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Photography Books

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'Who is Vivian Maier?' asks John Maloof in his foreword to **"Vivian Maier: Self-Portraits" (powerHouse, 119 pages, \$50)**. This must have been what she was asking herself when she took her pictures. Artists make self-portraits to present themselves to the public and also to explore what they think about themselves—not only who they are, but who they might be. Maier (1926-2009) was a nanny in Chicago and New York, and on her days off took pictures. Neither her employers nor anyone else was aware of her work until a cache of more than 100,000 images was discovered and attributed to her shortly after she died. So it was for herself that she took pictures of herself. In many pictures she regards herself warily in a mirror or window, holding her Rolleiflex as if to confirm her status as a photographer. In others, she is a mere shadow, a wraith attendant on the affairs of others. But she dressed smartly and, although her features are plain, she had presence. These fascinating, sophisticated images make clear that this reclusive woman was a major talent.

Sebastião Salgado's fame is based on his works of social documentation, like chronicling the disappearance of manual labor. His increasing involvement in environmental concerns in his native Brazil led him to wonder what the earth was like when it was pristine, before men mucked it up, and what men were like before they got too civilized. **"Genesis" (Taschen, 520 pages, \$69.99)** is the result, an epic look at our planet as it was on the sixth day of Creation, when "God saw everything He had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). There are startling black-and-white pictures of Antarctica, Siberia, Alaska, the interior of South America and parts of Africa, regions remote from cities and traffic. Many are aerial shots that include vast areas of mountains and rivers backlit for dramatic effect. Frigid shorelines teem with a myriad penguins, prehistoric reptiles laze in the sun, naked men with primitive bows hunt for game. We are in an archaic world.

"Capturing the Light: The Birth of Photography" (St. Martin's Press, 304 pages, \$27.99) by Roger Watson and Helen Rappaport is a dual biography of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot, two men who separately announced inventions of photographic processes in France and England in 1839. The book is very readable, even exciting—good on the science and particularly good on the characters and social backgrounds of the two men. "Daguerre had the verve of the Gallic artist, full of energy and intensity, locking himself in his laboratory for days on end . . . collar loose, sleeves rolled up, chemical stains everywhere. Talbot, on the other hand, would sit quietly in his study, patiently working through the problem in his head first, planning the experiments that would prove or disprove a theory." Silver nitrate has been superseded by pixels for image making, but it was once the cutting edge, with all the excitement that goes with the miraculous.

Leonard Freed (1929-2006) was an exemplary Magnum photographer: a wonderful

photojournalist, as the agency's members must be, with a driven curiosity about the ways of men. **"Made in Germany" (Steidl, 160 pages, \$65)** is a reprint of a Freed book from 1970; that this edition comes from one of Germany's most prestigious publishers testifies to its enduring importance. When Freed first visited Germany in 1954, the scars of World War II were everywhere. He returned many times to document the country's economic recovery and its struggles to come to terms with the Nazi era. Here are the Germans: young, old, rich, poor, pathetic, heroic, comic, tragic, solitary individuals and great crowds convened for diverse purposes. An elderly couple brings flowers to a military cemetery in Heiligenberg. A young girl stands by the side of the road in Castrop-Rauxel wearing a body-length sign that reads, "Du sollst nicht töten," ("Thou shalt not kill"). At a gathering in Karlsruhe a great crowd of men stand to sing the "Horst Wessel Lied," the Nazi anthem.

A viewer is hard put to identify where the pictures in Birgitta Lund's **"The Garden" (Space Poetry, 64 pages, \$27)** were taken. About half of the 23 color images in the book are portraits, an ethnic mélange of faces from Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Many are children or adolescents, and they seem intently fixed on whatever it is they are doing. Other pictures show stage-set palm trees, two-dimensional camels and Taj Mahal-like structures with minarets and domes outlined by incandescent bulbs. All were taken at night, and bright lights separate the subjects from the dark backgrounds. The book's text reveals that these carnivalesque images were taken at the Tivoli Gardens amusement park in Copenhagen. The sense of phantasmagoria is colored by the presence of toy guns and banged-up targets in several pictures. Ms. Lund returned home after 18 years in New York and documented a country less homogeneous and tranquil than the one she had left.

Where Matthew Pillsbury took the pictures in **"City Stages" (Aperture, 128 pages, \$65)** is usually pretty obvious—New York, Paris, London, Venice. It is reading the people that is problematic. Mr. Pillsbury shoots on black and white film in an 8-by-10-inch view camera using long exposures, some an hour or more, which provide sharp details even in dark shadows. But the figures in his frame at the beginning of the exposure leave or move about, and so appear only as transparent apparitions. In photos from the Louvre, the well-known works of art are very clear, but their admirers are fuzzy masses. In a triptych taken at rush hour in New York's Grand Central Terminal, the hurrying commuters hardly leave a trace. Individuals shot in private spaces—watching television, in bed, working at their computers—are there and not there, since we can see through them. The images are droll and disquieting, reminding us that we're all just passing through.

—Mr. Meyers writes on photography for The Wall Street Journal.