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[Porsche Pit Stop, Le Mans 24 Hours, France, 1958]

Once They Were Race Cars

JESSE ALEXANDER IS THE ONLY AMERICAN motorsports photographer whose work is as likely to be found in an art gallery as at a racetrack. Today, major races are covered by legions of shooters armed with motor drives and lenses that are nearly as big as they are. But 50 years ago, Alexander was one of the only Americans following the Grand Prix circus, and his Leica produced some of the most iconic black-and-white racing images of the '50s and '60s. During those deadly decades, most races were run on picturesque public roads closed for the occasion rather than today's safe, antiseptic, purpose-built circuits. Alexander continued to document racing as it grew into a garish business during the '70s. (His luscious, full-color photographic collection, "At Speed," is among the most precious collectibles of the period.) Now an *éminence grise* living in Carpinteria, Alexander is most celebrated for his elegiac black-and-white racing photos. His finest images, like the ones showcased here, are imbued with a sense of gravitas befitting a sport that was more than a mere game. And to gaze upon them is to be transported back to a bygone era when "life and death" was an inescapable fact, not an editorial cliché.—PRESTON LERNER

Patty
LOOK
Lewis
Gallery

25 East de la Guerra Street Santa Barbara, California 93101 tel 805-965-2525 patty@looklewisgallery.com
www.pattylooklewis.com Hours: 12 to 5 Tuesday through Saturday

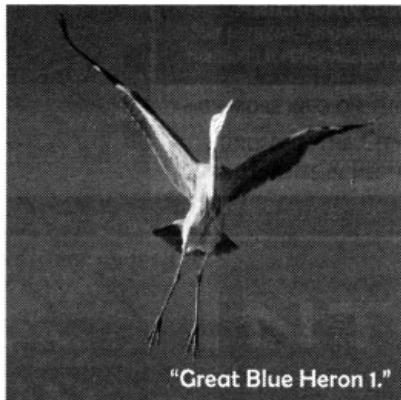
Free as a Bird

Jesse Alexander's Photography.
At Patty Look Lewis Gallery. Shows through July 28.

Reviewed by **Heather Jenó**

Jesse Alexander is a jewel in Santa Barbara's fine art lineage, with a successful photography career and a body of work that span decades. As a complement to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's current *Made in Santa Barbara* exhibit featuring the work of more than 40 area photographers, the Patty Look Lewis Gallery offers a modest but revealing show of Alexander's iconic racecar images from the 1950s and '60s alongside his more recent ventures into nature photography. The result is an appealing glimpse into one artist's journey from cultural investigator to introspective observer.

Although the show's abrupt change in subject matter and era from one side of the gallery to the other is somewhat distracting, the exhibition nevertheless highlights the crux of Alexander's artistic impulse: an obsession with motion. Whether photographing cars in the middle of the track at the Grand Prix in Monza, Italy, or the majestic Great Blue Heron in midflight against a piercing cerulean sky, Alexander's eye for capturing movement is



"Great Blue Heron 1."

uncanny in its precision. Even with the lack of high-speed digital photography in his earlier work, Alexander seems to possess the preternatural ability to stop time. In his photo of racecar driver Phil Hill speeding around a curve at the Grand Prix in Germany, for example, the photographer captures the car and driver in perfect focus, while onlookers stand by in a fuzzy haze. It is this contradictory effect that makes his work so compelling; objects in motion appear



"Phil Hill, Grand Prix of Germany, Nürburgring, 1958."

almost stationary in their clarity, while stationary objects look as if they are whizzing by the camera.

Alexander's racing photographs, printed lovingly with silver gelatin, evoke nostalgia for motor sports in their heyday. More than historical records, his images capture the glamour of mid-20th century racecar driving, a sport that seems romantic in comparison to its contemporary counterpart, NASCAR, with its endorsements and commercialization.

Across the gallery space—and geographically halfway around the world—Alexander's riveting photographs of the beaches of Carpinteria are equally persuasive. His lens turned on the natural world that surrounds his home, Alexander's eye remains trained on movement: Even when at rest, the indigenous birds framed by his careful compositions appear on the verge of takeoff. Their flight seems as inevitable as the start of a race, only this time, without the promise of a finish line. ■

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