

# TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

Harry Callahan shaped a generation of photo educators.



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**F**ew photography teachers have been as profoundly influential as Harry Callahan, who died last March at the age of 86. While passionately pursuing his own work—a trademark blend of experimental and personal—Callahan molded a generation of photography teachers

that includes San Francisco Art Institute’s Linda Connor, Boston Museum School’s Bill Burke, Princeton’s Emmet Gowin, and Cal State Fullerton’s Eileen Cowin. “Harry was the best kind of teacher,” says photographer and author Henry Horenstein, who studied with Callahan in



exposures before they became a cliché, working in color long before it was fashionable, creating deliberate blur before it served as a disguise for poor technique, openly accepting accident and intuition as a part of image making, and, most important, refusing to cling to a specific look or subject matter when the art world mistook sameness for style. Callahan found the raw material for this quiet rebellion in the familiar rather than the exotic. Indeed, one of his favorite subjects was his own wife, Eleanor. He photographed her in every imaginable setting and state, perhaps laying the groundwork for the inward-looking approach to photography that now holds sway—though bringing to it a rare and consummate craft.

Callahan passed along his photographic work ethic to countless students in the 30-plus years he taught, first at Chicago's Institute of Design (from 1946 to 1961) and then at the Rhode Island School of Design (from 1961 on). Yet even after his retirement from RISD in 1977, the year after his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Callahan seemed almost mystified by his success as a teacher. "I got wonderful results from the students, even though I didn't say much," he told me.

A simple explanation comes from Ringling School of Art and Design's M.K. Simqu, who studied with Callahan at RISD from 1971 to 1974 and remained a close friend of Callahan and his wife. "Harry was always very upbeat," she says. "He really encouraged his students to rise to the challenge of being a photographer. He had a positive view of life that made you feel wonderful." ■

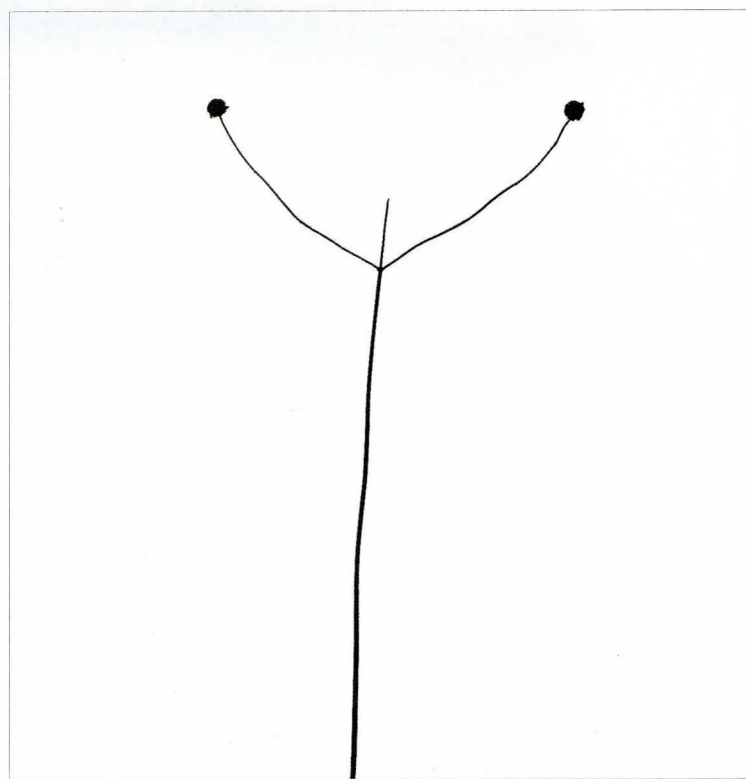
Photographs by Harry Callahan (from far left): "Chicago, 1950"; "Eleanor"; "Weed Against Sky, Detroit, 1948." Bottom left: Harry Callahan.

the early 1970s and now teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design, where Callahan spent the last two decades of his career. "He taught by the example of his work, and his students got the message loud and clear."

Callahan got into photography in a typically unpretentious way. An avid hobbyist—he had no formal training—he joined a Detroit camera club in 1940. The next year Ansel Adams came to the club for a lecture, and Callahan was astonished by the legendary photographer's work. "It opened up a whole world to me," he once told this writer. "That's when I really saw what a print could be." In fact, the prints that most impressed him were not Adams's spectacular Western landscapes but his more intimate views of nature. Seeing them freed Callahan to photograph the unspectacular—closeups of plant forms

against water and snow, for example, which Callahan printed with a high contrast antithetical to Adams's full-toned approach. "When I made those pictures of weeds in snow, it just seemed like a sin to leave out the texture in the snow," Callahan said. "It's exciting when you see you can break the rules."

Callahan broke the rules for decades, shooting multiple



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