The photographer Vivian Maier is well known by now, at least in the
storybook outlines of her career: Seen during her lifetime mostly as an
eccentric live-in Chicago nanny who for some reason always carried a
camera, she was revealed after her death—in 2009, at the age of eighty-
three—as a photographer of grand authority. Though she is already the
subject of two biographies and two movies, much about her life
remains obscure, but her tale is best told by her images—more than
150,000 of them—discovered posthumously and now working their
way into the public eye. Ignored in life, cherished in death, in some way
permanently enigmatic—it’s a mythic bohemian trope. But this fact
doesn’t undercut the value of the work.

The pictures that made Maier’s name are in black and white; the
twenty-three in this exhibition, taken beginning in the 1950s but mostly
in the ’70s, were in color, and the show was accompanied by a book
reproducing a larger selection. This first focused look at Maier’s color
work demonstrated that at a time when serious photographers left the
medium to amateurs, and twenty years before William Eggleston put
it on the critical-curatorial map with a show at New York’s Museum
of Modern Art in 1976, Maier was handling it with savvy. The earliest
image in the show, from 1956, shows a woman’s legs from the hem of
her coat down and from behind. On the right leg, she wears a stocking
and a red shoe; on the left, a white plaster cast, or perhaps bandages,
from knee to heel. The picture would still have traction, I think, in
black and white, but rather less so. Another early photo, from 1962,
of three disparate women on a Chicago street, is mostly washed out
palette—faded browns, grays, a large, blank white sky—but for the
lilac hat that one of them wears, an extravaganza of floral tulle that
gives the picture its purpose.

Several photographs here refashioned devices familiar from Maier’s
black-and-white work. While keeping herself professionally invisible
as an artist, she left a great many images of herself, seizing on mirrors,
shop windows, anything that might reflect her, in sometimes intricate
compositions that both capture her image and suggest her elusiveness.
A great many simpler works include her shadow. Self-Portrait,
Chicagoland, June 1975 she shot looking down at a green lawn scat-
tered with buttercups at her feet—a lovely way to memorialize oneself,
studding one’s image with flowers. These photographs of reflections
and shadows inevitably make me think of self-portraits by others,
notably Lee Friedlander, but Maier’s use of such strategies surely pre-
dates any exposure she could have had to his work. In another picture,
Self-Portrait, Chicago, July 1978, her shadow falls on a train-station
poster for the movie Heaven Can Wait, displacing its angelically posed
image of Warren Beatty. Wittily, the poster is echoed by a similarly
composed neighboring ad for Jaws, in which a female water-skier is
about to be devoured by that shark. Again, the photograph recalls
others—I think particularly of Walker Evans’s Houses and Billboards
in Atlanta, 1936—but although Colin Westerbeck, the essayist in the
exhibition’s book, names a couple of photo shows Maier is known to
have seen, the predecessors she most admired must remain guesswork.
In any case, she makes this subject her own.

For me, the most powerful image here was Chicago, 1959, a work
that addresses color not only photographically but as a social agent. A
row of white men in suits stands across the street from Maier, waiting
to cross. Nearer the camera, so close that their faces are out of focus,
two black women turn to look at the photographer. They are posed at
each side of the picture, so that our view of the street runs between
them—so that they frame and condition the way we see the men oppo-
site. There is a complicity between Maier and these women; all stand
on the same side of the street, facing the power on the other side. But
they seem to look at her with a certain suspicion, and she for her part
neither sees nor places them clearly. Made sixty years ago, the photo
has lost none of its relevance.

—David Frankel

Vivian Maier, Chicago, 1959, C print, 10 × 15".