



Morden photographer's dramatic, decades-old negatives developed and displayed at Manitoba Museum

With the help of museum staff, Celia Rabinovitch curated the collection of more than 300 images into 58 photos now on display in the museum's Discovery Room.

JOHN WOODS / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

# GRITTY and glamorous

## EVENT PREVIEW THE LOST EXPRESSIONIST - NICK YUDELL, A PHOTOGRAPHER DISCOVERED

● Manitoba Museum, Discovery Room, 190 Rupert Ave.  
● Thursday through Sunday, 11 a.m. - 5 p.m. through Aug. 1

TYLER SEARLE

SOMETIME in the mid 1970s, Celia Rabinovitch's father, Milton, presented her with a wooden box.

"These were Nick's," he said at the time. "Maybe you can do something with them."

The box, which had sat on a shelf in the Rabinovitch home for decades, contained more than 300 film negatives dating back to the 1920s and spanning through Manitoba's Dirty Thirties. It was the life's work of Milton's cousin, Isador (Nick) Yudell.

At the time, Rabinovitch didn't think much of her father's remark — it was a comment made in passing, not an explicit request. But in 2007, she began to scan and digitize the photos. What she discovered was a historical trove, detailing people and places otherwise lost to the passage of time.

Now, after 15 years of careful restoration, Rabinovitch has retraced the history of Yudell's life's work, curating the photographs into a new exhibit at the Manitoba Museum titled *The Lost Expressionist - Nick Yudell, a Photographer Discovered*.

Born in Winnipeg in 1916, Yudell was a first-generation Canadian with Jewish and Ukrainian (then a part of Russia) roots.

At the age of 12, his family gifted him a camera. Using black-and-white film, homemade lighting set-ups and an artistic eye, Yudell spent the next decade documenting his life, relationships and home in Morden.

The resulting photos are gritty, glamorous and compelling. They demonstrate a style common to European high society but completely alien to rural Manitoba, said Rabinovitch, who holds a masters degree in fine arts and formerly directed the School of Art at the University of Manitoba.

"It became immediately apparent that he was an artist in his own right," Rabinovitch said, detailing her first impression of the photographs. "At the beginning of the process... I thought well, there'll be some good archival photos... then, as I

started to scan... I thought, 'this guy has his own vision. He's an artist and he has a story to tell.'"

Yudell — who spent his days working at Rabinovitch Bros., a family-run dry-goods and clothing store then located on Morden's Stephen St. — took inspiration from outdated photography magazines he salvaged from the nearby pharmacy and tried to replicate the composition and techniques demonstrated within.

His friends and family became his muses. Yudell would dress them in elegant clothes, posing them like movie stars and taking shots from extreme angles to create abstract perspectives. At times he would experiment with long exposures, creating ghostly apparitions or duplicating his subjects.

Although he was a self-taught amateur, Yudell's work displays a sophistication and playfulness that was ahead of its time, Rabinovitch said.

"Nick's work shows us how wide and complex one person's life is," she said. "This exhibit is an exploration of... how far an image can take us into another world."

With the help of Manitoba Museum staff, Rabinovitch curated the collection into 58 photos now on display in the museum's Discovery Room. It includes a series of self-portraits, portraits, landscapes, and experimental photography.

"This photo collection was previously unknown, except by a few people, and the pictures were never published. The collection represents a significant historical discovery for the province of Manitoba," Roland Sawatzky, curator of history at the Manitoba Museum, wrote in an email to the Free Press.

Tragically, Yudell's life and artistic career was cut short by German forces during the Second World War.

Inspired by a fascination with aviation and a lifelong sense of adventure, Yudell enlisted with the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1940. Then 22-years-old, Yudell stowed his camera and the box of negatives — each one carefully marked with the time, date, place, lighting conditions and names of his subjects — and left Morden.

In 1942, Yudell deployed with RCAF Squadron 104 from England to North Africa. On Jan. 6, 1943, a barrage of German flak struck his aircraft and ended his life.

"His time as a photographer was very short, and represented the optimism and fun of a young adult," Sawatzky said. "Despite the Great Depression on the Prairies and the threat of war in Europe in the 1930s, his pictures are not full of angst or brooding. There are a lot of smiles."

The exhibit opened officially in February, but on June 12 Rabinovitch hosted a formal talk and tour, offering visitors an opportunity to hear



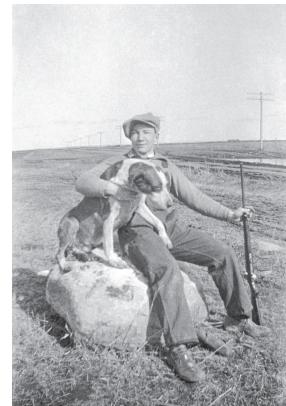
Fritzzy Greene and Shirley Walsh in apartment in Winnipeg's North End, 1934.



Nick Yudell in arm chair, 1941.



Ruby Rabinovitch, Yudell's older cousin, in front of Rabinovitch house in Morden, 1930.



Victor Burgess and dog Pat, half mile west of Morden, 1932.

Nick's work shows us how wide and complex one person's life is. This exhibit is an exploration of... how far an image can take us into another world'

— curator Celia Rabinovitch

tyler.searle@freepress.mb.ca