

Protecting and Presenting Photographic Exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago

Josef Koudelka: Nationality Doubtful debuted at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) in June 2014 as the Czech-born, French photographer's first retrospective in the United States since 1988. The show is the first ever to emphasize Koudelka's original vintage prints, period books, magazines and to present significant unpublished studies by the photographer. Following its debut at the Art Institute, the exhibit travels to the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in November 2014, and to Fundación MAPFRE in Madrid in September 2015.



Installation view of *Josef Koudelka: Nationality Doubtful*.
Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

Drawn to intensely dramatic scenes, Koudelka favored dark and atmospheric prints in the 1960s, particularly in his legendary series *Gypsies*, which he began in 1961 and first exhibited in Prague in 1967. Matthew Witkovsky, Richard and Ellen Sandor chair and curator in the AIC's Department of Photography, explains, "*Nationality Doubtful* featured two versions of the series: All 22 of the surviving 1967 exhibition prints, mounted on masonite with a wooden support behind, and nearly 30 prints made in 1968-69 to prepare an artist's monograph on the series. Koudelka had not shown either set of prints since the 1960s. Working with high-silver content Agfa paper, Koudelka achieved a richness to his blacks that at the same time can make it hard to see the prints under normal acrylic glazing. Tru Vue® Optium® Acrylic Glazing allows the sublime beauty of these early works to remain apparent, particularly for the delicate 1967 exhibition prints, which have been framed 'floating' in technically complicated shadowboxes for the exhibition tour."

He elaborates, "The Josef Koudelka exhibition, which brought to view masterworks that had either never been seen in public or not in 50 years, was composed largely of rich, dark prints - dramatic and difficult to see when framed. Tru Vue's glazing has removed the difficulty, while letting the masterworks shine through."

Witkovsky describes Optium Acrylic Glazing's contribution as "nothing less than transformative. It would be impossible to see many of our photographs properly without this incredible glazing, which hardly alters the tone of the photographic prints, and nearly eliminates reflections from their surface."

A leading member of the world-renowned photo agency Magnum, Koudelka has been honored with the French Prix Nadar (1978), the Hasselblad Prize (1992) and the International Center of Photography Infinity Award (2004). He became famous in anonymity through the worldwide publication of his daring photographs of the Soviet-led invasion of Prague in August 1968. Just 30 years old at the time, Koudelka already had worked for a decade, principally on *Gypsies*, for which he visited Roma populations for weeks at a time in his home country and later abroad during the



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course of years. This ambitious series combines a sense of modern history with timeless humanism.

Choosing exile to avoid reprisals for his *Invasion* photographs, Koudelka traveled throughout Europe during the 1970s and 1980s, camping at village festivals from spring through fall and then printing in wintertime. His photographs of those decades became the series *Exiles*. Since the late 1980s,

Koudelka has made panoramic landscape photographs in areas massively shaped by industry, territorial conflict, or in the case of the Mediterranean rim, the persistence of Classical civilization.

Tracing this long and impressive career, this exhibition draws on Koudelka's extensive holdings of his own work and on recent major acquisitions by the Art Institute, including the complete surviving contents of the debut presentation of *Gypsies* in 1967 (22 photographs), plus 10 *Invasion* images printed by the photographer just weeks after the historic event. Also on display within the traveling exhibition are early experimental and theater photographs and some of the photographer's beautifully produced books, which stretch dozens of feet when unfolded. A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition.



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"At a museum visited daily by tens of thousands, the risks can be high," notes Witkovsky. "It is paramount to keep photographs protected whenever possible from light, heat, humidity and accidental contact with fluids of any kind: spit, for example, or oils found in human skin. Once damaged, photographs in many cases can never be repaired. Glazing and a proper frame nevertheless keep such problems at bay; at the Art Institute, these protective measures are augmented by round-the-clock surveillance and absolutely steady control of temperature and humidity. A full complement of conservation experts is on hand as well."

In addition to Koudelka's exhibit, Witkovsky shares, "We have used Optium extensively in recent presentations of photography at the Art Institute and other areas as well." Amongst these examples, he lists the recent show *Sharp, Clear Pictures: Edward Steichen's World War I and Condé Nast Years*, *Abelardo Morell: The Universe Next Door* and AIC's Allerton Hall's permanent display, which is now hung exclusively with photographs framed in Optium Acrylic Glazing.

The AIC's current special exhibition, *Sarah Charlesworth: Stills* features 14 unique photographs printed at an imposing 6-1/2 feet tall and framed using Optium. Each image pictures a solitary individual jumping or falling from a tall building. "Having Optium was absolutely indispensable for such monumentally sized pictures, which would otherwise be a mass of distracting reflections for the viewer," Witkovsky emphasizes. *Stills*, which is owned as a unique set by the Art Institute and has never been shown complete, is the first U.S. museum solo show in 16 years for Charlesworth (1947-2013), a key figure in the convergence of photography and contemporary art during the later 1970s and 1980s. The exhibition, which runs from Sept. 18, 2014 through Jan. 4, 2015, is part of *Photography Is _____*, a nine-month-long celebration to mark the 40th anniversary of the founding of a Department of Photography at the Art Institute. The season includes weekly pop-up gallery talks, fresh online content, and presentations of some 300 photographs that are the very best in recent acquisitions for the museum.

Learn more at <http://www.artic.edu/photography-is>.

Josef Koudelka: *Nationality Doubtful* was presented at the Art Institute of Chicago, June 7-September 21, 2014

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