

From sea to scene: Allan Sekula's 'Fish Story' at the Walker

Max Sparber October 10, 2023 5:25 PM



Allan Sekula, Chapter One: "Fish Story" from Fish Story, 1988-1995. Walker Art Center. Courtesy the artist. 
Courtesy of Allan Sekula

But the images and the thoughts expressed behind them are so expansive, you could do so if you wanted. You could step into the A and B galleries of the Walker Art Center and select one photograph of the many on display there, from a collection called "Fish Story."

There is an image of the former Exxon Valdez, an oil tanker responsible for one of the largest oil spills in American history. In Sekula's photograph, it has been rechristened the Exxon Mediterranean and returned to service. Eventually, it crashed into a cargo ship in the South China Sea.

The photographer, who died in 2013, spent seven years documenting the international shipping industry. Sekula explained that the “maritime world was interesting to me because it’s a world of gargantuan automation but also of persistent work, of isolated, anonymous, hidden work, of great loneliness, displacement and separation from the domestic sphere.”

He captures a child on the Staten Island ferry, workers cleaning up a chemical spill after a refinery spill, a former shipyard worker scavenging copper.

The absence of people also is meaningful: A pair of photos show a house, cut in half and being towed down a road. This was a former shipyard worker’s home, now empty and in the process of relocation.

Sekula was interested in the human cost of capitalism, especially on the scale of international shipping. Cranes, rudders and shipping containers tower over people.



Allan Sekula, Chapter Five: "Message in a Bottle" from Fish Story, 1988-1995. Walker Art Center. 🟡 Courtesy of Allan Sekula

Sekula was a theorist and critic of photography and disliked the way individual images might universalize or flatten a story. So his photographs, such as those in “Fish Story,” exist in conversation with each other, and with text — a lot of text. It’s not just the careful labels he provided for his photographs that helped contextualize them. He also authored entire panels explaining his motivations in taking the photos, as well as what they mean historically, politically and economically. Walking through the exhibit is a little like strolling through an enormous book.

A fine art photographer with a keen documentary sense, he was skilled in composition and interested in many subjects. While Sekula was critical of documentary photography’s tendency to sensationalize, he understood the power of spectacle. The photographs are often spectacular.

“Allan Sekula: Fish Story” is on display at the Walker Art Center through Jan. 21, 2024.