

HELMAR LERSKI METAMORPHOSIS

16 September – 23 October 2004



"For heaven's sake, dear Mr. Meidner, you aren't going to throw down your brush and palette and become a photographer, are you? ...Don't take offense at the machine. Here too, it's the spirit that creates value... Photography is something great. It doesn't do any good to step back and cry. Join in, but hurry! Photography marches on!"

-Helmar Lerski to the painter Ludwig Meidner, 1930

New York - Howard Greenberg Gallery is pleased to announce an exhibition of photographs from the 1930s by Helmar Lerski (1871-1956). Lerski was an artist with a multi-dimensional career as a portrait photographer, actor and cinematographer, freely moving through each discipline throughout his life. He is best known however for his series of monumental portraits of tightly cropped heads and hands featuring dramatic and complex lighting schemes.

Helmar Lerski was born in Strasbourg in 1871 as Alsace-Lorraine was being awarded to the German Empire, an appropriate beginning for a life that was truly international in scope. His parents moved to Zurich when he was quite young; later he traveled through North Africa on his way to America, moved to Chicago in 1893 and set up a commercial studio in Milwaukee in 1910. In the midst of World War I he moved back to Europe where he pursued his career in cinematography. Throughout the 1920s Lerski struggled as a freelance filmmaker, finally returning to portraiture in 1928 putting his experiences in film to profitable use. His photographs of German celebrities brought him fame. He was published in numerous picture magazines of the period including *Vogue*, *Sport im Bild* and *Die Weite Welt*. Lerski was respected enough to have been included in the landmark catalogue and exhibition, *Film und*

(Over Please)

Foto in Stuttgart in 1929. His work also caught the eye of the groundbreaking Surrealist dealer, Julien Levy in New York who featured Lerski in his 1932 exhibition "Modern European Photography" along with Brassai, Andr  Kert sz, Ilse Bing, Florence Henri and others.

Shortly after the publication of Lerski's first book, K pfe des Alltags in 1931 he and his wife visited Palestine for the first of several visits over the next several years, eventually settling there until 1937. It was there that Lerski began his best known series of photographs, *Metamorphosis Through Light*, an extensive repetition of photographs of one man's face, altered repeatedly by an amazing array of different lighting conditions. The series totaled about 175 separate images, designed to "furnish proof, that a photographer can create freely, following his mind's eye, like a painter, designer, or sculptor." The drama of *Metamorphosis* is clearly derived from his extensive experience in cinematic lighting and his technical expertise.

Lerski led a nomadic existence, driven by the events that splintered Europe and the Holy Lands throughout his life. His life was a sequence of transportations without a central resting place. It might be assumed that his thematic focus in photography, as pictured in his books K pfe des Alltags, Les Juifs (of the "Jewish Heads" series) and Metamorphosis Through Light was of an external fascination with the human face and gesture but really reflects a search for his own self. The constant exposure to anti-Semitism and its horrible repercussions resulted in an acknowledgment of his own Judaism and for an historical identity. Ultimately, Lerski's penetrating vision of others is a mirror of his own wandering soul.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| October 29 – December 4 | Walker Evans and His Early Circle:
Berenice Abbott, Helen Levitt, Peter Sekaer, Ben Shahn and Ralph Steiner |
| December 10 – January 22 | <i>Sarah Moon: Circus</i> |

An illustrated catalogue of these works will be available.

For further information, or to request visuals for press, contact Margit Erb at 212 334 0010, margit@howardgreenberg.com. Starting September 15th, the exhibition can be viewed at www.howardgreenberg.com