

# STRÖMHOLM



FEBRUARY 2 — MAY 5, 2024

Fundación **MAPFRE**



1. Self-portrait, Camargue, c. 1950 / 2. Francis, Christer Strömholm in Spain, c. 1959

According to his own account, Christer Strömholm (Stockholm, 1918-2002) was a boy with excessively combed hair, dressed in a sailor suit and trapped in a bourgeois milieu. His adolescence was a difficult one and a tragic event that took place when he was sixteen - his father's suicide - marked his life forever. Having turned seventeen, Strömholm began to travel the world, embarked on his artistic training in Dresden and attended various painting academies in Paris and Stockholm.

His encounter with Spain in 1938 during the Civil War marked the awakening of his political consciousness. On the outbreak of World War II Strömholm enlisted on the Finnish side in order to fight against Russia in the Winter War. He moved to Norway in 1940 with a number of the Finnish volunteers who joined forces to combat the Nazi occupation. Ultimately, the experience of three wars would profoundly influence the artist and his vision of life.

After World War II Strömholm returned to Paris where he entered the Académie des Beaux-Arts. There he began to experiment with the graphic arts and to explore the potential of a large-format camera. It was at this point that he realised that the photographic image allowed him to express himself in a manner which reflected his intentions. Paris in the 1940s was home to the leading artists of the day. It was also the capital of photography and the city itself was a favourite motif for many. It was here that Strömholm met a considerable number of the great French photographers, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Édouard Boubat. One of his principal sources of inspiration was Brassai, with whom he shared an interest in fragments of texts, both graffiti-type writing on façades and signs, posters and advertising hoardings.

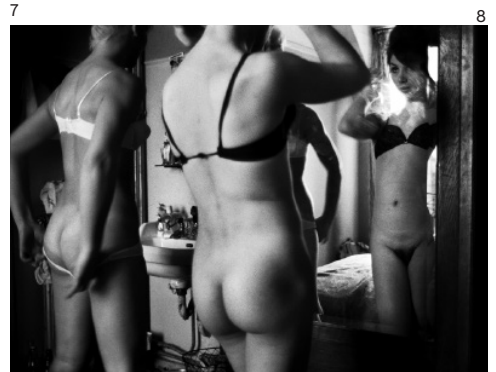


3. Alberto Giacometti, Paris, 1960 / 4. Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 1963 / 5. Leo Zimmerman, Paris, 1949

In 1949 Strömholm embarked on a series of portraits of artists for various Brazilian and Swedish magazines. These were the first of a small number of commercial projects which he undertook during his lifetime but through them he realised that he possessed an ability to penetrate the inner psychology of his subjects. Artists such as Le Corbusier, André Breton, Antoni Tàpies and Antonio Saura, to mention just a few, lowered their guard for him, in part because Strömholm was familiar with their work.

Around 1950 Strömholm met Otto Steinert, who had founded the Fotoform collective the previous year. Its members centred their interest on formal experimentation and the expressive potential of the photographic language, creating a method they termed “subjective photography”. Strömholm participated in Fotoform’s collective exhibitions in Europe and the USA under the name of Christer Christian. Contact with the other members allowed him to discover facets of photography he had not previously explored. However, he left the group after a few years as he considered that formal experimentation could not be an end in itself.

Strömholm travelled intensively over the following years. His work saw a notable evolution during his trips to cities such as Hiroshima, Tokyo, Calcutta, Nairobi, Los Angeles and New York, where he took some of his most iconic photographs. In the late 1950s he made friends with the transsexuals in the area of the Place Blanche near the Pigalle quarter. He moved into a hotel where a number of them were lodging and embarked on portraying their lives in the context of an often hostile and critical environment. They became “Les Amies de Place Blanche”, the title of the book published in 1983.



6. Nana, place Blanche, Paris, 1961 / 7. Jacky and Christer Strömholm, Paris, 1962 / 8. Suzannah and Sylvia, hotel Pierrots, 1962

In the early 1960s Strömholm made trips to Spain as a tourist guide, which offered him the chance to photograph prostitutes, Civil Guards, priests, American marines and children. In 1962 and 1963 he returned there in the company of the writer and poet Lasse Söderberg. In the book *Resa i svartvitt* [Journey in black and white], published many years later, they recounted how they experienced the social reality of Spain under the Francoist regime. These photographs present an image of poverty, capturing the atmosphere of regions where progress seemed to have come to a halt. Some of Strömholm's most iconic images of children were taken during these travels around Spain.

In 1967 he published the book *Poste restante* which reflects his peripatetic lifestyle through his extensive travels from the late 1940s to 1967. Now considered one of the most important post-war photographic books, it can be seen as a reflection on the human condition. Strömholm had been focusing on the theme of death and he compiled many of the resulting images in *Poste restante*. They became a way of processing his difficult childhood memories as well as his war experiences. As is so often the case in his work, these images and their interaction are based on a contrast of opposites and on an interest in the existential nature of things.

For Strömholm, who liked to equate photography with painting and sculpture, traditional teaching of the medium excessively emphasised its technical aspects and a photographer's training should primarily focus on the analysis of images.



9. *The Pale Lady*, Barcelona, 1959 / 10. *Sun and shade*, 1963 / 11. *Madrid*, 1963 / 12. *Palma de Mallorca*, 1959

Among the first participants in the debate on photography teaching in Sweden, from 1962 to 1972 he was director of Fotoskolan, the photography school in Stockholm, where some of Scandinavia's most important photographers trained.

In 1986 the exhibition *9 sekunder av mitt liv* [Nine seconds of my life], held at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, definitively established the sixty-eight-year-old Strömholm's reputation among the Swedish public. The reason that this recognition came so late was largely the fact that the subjective and existentialist documentary photography which he championed had been under-appreciated in the preceding decades. In 1997 he received the Hasselblad prize.

Christer Strömholm repeatedly insisted on the impossibility of photographing non-lived experiences: photography had to be based on one's own, and the photographer must be present with all his or her senses. In many ways his images revisit his own past. For Strömholm, each image was another self-portrait.

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## Fundación MAPFRE

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## Curator

Estelle af Malmborg

## Dates

From February 2 to May 5, 2024

## Opening times

Mondays (except public holidays): 2 pm to 8 pm  
Tuesdays to Saturdays: 11 am to 8 pm  
Sundays and public holidays: 11 am to 7 pm  
(Last entry: 30 minutes before closing time.  
Visitors must leave the galleries 10  
minutes before closing time)

## Ticket prices

Standard: 5 €  
Reduced: 3 €  
Free entry: Mondays (except public holidays)

## Guided tour

Brief explanation (15-20 min. approx.) of  
the main artistic aspects of the exhibition  
and its most outstanding works.  
Hours: Wednesdays and Thursdays:  
from 4 to 7 pm; Fridays and Saturdays:  
from 12 am to 2 pm and from 4 to 7 pm;  
Sundays and holidays: from 12 am to 2 pm.  
No additional cost upon entry.  
Information at reception desk

## Audio guide

4 €. Spanish and English


## Bookshop

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Cover: *Jacky and Adèle Chanel, Paris, 1960*

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