

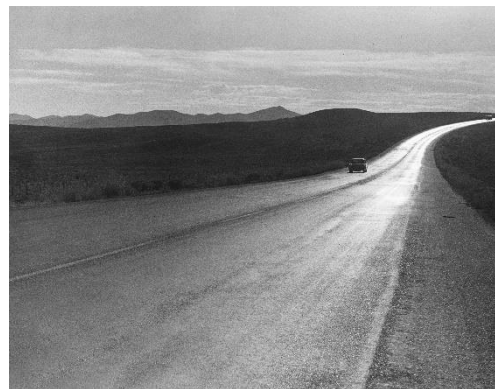
For Immediate Release

***Robert Frank and Todd Webb: Across America, 1955 Opening at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston October 8***

***100 photographs chart the cross-country journeys of two photographers, who each captured singular views of America at mid-century***



*Houston, Texas, October 5, 2023* - In April 1955, two photographers were awarded grants by the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, both for U.S. survey projects. One was Robert Frank, whose cross-country trip by car would result in the celebrated book *The Americans*. The other was Todd Webb, who at the age of 49, was awarded the grant to walk, boat and bike across the United States in order to depict “vanishing Americana, and the way of life that is taking its place.” On view October 8, 2023, through January 7, 2024, this exhibition will bring these simultaneous projects together for the first time.



In 1955 Todd Webb was part of art photography’s inner circle. Between 1946 and 1966, his work was included in fourteen exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art alone. Robert Frank, in comparison was the young upstart determined to make his mark, and he would go on

to become one of the most influential photographers to date. These men, of different backgrounds and generations, embarked on cross-country journeys supported by Guggenheim Foundation funding. They chose different methods of travel, different photographic approaches and styles and were interested in different aspects of American



culture. Knowing “the photographing of America’ is a large order,” they threw themselves into the impossible task anyway, eager to prove their artistry.

During their individual travels, both artists tended to capture images of bars, cowboys, crowds, odd architecture, parades, gravesites and trolleys. For both, a composition including the American flag was too potent to resist. While neither artist found the exact vision of America they expected, both men created photographs that mirrored their style and perspectives on American culture.

Frank’s shot-from-the-hip works captured movement with selected focus, his images conveying both stark reality and human compassion. The exhibition features both published and unpublished works from Frank’s *The Americans*. Webb’s never-before-seen images are characterized by their focused stillness; their precise exposure and careful compositions suggest a patient humanity.

“I am enormously pleased that the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston will bring together both Robert Frank’s and Todd Webb’s landmark 1955 projects for the first time, in this exhibition. The opportunity to compare the work of these influential photographers conveys the magnitude of their undertaking, and the complexity of their individual perspectives on an often-idealized era in America,” said Gary Tinterow, Director and Margaret Alkek Williams Chair of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

“It’s eye-opening to put these projects side-by-side for the first time,” noted exhibition organizer Lisa Volpe, MFAH Curator of Photography. “It reveals the humanity in Webb’s work, and the underrecognized, but profound hope in Frank’s photographs.”

Comparison of both Frank’s and Webb’s projects reveals more than any singular study could. The similarities clarify the context in which these projects were conceived and carried out. The differences highlight each artist’s approach and vision. More than one hundred images – 50 by each artist – illuminate Frank’s and Webb’s different perspectives and reveal the unvarnished state of American culture at mid-century.

## About Robert Frank and Todd Webb

Over 60 years, Robert Frank (American, born Switzerland, 1924-2019) radicalized photography through his selection of subject matter and his rough, highly charged vision, expressing a personal viewpoint of the world. Frank emigrated from Switzerland to the United States in 1947 and briefly worked for top fashion magazines, including *Harper's Bazaar* and *Mademoiselle*. He was the first European photographer to receive the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, which he used to travel the country's highways, photographing post-war America.

Todd Webb (American, 1905-2000) is noted for his endless curiosity and compassion, and his patient eye. Webb's broad humanity was shaped by his life experience. A successful stockbroker in the 1920s, he lost all of his earnings in the Crash of 1929. During the Depression, Webb prospected for gold, worked as a forest ranger, wrote short stories and picked up a camera. His interest in and love for photography soon crowded out his other ambitions. After serving in World War II, Webb moved to New York to devote himself completely to photography.

## MFAH Exhibition Catalogue

A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition and includes the first-ever publication of Webb's photographs from his 1955 journey, alongside Frank's images. One essay analyzes these projects within the context of the American scene in 1955 and the trends in art photography at mid-century. Another by Susan Straight – whose books include *Highwire Moon* (2001), a finalist for the National Book Award, and *Mecca* (2022) – explores the personal resonance of these compelling photographs.

## Related Programming

### **Opening Day Lecture | New Beginnings “Robert Frank and Todd Webb: Across America, 1955”, Sunday, October 8, 2 p.m.**

Embark on a journey through the work of photographers Robert Frank and Todd Webb on opening day of the exhibition *Robert Frank and Todd Webb: Across America, 1955*. This conversation brings together Betsy Evans Hunt of the Todd Webb Archive and Clark Winter of the June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation. They share an intimate understanding about the lives and careers of these two influential American artists. Hear stories ranging from an unexpected gallery encounter to collaborative working relationships and beyond. Caroline Weiss Law Building, 1001 Bissonnet Street.

### **Pull My Daisy, Saturday, October 7, 1 p.m.**

Directed by Robert Frank  
(USA, 1959, 28 minutes, in English)  
Brown Auditorium Theater, Digital  
*Free with MFAH admission*

This screening, presented to complement the exhibition [Robert Frank and Todd Webb: Across America, 1955](#), is included with Museum admission. Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Robert Frank and painter Alfred Leslie codirected this New American Cinema classic featuring poets, artists, and musicians gathering in downtown New York. Narrated by Jack Kerouac from his play *Beat Generation*.

**[Me and My Brother](#), Saturday, October 7, 2 p.m.**

Directed by Robert Frank  
(USA, 1968, 91 minutes, in English)  
Brown Auditorium Theater, Digital  
***Free with MFAH admission***

This screening, presented to complement the exhibition [Robert Frank and Todd Webb: Across America, 1955](#), is included with Museum admission. Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky spring Orlovsky's brother Julius from a New York psychiatric hospital and take a road trip to San Francisco. The ensemble cast includes Roscoe Lee Browne, Joseph Chaikin, and Christopher Walken.

*4K restoration by the Museum of Modern Art (New York) in collaboration with the Andrea Frank Foundation, with funding provided by the Celeste Bartos Film Preservation Fund.*

**CONVERSATIONS IN VERMONT**

Directed by Robert Frank  
(USA, 1969, 26 min., digital)  
*Friday, December 8, 2:00 p.m.* (B)  
***Free with MFAH admission***

Robert Frank's relationship with his children Pablo (1951–1994) and Andrea (1953–1974) is explored in his first overtly autobiographical film. He visits them at a free school in rural Vermont where he interviews them about their feelings, their upbringing, and what it was like to grow up in a bohemian world with parents who are artists.

*Restored by The Museum of Modern Art with support from the Celeste Bartos Fund for Film Preservation*

**LIFE DANCES ON**

Directed by Robert Frank  
(USA, 1980, 30 min., digital)  
*Friday, December 8, 2:30 p.m.* (B)

### ***Free with MFAH admission***

*Life Dances On* is composed of delicately balanced, intuitive moments that merge Frank's mourning of the loss of two people very close to him with filmed portraits of others who share his life, including his family and people on the street in New York City. This moving and personal film is dedicated to his daughter Andrea and his friend and collaborator Danny Seymour.

*Restored by The Museum of Modern Art with support from the Celeste Bartos Fund for Film Preservation*

### **Organization and funding**

This exhibition is organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

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The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation

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Wendy & Mavis Kelsey Jr.  
Joan Morgenstern  
Fannie and Peter Morris

### **About the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston**

Spanning 14 acres in the heart of Houston's Museum District, the main campus comprises the Audrey Jones Beck Building, the Caroline Wiess Law Building, the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden and the Nancy and Rich Kinder Building. Nearby, two house museums—Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens, and Rienzi—present collections of American and European decorative arts. The MFAH is also home to the Glassell School of Art, with its Core Residency Program and Junior and Studio schools; and the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA), a leading research institute for 20th-century Latin American and Latino art. [www.mfah.org](http://www.mfah.org)

#### **Images:**

Robert Frank, *Santa Fe, New Mexico*, 1955. Gelatin silver print, 8 ¾ x 12 7/8 in. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Target Collection of American Photography, museum purchase funded by Target Stores, 82.509. © The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation.

Todd Webb, *Garden City, KS*, 1955, printed 2023. Inkjet print, 12 x 18 in. Courtesy of and © Todd Webb Archive.

Robert Frank, *U.S. 285, New Mexico*, 1955. Gelatin silver print, 13 ¼ x 8 7/8 in. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Jerry E. and Nannette Finger, 38.89. © The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation.

Todd Webb, *Between Lovelock and Fernley, NV*, 1956, printed 2023. Inkjet print, 9 x 13 in. Courtesy of and © Todd Webb Archive.

Robert Frank, *Bar, Las Vegas Nevada*, 1955-56. Gelatin silver print, 8 ¾ x 13 3/8 in. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase, 84.145. © The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation.

Todd Webb, *Joe, Abiquiú, NM*, 1955, printed 2023. Inkjet print, 9 x 13 in. Courtesy of and © Todd Webb Archive.

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