

Book Review

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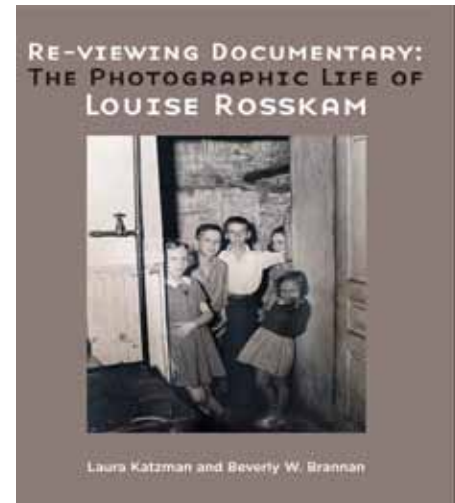
Re-viewing Documentary: The Photographic Life of Louise Rosskam, by Laura Katzman and Beverly W. Brannan. American University Museum in association with Penn State University Press, 2011. \$39.95.

Louise Rosskam (1910-2003) truly deserves this first monograph on her achievements as a social documentarian, and not just because she was one of the last living photographers associated with Roy Stryker's expertly organized documentary photography project for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Stryker's camera workers produced an archive of more than 272,000 negatives, transparencies, and prints depicting American life during the Great Depression, now available at the Library of Congress.

Yet Louise Rosskam was never on the FSA payroll. Her husband, Edwin, served as both editor and photographer under Stryker, who gave her free film and direction. Some of the results ended up in what FSA veterans called, "The File," which grew to include Office of War Information (OWI) photographs after World War II started and when Stryker was transferred there. Photographs that the Rosskams shot for other purposes, such as a trip they made to Puerto Rico for *Life* magazine before meeting Stryker, are also now in The File.

After Stryker left government service to work for the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, Edwin and Louise Rosskam joined other former FSA/OWI photographers on a major new project, again under Stryker's direction. Working as a team (both were paid this time), their photographs, simply stamped "Rosskam," without individual attribution, are now a notable component of another huge photo archive with about half a million items at the University of Louisville. After WWII, completing a body of work begun for Standard Oil, they produced the outstanding documentary photography book, *Towboat River* (1948), about the men and women who lived on barge-pushing craft on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers.

The Rosskams then relocated their documentary efforts to Puerto Rico, where they were key figures in an FSA-type project for the Office of Information, working closely with Governor Rexford Guy Tugwell and Senator (later Governor) Luis Muñoz Marín. In Puerto Rico, Louise matured as an independent photographer, apart from Edwin who



became more involved with administrative work and filmmaking. Returning to the mainland in 1953, they relocated to Roosevelt, New Jersey, where their neighbors and friends included Ben and Bernarda Shahn and Sol Libsohn. Louise continued to do part-time documentary photography projects, such as one on the children of migrant workers for the New Jersey Department of Education.

Re-viewing Documentary: The Photographic Life of Louise Rosskam was published in a first printing of only 500 copies to accompany a major retrospective curated by Laura Katzman and Beverly W. Brannan for the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center in Washington, D.C., September 3-December 14, 2011. Katzman, an associate professor of art history at James Madison University, previously co-authored Ben Shahn's *New York: The Photography of Modern Times*. Brannan, Senior Curator of Photography at the Library of Congress and expert on New Deal photography, co-edited *Documenting America, 1935-1943*. These extremely well-qualified authors do not disappoint. *Re-viewing Documentary* is the result of fifteen years of dedicated effort that began in 1996 with their interviews of Louise Rosskam, and flowered in their first two exhibitions of her photography, in 2002, at the Maier Museum of Art, now Randolph College, and in 2005 at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

This work has now culminated in an outstanding scholarly monograph and exhibition, which draws on photographs, books, newspaper clippings, and other archival material from a wide array of public and private collections. The monograph, with more than 100 photographs, includes just about everything visual in the exhibition except for an excellent film about Rosskam, made by

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Jeanine Butler in 2005-06, and a film on Puerto Rican labor made by Jack Delano in 1952. In addition to a lengthy introductory essay credited to both authors, the book provides highly readable chapter essays and extensive notes, written by Katzman, that illuminate the photographer's life and work.

For those already somewhat familiar with Louise Rosskam's work, perhaps the most remarkable revelation will be her heretofore little known images from Puerto Rico. Katzman and Brannan, supported by a research grant from the Judith Rothschild Foundation, went to the island in 2008 and significantly expanded their knowledge of the Rosskams' work there. Among other sources, the exhibition and book draws on the brilliant Rosskam photographs at the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College, City University of New York. (The Rosskams' Puerto Rican photographs were featured in another exhibit at the Hunter College East Harlem Art Gallery, May 11-July 21, 2012). Another remarkable series is Rosskam's Kodachrome photographs from 1942, of people on N Street in Southwest Washington, D.C., reproduced in color.

Louise Rosskam was able to photograph people so well because strangers didn't stay strangers long. She had an engaging, warm personality, and was sincerely interested in every person she met. Because she had earned their trust, her photographic subjects usually look happy and/or proud to have their photos taken. The result is a body of work that is consistently respectful and often depicts manual laborers as people to be admired, not just a working class to be studied or used by intellectuals or politicians for their own purposes.

Rosskam, a University of Pennsylvania alumna whose father was a Philadelphia banker who lost his money in the Depression, moved easily among people of varied backgrounds. Her characteristic modesty, combined with complete devotion and admiration for her husband, whom she said was the real artist of the team, led to her career being in the shadow of Edwin's, when in fact her work stands up very well to his.

Edwin's photographs, some of which are also reproduced in this volume, seem more deliberate and carefully composed while Louise's have more spontaneity. But both photographers' oeuvres convey strong documentary values with a passionate concern for humanity. In sum, Katzman and Brannan have done a fine service in bringing Louise Rosskam into the limelight of the 20th century documentary tradition with this volume and the related exhibition.

NEW in Print

by Liz Ruth-Abramian
Los Angeles Maritime Museum