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## Dreaming of a Black-and-White Christmas With Lee Friedlander

The artist's holiday-themed pictures, on view at Deborah Bell Photographs, offer an unusual, often humorous view of the yuletide season.

By *Brian P. Kelly*

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Lee Friedlander's 'Nashville, Tennessee' (1966). LEE FRIEDLANDER

*New York*

Standout Christmas films? “It’s a Wonderful Life”; “Elf”; “Die Hard” (if you buy that argument). Standout Christmas *on* film? You could do a lot worse than the work of Lee Friedlander, as is abundantly clear in the show currently on view at Deborah Bell Photographs.

“Lee Friedlander: Christmas,” staged in collaboration with San Francisco’s Fraenkel Gallery and New York’s Luhring Augustine, collects nearly 30 pictures dating from 1958 to 2015 that offer atypical, often humorous, views of the yuletide season.



'West Texas' (2003). LEE FRIEDLANDER

Winter wonderlands are absent from these images, though many of the locales Mr. Friedlander captures are merry and bright. In “West Texas” (2003) a sign for Ms. Tracy’s Cafe is backed by a rocky mesa, surrounded by cactuses and flanked by an inflatable Santa who still seems plenty jolly despite the arid weather. A store window in “Honolulu, Hawaii” (2013) is filled with tropical wear, a surfboard, notices advertising a sale on bikinis and a spiral of lights shaped into a Christmas tree.

These commercial elements are a recurring theme in Mr. Friedlander’s photos. A car lumbers past ramshackle mailboxes in “Mississippi” (1986) while a sign with movable letters wishes passerby “Merry Xmas” and tries to lure them into an unseen convenience store with “6 Pk Busch” for \$2.99 and “Can Coke” for 39¢. In “California” (1965), a massive Santa waves to potential customers from atop Bob’s Trailer Repairs & Supplies.



'New York City' (1963). LEE FRIEDLANDER

Worries about the commercialization of the holiday have been voiced many times, many ways, but Mr. Friedlander probes deeper cultural trends with his observations. In “New York City” (1963), a wreath hangs in a shop window beside a poster flogging a “Southern Fried Chicken Dinner” for \$1.19—even without the festive flair an enticing deal considering it comes with “assorted relishes,” potatoes, a basket of rolls and “Coffee . . . all you like!” In part, it’s a time capsule, recording the rise in the popularity of soul food, especially in northern cities, that was coincident with the Second Great Migration happening during this period. Further, the juxtaposition of the idealized Norman Rockwellesque holiday feast brought to mind by the image’s Christmas decor and the reality of the restaurant’s affordable but less heartfelt meal introduces a

melancholy air. This is underscored by the void of the establishment's door at the photograph's right, a lone man's bent head visible in the inky blackness—a symbol of the atomization and isolation many felt during a turbulent decade.

But Mr. Friedlander is no Grinch, and many of the photos here are celebrations of the season, and the times, places and cultures they document. In “Nashville, Tennessee” (1966) he captures a pair of women trimming a tree in the window of a business: Beehive and bob hairstyles, pencil skirts and an aluminum fir all offer a festive distillation of a particular era in American history. More somber is the 1964 scene in “Philadelphia,” of a row house door whose window displays a portrait of John F. Kennedy, assassinated just a year before. Down the steps stands an oversize candle—what otherwise would have been a cheerful decoration now an earnest memorial.



'New York City' (1961). LEE FRIEDLANDER

We see the artist's lighthearted side in several images. Santa dolls line the top and spill out the back of a station wagon in “New York City” (1961), an inverse of St. Nick's overflowing sleigh. The 2006 picture of a dirty window in the same city shows the word “HELP” written in the grime, Kris Kringle's reflected image from a nearby advertisement coming off as a threatening reminder that he's always watching, whether you're sleeping or awake. A deflated Santa decoration photographed in 2015 captures the holiday exhaustion so many feel in the tornado of travel, shopping and merriment each year, while a 1966 image from “New York State” shows a statue of Father Christmas trapped in a lattice of wood scaffolding like some prized prisoner captured in a war against the North Pole.



'New York City' (1963). LEE FRIEDLANDER

The general gaiety of the show doesn't mean the photos here are slight. Even with the whimsical subject matter, we see Mr. Friedlander as an expert of composition. Ornaments dangling in a shop window cast oblong shadows in a 2013 picture that's almost surreal, echoing Man Ray and Dora Maar. A phone booth's pane of glass perfectly frames a group of pedestrians in a street scene from “Vicksburg, Mississippi” (1971). A model plane jets through the center of a wreath in the window

of a business in “New York City” (1963), the bustling crowds outside seeming to occupy a different world than the magical one captured indoors. While Christmas may be the central focus of this show, Mr. Friedlander’s skill as a photographer is the real gift here.

**Lee Friedlander: Christmas**

*Deborah Bell Photographs, through Jan. 10, 2026*

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