

“The Manhattan Art Review”

Color Photographs from the New Deal (1939-1943) - Carriage Trade - \*\*\*\*

This is a restaging of a 2012 show of, like the title says, a collection of color photographs taken by WPA workers during the New Deal. Aside from the obvious shock of images from the era in vivid color, there's a surprising correlation of sentiment between these and something out of a Dovzhenko film; a nakedly propagandistic romanticization of the worker and the social whole that was quickly labeled un-American post-WWII. The New Deal's flirtation with socialism to save capitalism was a brief muddying of the waters that led to programs that are bizarrely foreign to contemporary America: public funding for the arts, the edification of a social collective, the notion that common people are vehicles of innovation and growth, not just bosses? Not in my country! Naturally, the American establishment was only too happy to discard all that junk in favor of the absolute individualism that could be bolstered by covertly financing abstract expressionism while pushing the image of the self-made man living in the suburbs with his nuclear family, etc. I don't mean to imply that the New Deal was perfect or that its architects really did it for the sake of the people, but it's still worth being reminded what it looked like. Even putting aside the whole CIA AbEx thing, putting public money into the arts definitely helped produce a talented generation of artists. To hammer home the causal relationship between politics and culture, the exhibition also includes photos of labor struggles in the '30s and newspaper clippings of anti-worker propaganda, lest we think social change is something presidents create in a vacuum of their own volition. A rigorously intelligent presentation of an incredible archival discovery, as you can safely expect here at Carriage Trade. If anyone else ever did something like this my jaw would be on the floor, but I'm not holding my breath.