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BAY AREA

Lew Thomas, S.F. native and guiding light in conceptual photography, dies at 88



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A Lew Thomas photograph entitled "36th Avenue between Geary and Clement," taken in 1972.
Lew Thomas / Courtesy SFMOMA

Lew Thomas was running the bookstore at San Francisco's Legion of Honor when he decided to become one of the photographers featured in the modern and contemporary art books he liked to stock and discuss.

He got a late start, in his 30s, but he was early to the idea that photographers didn't have to go out on the street or into nature.

Breaking free of the traditional formats that favored sharp realism and crisp lines, Thomas could make an equally compelling image of sunshine streaming through the window of his home. That 1972 image, titled simply "Light on the Floor," is now in the permanent collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

"There was this classical tradition of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston kind of photography here, and Lew changed that," said Sandra S. Phillips, curator emerita of photography at SFMOMA.

Philip Martin Gallery

“He was engaged in a radical rethinking of the place of photography in the art world, and he challenged the old classical ideals. It was the beginning of conceptual art in photography here.”

This was celebrated in January 2020, when Thomas and his proteges Hal Fischer and Donna-Lee Phillips were given a group show titled “Thought Pieces” at SFMOMA.

Not long after, Thomas was diagnosed with early-stage dementia and moved into a Petaluma nursing home, where he died Aug. 3. The cause of death was pneumonia, according to his daughter, Kesa Labanowski. He was 88.

“Lew was a major influencer in changing how practicing photographers thought about the medium,” said Fischer. “Through his art, his mentorship and his publications, Lew was a driving force in bringing a new, intellectually-informed perspective into photography.”

Lewis Christopher Thomas was born Dec. 19, 1932, at St. Mary’s Hospital in San Francisco. He was the only child of Cora and Lawrence Thomas, who owned a one-truck moving company called Rapid Transit. The family lived in a flat on California Street, and Thomas attended the parish school at St. Dominic’s Catholic Church.

After the parish school, Thomas started at Lowell High School, but transferred to Drew School on the street he lived on. From there, he advanced to the University of San Francisco, also within walking distance, where he earned his B.A. in English in 1962.

He wanted to be a librarian but landed a job at the White House, the downtown department store where he was in charge of clearing the cash and credit receipts out of the register at the end of each night.

One of his accounts was with Natalie Simon, who had moved out from Cleveland. A phone flirtation led to a first date, and in 1960 they were married at City Hall. A few years later he answered an ad for a clerk job at the bookstore at the California Palace at the Legion of Honor. When he arrived for the interview, he learned that there was no bookstore. The museum was looking for someone to create one, and Thomas was hired as bookstore manager, with no prior experience.

“He ran it as a kind of salon for poets, writers, artists and thinkers,” said Philip Martin, his gallery representative, based in Los Angeles.

Thomas’ approach was derived from St. Thomas Aquinas, the 13th century Dominican intellectual and philosopher whom he studied at USF. Thomas embraced his theory that God’s miracle was in all light and movement.

“I did not need a pictorial image to make a photograph,” he later wrote in his 1978 book “Structural(ism) and Photography.” I did not need to go somewhere to make a photograph. All the content I would ever need for photography was already with me.”

Thomas launched his own imprint, NFS Press, in the garage of his Noe Valley home, which also contained his lab and darkroom. For a time, he and his wife also owned an art bookshop called the Greatest Bookstore in the World at 22nd and Guerrero streets. He could answer any question from his spot at the cash register.

“He was very intellectual and had an encyclopedic mind, so if you asked him about almost any book he could recite a paragraph,” said Jane Reed, an artist and curator known as the person in the boat as it rocked in the Irish Sea during David Ireland’s short conceptual film “Skellig.”

Philip Martin Gallery

“Lew was interested in time and space and used them frequently in his photographic series.”

An example Reed cites is a series titled “Time Equals 36 Exposures,” which consisted of 36 exposures of a white timer with black numbers at different times of the day and then 36 exposures of its negative to form a reverse grid. “He did that type of thing often. He photographed water draining in a sink to show the passage of time to show that an image is not stagnant. It moves.”

His conceptual photographic work was interrupted when Thomas was hired as the director of the Creative Art Center in New Orleans, where he moved in 1991. He lived in an apartment in an old mansion in the Garden District for 15 years. But he was still a San Francisco city boy to the core, and was “insane about the 49ers and the Giants,” Labanowski said.

Thomas found himself living through dramatic, historic situations on multiple occasions. He was in a plane flying from New Orleans to San Francisco for his daughter’s wedding during the 9/11 attacks. His flight landed in Albuquerque and he had to drive two days from there.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, he rode it out in a Garden District apartment, though he also left New Orleans for good in the aftermath, and moved to Petaluma to be near his daughter.

Once there, he lived through COVID-19, which he contracted at age 87 when it swept through the nursing home where he lived. He recovered, and when his daughter visited him they would sit outside and he’d tell stories about art and artists. Anything could trigger a story, even the air conditioning unit on the roof, which reminded him of the photographs of German water towers taken by Bernd and Hilla Becher.

“My dad saw art in something as simple as a lamppost,” Labanowski said. “He never lost his passion for it.”

Thomas’ first marriage, to Sally Noack, ended in divorce. Though he had long been separated from his second wife, Natalie, they remained close and he was at her bedside when she died in 2006. Survivors include his daughter, Kesa of Petaluma; a son, Chris Racanelle of Montpelier, Vt.; and grandchildren Zachary and Natalie Labanowski, both of Petaluma. At Thomas’ request, there will be no memorial service.