

# PHOTOGRAPHY

By Ben Lifson

There have been times in the history of photography when the invention of a camera began, or coincided with, a change in the way photographers worked. "You can read Edward Weston's *Daybooks*, for example," says photographer Tom Germano, "and see that as different tools became available he got excited and did different things. The Auto-Graflex let him capture moments and still keep print quality, like in that picture of the couple in the Bugati. It's funny, but in the picture the man is holding a Leica, which was a toy in America then, but in Europe Kertesz and Bresson were already using it with great effect to do just what Weston was doing, except with a smaller negative." Germano is particularly well-versed in this aspect of the medium: four years ago he also invented a camera. With what effect, it's too early to tell.

Germano's camera, although large, weighs less than three pounds and fits readily in the hand. It uses 120-roll film, and makes a 6-by-9-centimeter negative (roughly 2½ by 3¼ inches). "I think other people felt the need for it," he says. "At least, as soon as they heard it described they knew it answered questions that they only half-realized they were asking." The camera combines the "formidable descriptive capability" of a large negative with the hand-camera's mobility and the plasticity of the 35mm frame (proportions: 1 by 1½ inches).

Germano got the idea for his invention in 1973, when he was a part-time darkroom technician at Pratt Institute and was photographing Brooklyn houses and yards with a 5-by-7 view camera. "I loved the description of a view camera; just the idea that you could photograph deep into the shadows and have a highlight that wouldn't block up was exciting. And I was working almost exclusively in bright, contrasty sunlight." But Germano had begun photographing with a 35mm camera and didn't want to give up its improvisational style. "When you work a Leica you fall in love with the idea of running around making that frame. . . . A view camera is large, cumbersome. You can't see a thing until you focus it. You move three feet back, and you have to refocus it. And the pictures always look rigid, premeditated.

"So you see, I didn't do this out of some abstract idea that the world was ready for a new camera. My need for it came directly from my work. It's not even an original idea. Others used the 6-by-9 format before, notably Brassai." When Germano knew what he wanted, he researched existing 6-by-9 cameras. He concluded that to get what he wanted he'd have to build it himself.

"It took a while, but the problem was simple. I took a view-camera lens with a shutter in it and hung it the right distance away from a roll-film back. I had friends who were carpenters, and they helped. We made it mostly out of wood, with a little aluminum for reinforcement. It was beautiful, it was the easiest thing to work with. . . . the results were immediate." After four months, he put together a small portfolio of prints and applied for a CAPS grant. The day he got his check, Germano quit his job and began to find out what kind of a camera he had invented.

It had its problems. The lens didn't perform well at wide apertures, which meant Germano had to use slower shutter speeds

picture still holds together. That's not true of these pictures. You have to stay about seven feet away, maybe more, but I think that's a beautiful limitation. All of a sudden things that might not have looked like pictures before, become possibilities, and from possibilities they become passions. In Germano's pictures, small details—the curve of a vine, the flounce of a child's skirt—are dramatic 20 or 30 feet away.

Several photographers expressed interest in the camera and urged Germano to manufacture it. They made what he thought were firm orders; some wanted to pay in advance. The CAPS grant was running out, and Germano was worrying about money. He didn't

## Four Feet to Infinity



Brooklyn, 1974: Germano's 6-by-9 camera has a democratic focus from 30 feet away.

than are customary with a Leica. It couldn't compete with a view camera for sharpness because it wasn't on a tripod. "You can put even a mediocre camera on a tripod and you begin to see things. A view camera is the absolute ultimate." A view camera's larger negative gives hard-edged tones, and Germano's prints were soft. But he liked the soft surface, with its "seamless transitions between tones of gray. And everything from four feet to infinity was equally sharp; the focus is democratic. It's not like a 35mm picture where the background goes out of focus. At the same time, things didn't look good when they were really fuzzy. You've seen the flash work of Winogrand and Friedlander, how something can be grossly out of focus and the

want to teach, and although he hadn't considered going into business demand for the camera seemed great enough to make him think he could make a large profit quickly.

Germano borrowed \$5000 from a friend, formed the Siciliano Camera Works, taught himself drafting from an army manual, made blueprints, sub-contracted work to machine shops, and started assembling cameras at his home in Brooklyn. The 20 firm orders dwindled to four. "I was bankrupt before I had time to set up the business." Since 1975 he has sold 20 cameras. An order for the camera comes in now and again, but it takes him several months to assemble one. Still, his involvement with the Siciliano continues beyond his own work. "If you're an interest-

ing photographer to begin with," he says, "and you're working on something—if you're *working*—it gives you another problem."

"It changes the problem," says Tod Papageorge, who has been using the Siciliano since 1975 and has two 6-by-9 pictures currently on view in the Museum of Modern Art's "Mirrors and Windows" exhibition. "Because the shutter speeds are slower, you can't play with dramatic, emphatic, sculptural forms. You don't align things in the frame, you describe them. You can then use a more discursive, broken kind of form. It's radically changed my sense of what a picture can be."

Almost everyone who uses the Siciliano talks about its slow shutter speeds, its initial awkwardness. It made Paul McDonough, whose work is in the permanent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, leave the streets for landscape and still lifes. After 18 months he feels more fluid with it, has accepted blur, returned to crowds. "Because I can't be inconspicuous, can't pounce on things as they happen, I feel almost an obligation to arrange, manipulate—even to intervene in the events I photograph. I've never made pictures like this before." Mitch Epstein, who will have his first one-man exhibition at Light Gallery next spring, found the Siciliano the only reasonable and economical way to work in color and keep the small camera's immediacy. "My work has become more contemplative. But it isn't any less physical than it was when I was in the middle of things with a Leica." Len Jenschel, one of last year's CAPS winners, says that his exploration of the Siciliano "coincided with a change in my ideas about photography. It forced me out of the city for a while, to the country, the ocean, where I discovered the material for the more personal, romantic art that I had been thinking about. I didn't want to come back to the streets after that."

Not everyone took to the Siciliano so readily. According to Germano, when Lee Friedlander found he couldn't photograph close up, even with a modified camera, he sold it. Frank Gohlke tried it but preferred the 4-by-5 frame. Although, Germano made the Siciliano to accept Mamiya press camera lenses because they're readily available, they are also notoriously uneven in quality, and the viewing system is surprisingly inaccurate.

Germano is working on an improved model that will accept any lens. He hopes that a built-in sports finder will solve some of the problems. "I'll make about eight, for the people who have stood by it. Certainly I won't sell it to anybody who doesn't have the old camera. I've actually been working on it since the first camera was made. It's a winter project, basically, for when the sun is too low in the sky, it's too cold to shoot much, and I'm all caught up on my printing." ■