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ART

The Force of Images

An upcoming exhibition aims to document the LAPD's history through departmental photographs taken in the line of duty.

By DIANE HAITHMAN, Times Staff Writer

After 20 years in the Los Angeles city clerk's office, records management officer Hynda L. Rudd is blunt in describing life in the vast storeroom containing the city's confidential government records. "This is not the Huntington Library," she says dryly. "You could store somebody's head in here and we wouldn't know, except for the stench."



"Homicide Crime Scene, 1934." Photograph from the LAPD Archives

That image is hard to shake during a visit to the City Records Center on Ramirez Street downtown. The mind can't help but wonder which box contains the head, while the eye takes in the 47,500 square feet of cardboard crates—row upon row, shelf atop shelf—filled with 150 years' worth of confidential documents, papers and photos amassed by various city departments. This area has no heat and no air-conditioning. Though the thousands of boxes have been relocated over the years, many have not been opened since they were packed.

And, Rudd adds sternly, you don't get into the City Records Center without departmental approval, even if you're the pope.

That's why it is so unusual to find Merrick Morton and his wife, Robin Blackman—owners of Echo Park's Fototeka gallery—opening boxes here on a recent morning.

The pair are several weeks into their research for a venture that will provide an unlikely link between the art world and the Los Angeles Police Department: a photo exhibition culled from the thousands of negatives and prints taken by LAPD police photographers over the years. Many photos come from the LAPD's Special Investigations Division. Established in the 1920s, it is the nation's oldest crime lab.

Morton and Blackman—along with Tim Wride, associate curator of photography for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—are trying to turn negatives into positives for the LAPD with their upcoming show "To Protect and Serve: The LAPD Archives—100 Years of Photography," Sept. 1-30 at Fototeka.

The photos, many never published or viewed outside courtrooms or LAPD offices, provide a glimpse of Police

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Department history that may serve to offset the negative image of the LAPD fostered by recent headlines, Morton said. Photos run the gamut from cheery staged publicity photos to the grisly scene of the crime.

The photos are not always pretty—but in the curators' view, many are art. Although recent police photos were taken by professionals hired by the LAPD, in the early decades of photography, most shots were taken by police officers.

"I think the timing is very good," Morton said thoughtfully, holding a negative from a box dated 1951 up to the light, the aging image protected from his fingers by a white cotton glove. He and Blackman will select several boxes to take with them for further examination at Parker Center later in the day. Today, Morton will also borrow boxes from the 1940s, hoping to uncover images of L.A.'s 1943 zoot suit riots.



"Officer Directing Traffic," 1950's.
Photograph from the LAPD Archives

"One of the reasons I like the idea of this exhibition is, right now the department gets such a bad rap—the whole department is, unfortunately, blamed for the Rampart scandal," Morton said. "To me, it's a good time to show the history of the department."

Morton added that

the main goal, however, is to provide a forum for photos of artistic or historical merit—in most cases, both. "I have my personal feelings about the police, but it goes beyond that," he said. "This exhibition is really about the photographers.

"What they have in common is that they are all technically proficient, but there's a group of them that have that eye—no matter how much training you get, you have an eye, or you don't. By accident or not, it's something that tells someone how to frame an image. Not every image is going to be an art masterpiece, but we're really looking for that specific eye that caught that image."

"For me," added Wride, "it's just about the photographs—and the fact that I was born and raised here. L.A. has such an amazing set of histories, and this is one of those histories that nobody really has a handle on."

Carolyn Kozo Cole, curator of photographs for the Los Angeles Public Library and a supporter of the Fototeka project, agreed. Exhibitions of archival photos are hardly unusual—and interest in crime photography has run high for decades, she said.

"Think about Weegee, New York's crime photographer par excellence, and all the sensational crime photo exhibits and books—there is a continuing interest in the scene of the crime," she said. "But there is something really compelling about photos that have not been seen by anybody. It is the possibility of seeing views of Los Angeles that we have never imagined that is so compelling."

It's guesswork, but the curators continue to turn up an occasional gem. Recent finds include a police photo of the 1963 "Onion Field" attack that left an LAPD officer dead, and an unpublished photo of the 1947 Black Dahlia murder scene. Unlike the ubiquitous press photos showing the victim in close-up, this one is a wide shot, taken by a police photographer, with the body barely visible. Morton also discovered the police memorandum recording the event: The victim, Elizabeth Short, is first logged as a Jane Doe. Her name was written in later. The log will be displayed with the photo.

Unexpectedly, the curators of "To Protect and Serve" have also found themselves on a mission to protect and save: In the course of going through the boxes, they discovered several containing badly decomposing cellulose nitrate negatives.



Photo shows a simulated crime scene from the LAPD training division, 1953. *Photograph from the LAPD Archives*

Per departmental policy, Rudd reported the existence of the boxes to the Fire Department—which promptly recommended that all negatives of photos taken between 1925 and 1955 be destroyed because the flammable nitrate presents a fire hazard, particularly because the negatives are stored in a non-air-conditioned space.

Plans to dispose of the negatives remain on hold while the records department searches for a temperature-controlled storage location, but exhibition curators can't help but recognize that each photo they select and print for the exhibition has been rescued from potential destruction.

There is no way to examine all the material; the Special Investigations Division estimated that there are almost 1 million images in storage. "It scares me when I look at these boxes, just the quantity," Blackman said. "We're doing a two-year project in four months." For that reason, the exhibition will stop short at the mid-1970s.

Morton has a personal reason to want to polish up the LAPD's tarnished badge—he is a reserve member of the force. In the early 1980s, he began a long-term project photographing Southern California street gangs—and gained permission to join LAPD officers on ride-alongs. "Anybody who has spent a few shifts on the gritty streets, in high-crime areas—well, it sort of changes your perspective," he said. To continue his work, Morton became a reserve officer in 1986.

Morton began preparing for the Fototeka exhibition by combing through the Los Angeles Police Historical Society's holdings, but he found that collection top-heavy with public relations photos and realized he needed to get into the records department to find the real story. He contacted Rudd. "Basically, she told me hell will freeze over before you get access," he said.

Undaunted, Morton called Sgt. John Thomas, aide to Police Chief Bernard Parks, who already had an interest in LAPD history: Thomas is the creator of *Blacks in Blue*, a 2001 calendar highlighting 114 years of service by African American officers. Thomas took Morton's request to Parks; Morton's police connections came in handy in winning over the chief.



Not that it took much convincing. "We jumped at the opportunity," Parks said in a telephone interview. "(Morton) is a reserve officer who has a deep interest in the department and the business of photography and sees how he can make the two of them blend to do something very special. It's something you can never lose touch with, our history. You cannot disconnect



Detectives pose for a photo after a successful raid on prohibition-era bootleggers. *Photograph from the LAPD Archives*

Los Angeles, the city, from the Los Angeles Police Department."

Parks said that, after Fototeka, the department plans to take the photos on the road, in the form of neighborhood exhibitions of the photos at the city's precinct offices.

"We want to let the people who enter our stations appreciate them as much as we do," Parks said. "Many of our stations have community events, and while people may be familiar with those events, often they may be totally unfamiliar with the role that station may have played in some citywide event in the past."

Parks added that he trusted Morton to avoid sensationalism; the curators confirm that they are avoiding photos depicting graphic violence, particularly involving children, unless the shot has some other redeeming historical value.

One such shot, curators believe, is a 1934 photo of an officer in uniform, killed in the line of duty. Parks said that photo will not be included until surviving family members give their approval.

Thomas—who spends his free time and lunch hours helping the curators pore through the negatives—hopes the photo of the fallen officer will become part of the exhibition. "It's tragic, it's sad, but it shows the sacrifice officers have been making since the beginning of this department," he said.

"Projects like this give people a sense of perspective, a sense of the public-service sacrifices over the years, day in and day out—just good police officers doing what they can every day to make the city safe. That's the reality of what the LAPD is now, and what it was then," he added. "We're sort of paying homage to them. These people probably never thought of their photos as being exhibited as *art*."

"To Protect and Serve: The LAPD Archives--100 Years of Photography," Fototeka, 1549 Echo Park Ave., L.A. Sept. 1-30. Fridays-Sundays, 1-5 p.m., or by appointment. (213) 250-4686.

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