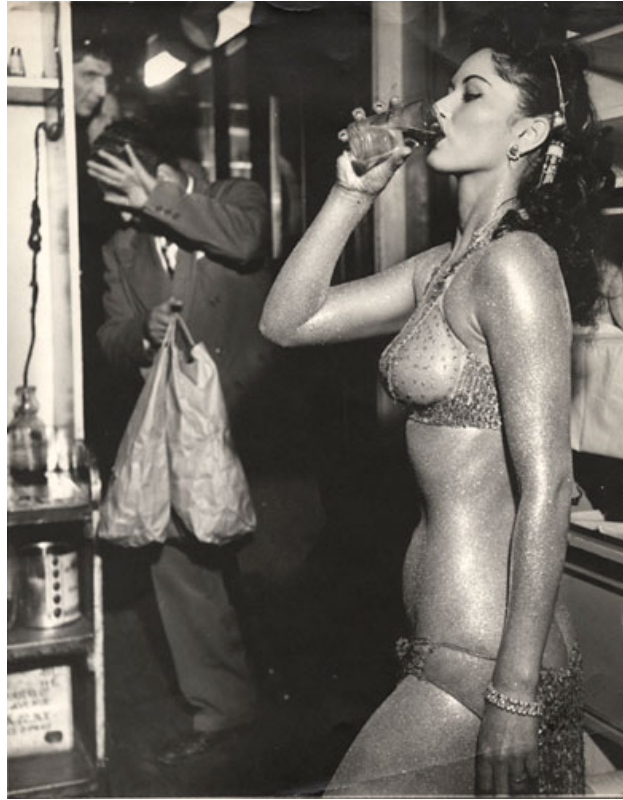


## Weegee at MOCA



*The Gold Painted Stripper, ca. 1950*

The photographer known as Weegee was a 1940's paparazzi, more than a decade before Federico Fellini originated the word "paparazzi" in "La Dolce Vita" (1960). Weegee created art that was part picture, part performance and part carnival act. He could also be called a performance artist, as he relentlessly photographed movie fans and people on the edge, and often inserted himself into the pictures.

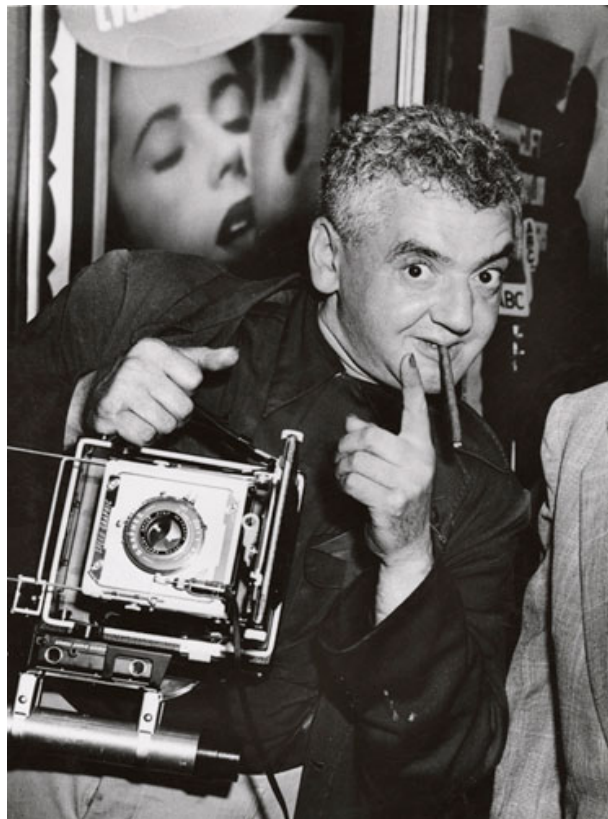
The exhibition, "Naked Hollywood: Weegee in Los Angeles" at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, through early 2012, brought to the public 200 photographs and a few films by and of "Weegee." His works are primarily of the Los Angeles that he migrated to and began photographing 1947, after achieving success as a tabloid and art photographer in New York.

Weegee, born in the Ukraine in 1899, was named "Usher Fellig" by his parents. His adopted name "Weegee" combines the words "squeegee" and "Ouija," the latter referring to his extraordinary ability to predict New York crime scenes.

As a New York press photographer in the 1930's, he chased after murders, and became one of the highest paid photographers at the tabloid, the *New York Mirror*. He

used a portable police-band shortwave radio to scoop out crime scenes and had a darkroom in his car, enabling him to publish his grisly images quickly.

The self-taught Weegee evolved from tabloid photographer to photographic artist. In 1943, five of his images were shown in "Action Photography" at the Museum of Modern Art. His works were later included in a MoMA show organized by photographer Edward Steichen.



**Unidentified Photographer, *Hollywood*, ca. 1950**

Once in L.A., a city he called "Newark, New Jersey with Palm Trees," Weegee roamed the streets with his camera, cigar in mouth, shooting eccentric looking Los Angelenos; the more unusual they were, the more he liked them. He scoured storefronts for naked mannequins, shooting these in groups, calling them "Hollywood extras." In one photograph, several mannequins, one real woman and Weegee are crowded into the front seat of a car.

He obtained assignments to shoot Hollywood sets, movie openings and stars' homes. While photographing movie stars, he seized the opportunity to also shoot the star struck fans, often gathered in mobs, expressing exultation at the sight of real movie stars. He shot stars' backs and rear-ends, with hysterical fans facing the camera. He photographed stars in unflattering moments, such as Liz Taylor devouring a meal. Using a plastic lens, he distorted images, giving *Marilyn Monroe* a twisted face,

rendering *Liz Taylor* with no features, and giving *Audrey Hepburn* bizarre features. He published these images in "Naked Hollywood," © 1953; but the photos were not well received by the public. Weegee met Warhol in the late 1960's, had the pop art icon shot alongside him, and photographed several images of him, all in this show.

Weegee savored grade B filmmaking. He photographed strippers and porn queens as well as promotional images for the film, "Shangri-La," made in a Florida nudist camp. He shot longer LA landscapes, but here also manipulated the film. In *As Is: Carson Drive & Wilshire Blvd.*, he has two palm trees, jutting out of the ground, forming an enormous "V."



**Weegee, *Liz*, ca. 1950, International Center of Photography**

As this voyeuristic show demonstrated, Weegee also liked to be photographed. Several photos by "Unidentified Photographer" are of Weegee, short, mischievous, with an eager gleam in his eye, evocative of Shakespeare's Puck, always with a cigar in his mouth. In a few shots, he poses with his camera. In others, he takes the photographer's stance alongside the subject. In one image, he stands next to several nude mannequins, ready to photograph them. He also had several bit parts in movies, and had these scenes documented.

"Naked Hollywood: Weegee in Los Angeles," ran at MOCA Grand Ave., LA, as part of the Pacific Standard Time initiative.

All images: International Center of Photography, Bequest of Wilma Wilcox, 1993.

*Liz Goldner*