hand, was a local. The family moved from Coney Island to Crown Heights and, later, the Lower East Side, which in the 1970s hadn’t yet acquired its current real-estate cachet but served as an irresistibly grungy backdrop for the human parade.



After graduating from the Fashion Institute of Technology, she criss-crossed the city as a freelancer, looking for life in the shadow of glamour. There was plenty of it. Men in full make-up and others in no clothes at all partied on the dancefloors and in the backstage rooms of discos, proudly strutting for Gottfried's lens. And did she really just stumble across the scene in which pop star Rick James, in full funk regalia, stares down a pair of startled society matrons, three fur-clad creatures appraising each other across a generational divide?



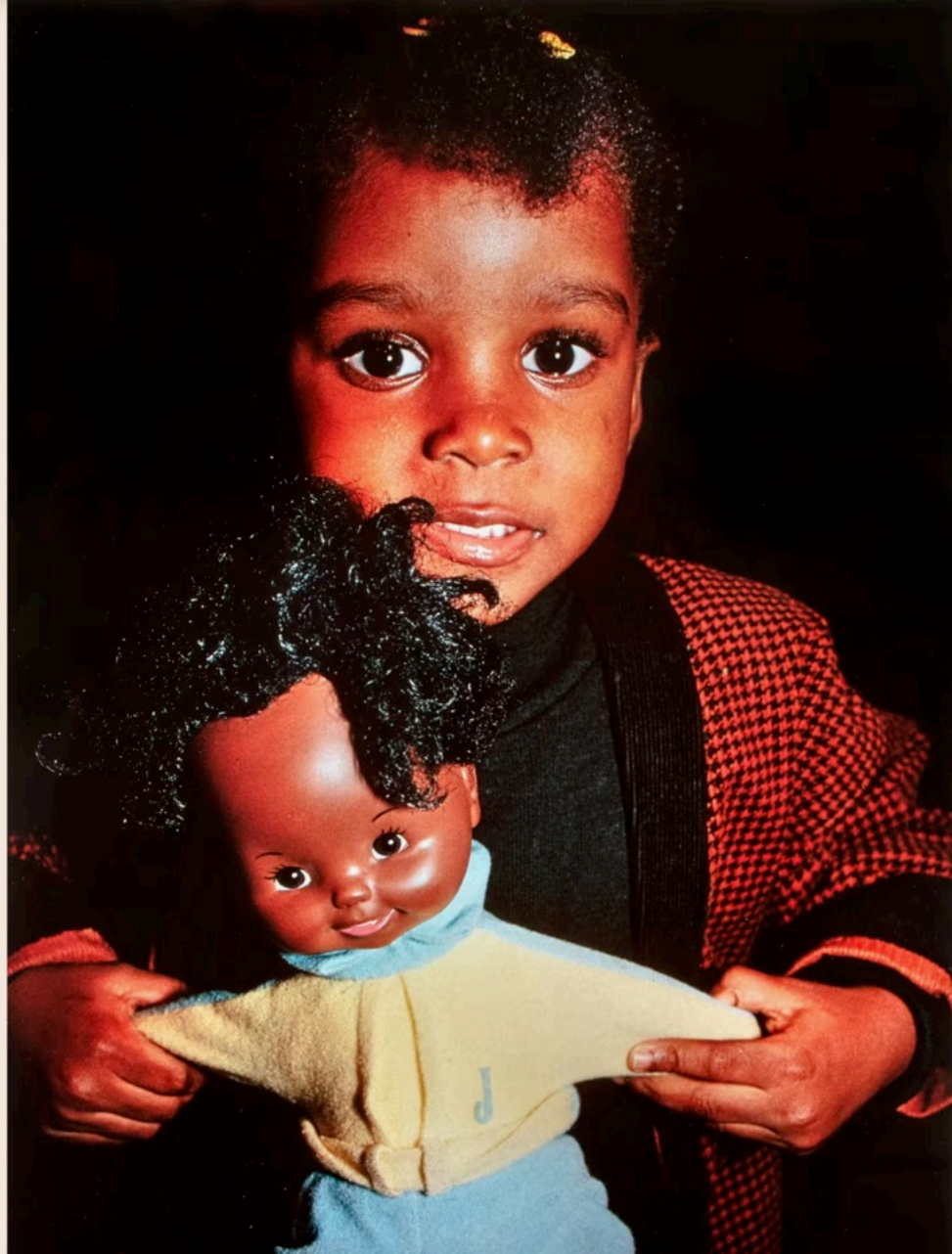


'Boy with Afro on Bicycle in front of Trash Cans' (1975) © Estate of Arlene Gottfried

Gottfried had an exceptional rapport with children, finding a panoply of emotions in their soulful faces. A teenaged boy with a halo-like afro pauses astride a bike (with wheels, this time), his expression mingling playfulness and pride. This is my neighbourhood, it says, and behind him stands a mountain range of trash, part of the New York streetscape since time immemorial.

A dash of nostalgia flavours Gottfried's New York of the 1970s and '80s, a stew of glitter, scruffiness and euphoria that bubbled briefly before Aids shut the burner off for good. Maybe that's why the show has almost no pictures from the past two decades of her life, the years of glass condos, cute cafés and *Sex and the City*. Instead, it ends with a story of tragedy and transfiguration.

In 1990, Gottfried attended a gospel concert at her old high school, Erasmus Hall, where she snapped the portrait of Monet, a soprano's two-year-old daughter. The bright-eyed child embraces a doll that could be her doppelganger and gazes out as if at an old friend. A jolt of energy courses between girl and photographer. A week later, Monet was dead, killed by her mother's boyfriend.





Save



'Monique's Daughter with Doll' (c1990) © Estate of Arlene Gottfried

Later, the mother asked the lady with the camera to come to a rehearsal of the Eternal Light Community Singers and bring the photographs from one of her daughter's last days. "So I went — and I stayed five years as a singer," Gottfried recalled. "Monet's life really touched mine in a major way." At one point, she even listed her occupation as "singing photographer". The exhibition video includes a brief clip of her performing a solo with the choir, and it suggests that her voice was as open, fearless, and generous as her eye.

To May 25, nyhistory.org