

Ben Sahn captures the depression

By MICHAEL HYMERS

Tell a photographer that a photograph is not really a work of art, and it is very likely you will have an argument on your hands. Okay, maybe you might concede that some photographs are art . . . sort of . . .

This dispute is not as popular as it once was because it has become more widely recognized that while family snapshots are often somewhat less than inspiring, photography is an intentional process of creative control capable of being great art. But then again, photographs are often kept merely as records, not as art. Is it ever possible for the two to meet?

Since photography came into being in the early 1830's, the camera has served to document and record the people, places and happenings of every era. When photography has been done well—from Daguerrotype to 35mm—it has also served to capture the attitudes, concerns and emotions of each of those eras.

Presently at the Dalhousie Art Gallery is an exhibition titled "Ben Shahn Photographs." This collection consists of photographs taken from 1935 to 1941, the years Shahn

was employed by the Farm Security Administration in a project of photographic documentation on the American agriculture system. A number of photographers participated in this scheme, the most widely known being Walker Evans.

Shahn was primarily a painter and graphic artist, and his technical knowledge of picture-taking was somewhat limited—many of his early images were lost through underexposure and other careless mistakes.

As an artist, he "had the eye," and when he had become comfortable with the medium, that "eye" immediately sprang into action. While his lack of interest in the technical aspects of his art led him to avoid extra equipment, he did make occasional use of a 45 degree mirror attachment on his lens which allowed him to shoot his subjects without them looking directly into the camera.

Shahn's photographs are a remarkable host of candid portraits, cityscapes and human surroundings. Some of the portraits are repetitions of the same subject from a wider angle. We may examine first the forlorn expression on a woman's face as she sits alone and then the woman in her surround-



ings. While each picture may be appreciated for its own merits, the presence of the two together heightens the sense of drama.

Shahn's images of people are varied: a low angle shot of a bulky woman sitting on her front porch, leaning on the railing and staring evenly down into the camera; the ample posterior of a gun-toting sheriff visually dominating the "Better Groceries" sign across the

street; a conversation between hat-wearing women on a sidewalk—one speaking while the other looks away; three men sitting in the corner of either the "Blite Cafe" or the "Elite Cafe" . . .

The scenes are those we have come to associate with the 1930's, probably because our conceptions of the 1930's are strongly based upon the works of these people.

He catches the commerce and advertising of the period. "Satisfaction guaranteed on these famous products or double your money back," says posterman, while postwoman replies, "And look at

these low prices."

A photograph of the "Dance Crystal Pool" is startling, because the people frolicking in the water on the billboard at first look every bit as real as those walking in the parking lot below.

Shahn's photographs strike a candid, sincere human chord. Subtlety is their characteristic feature, and the photographer has an apparent knack for choosing just the right combination of elements at just the right moment.

"Ben Shahn Photographs" can be seen at the Dalhousie Art Gallery until Sept. 30. □

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Flaming feminist film

By P.J. WILSON

Born in Flames takes place in a fictional America ten years after a peaceful cultural revolution known as The War of Liberation. The social landscape looks peculiarly like that of the real America of 1984. While traditional news broadcasts laud the new land of freedom and equality among the sexes, women laugh bitterly in recognition of the actual backward shift occurring at all levels of women's rights.

In response to a wave of sex riots by outraged men, who feel their right to work has been undermined because of the cultural revolution, employers fire women from their hard-won jobs in the blue-collar labour force—jobs traditionally held by men. Moreover, the War of Liberation has done nothing to alter women's on-going subjection to sexual harrasment and rape.

In anger and frustration, women have formed groups. One of these is an activist guerrilla organization called The Women's Army, led by the charismatic Adelaide Norris who is under close monitoring by the F.B.I. Three other groups, which remain nameless, consist of intellectuals, musicians and others. The intellectuals continue to seek change through discussion and negotiation, while the two other groups operate feminist radio stations. Norris contacts leaders of each of these groups on behalf of The Women's Army, but they refuse to join her. Only later through her death will the various factions unite.

The film, directed by Lizzy Borden, has a disturbing atmosphere of authenticity. Largely this is accomplished through the spontaneous newsreel appearance. Scenes and dialogue are apparently improvised, and from time to time actual newsreels of American riots become part of the *mis en scene*.

Borden's purpose in *Born in Flames* seems to be to demonstrate what women might accomplish in the way of underground social engineering when acceptable channels prove to be of no use.

Near the end of the film, after The Women's Army leader Norris is abducted by the F.B.I. and dies suspiciously while in detention, two of the three other women's organizations amalgamate with The Women's Army. When their radio stations are burned down by groups of angry men, they steal trucks and broadcast on the move. To gain public attention to the probable murder of Norris, they arm themselves and storm a national television station. While they do this, a presidential message is in progress, announcing that as compensation for losing their jobs women will be paid for doing housework. But the women break-in on this message and run their own instead.

At times the dialogue is difficult to follow, as much a fault of bad sound as tricky political ideology. Still, the energy and authenticity of *Born in Flames* will undoubtedly cause viewers to feel a little hot under the collar. And that seems to be what Borden is hoping for.