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A billboard of the singer Eddie Fisher outside the Tropicana hotel in Las Vegas, photographed by Elliott Erwitt, 1957.

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OPEN BOOK

Elliott Erwitt's Last Hurrah

A new coffee-table book celebrates the photographer's eye for life's absurdities

BY GRAYDON CARTER AND NATHAN KING

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In the grand tradition of 20th-century photography, there are many great image-makers. But few were so skilled as Elliott Erwitt when it came to gently capturing the poignant absurdities and paradoxes of the human condition. This delightful new collection, *Last Laughs*, is a monument to Erwitt's unique vision and compassionate wit, a tour de force that assembles some of the most indelible photographs from his vast archive.

Erwitt's sense of humor seems to have been the by-product of an unconventional upbringing. Born in Paris in 1928 to Russian parents, he then lived in Italy before immigrating to the U.S. at age 10. It was as a painfully shy 15-year-old in Hollywood that he traded his watch for a Rolleiflex camera, and an obsession took hold. Erwitt quickly became familiar with the trenches, both literal and metaphorical: having served as a photographer's assistant in the army, he subsequently launched a career in commercial photography for magazines, advertising agencies, and film studios.

Erwitt regarded even the most banal-sounding commission as a passport to somewhere interesting, and almost never turned down an assignment. On every job he kept a personal Leica over his left shoulder and a professional camera on his right. It was the camera on the left that produced his most memorable photographs.

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Along with his sharp sense of humor, Erwitt was equipped with a modesty that put otherwise guarded subjects at ease, stars and civilians alike. His self-effacing frankness helped to persuade everyone from Marilyn Monroe to Che Guevara to lower their defenses as he raised his lens. No less impressive is the list of those he befriended and worked with behind the camera, including giants of the art such as Edward Steichen, Robert Capa, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Through the latter two, Erwitt became a member of Magnum, the renowned photography collective of which he would eventually serve as president for three years.

Camera almost permanently in hand, Erwitt turned his favorite pastime of observing the human comedy into something more purposeful than simply people-watching. It wouldn't be an overstatement to call his work an anthropological study carried out over the course of an entire professional lifetime—sociology with an arch streak running through it. He documented the idiosyncrasies of a species that's in a hugely comic predicament but trying not to dwell on it. One example: the image of Yale's oldest living graduate sitting in a long Cadillac isn't funny because the fellow is old but rather because he's framed on the far-right edge of the shot, with the impish suggestion he may be on his way out of the picture in more than one sense. Petulant children, tentative newlyweds, blasé nudists—all were grist for the mill of a man who was unflinching yet never mean or lofty.

Museums were especially fertile terrain for Erwitt, where he turned his lens on the visitors rather than on the artwork, in defiance of the ever present NO PHOTOS signs. "I devised a little technique to get around the restrictions and successfully take photographs in a museum," he said. "All you need is a small camera that is inconspicuous and doesn't make too much noise. When the attendant is not watching, you adjust it to eye level and cough slightly while pressing the button to disguise the noise of the shutter release." He paused. "You can also bribe the attendant, a more efficient and direct practice in some countries."

Though Erwitt shot mostly in black and white, he didn't see the world that way. He had a preternatural gift for homing in on the borderline between the everyday and the absurd, and his thoughtful photographs don't spare any telling details. They are a sort of Rorschach test for the viewer, inviting us to project our own drama and comedy onto the scenes they present.

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The matter-of-fact Erwitt was wary of taking photography too seriously. Once, when asked by a reporter from *Le Monde* how he learned to photograph, he replied simply, “I read the instructions on the back of the box.” This oversimplifies the matter but does hint nevertheless at the sharpness and elegance that lives within each photo in *Last Laughs*.

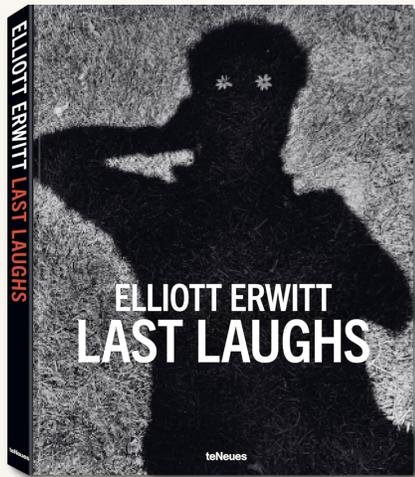
Ultimately, the book delivers on the promise of its title, giving us a chance to visit with Erwitt and share in his appreciation of life’s theater of the absurd. In this era of posturing and endless self-promotion, Erwitt’s images of people simply being, in all their awkward, tender, ridiculous glory, continue to resonate and serve as reminders not to do more but less. He put it best himself: “The whole point of taking pictures is so that you don’t have to explain things with words.” It’s much easier just to laugh.

Although Erwitt is best remembered for his funny photos, not all laughter is a response to humor. In fact, most of Erwitt’s subjects don’t realize they’re doing anything worth laughing about. He was a vigilant, wry observer, staying alert so that the viewer could be in on jokes that weren’t necessarily obvious.

Erwitt was a consummate ironist who reveled in the unexpected. His beloved dog photographs capture how animals look at each other—and at us—rather than the other way around. When asked why he photographed canines so often, he said, “They are easy subjects and I love them. To get their attention, I bark. In fact, dogs are people with more hair. Best of all, they don’t ask for prints.”

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Last Laughs, by Elliott Erwitt

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*“Elliott Erwitt: Last Laughs,” an accompanying exhibition at Staley-Wise Gallery, in New York, is on until
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