
PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Opening Reception: Saturday, March 22, 2025 3:00–6:00 p.m. • FREE and open to the public
Exhibition on display through September 28, 2025 • California Museum of Photography

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LOST IN THE WILDERNESS

Ansel Adams in the 1960s

Ansel Adams loses his way. The great American photographer stands at the summit of his life: renowned and celebrated. Then come the 1960s—the civil rights movement, counterculture, free love, psychedelics, assassinations, Vietnam War protests, and civic unrest.

Even more traumatically for the country’s best-known photographer, photography itself shifts beneath him. The new generation of 1960s

Adams’ sprawling six-year project traverses the dark heart of the sixties—from 1963 to 1968.

conceptual photographers don’t give a damn about rocks and trees. They disdain the pieties of artistic tradition and reject the modernist photo perfectionism symbolized by Adams’ “Zone System” for precisely calibrated film exposure.

Beyond that, the new sixties photographers blow the range of subject matter wide open: protest, alienation, sexuality, the chaotic character of the social landscape, the depiction of the idiosyncratic and the deeply personal.

Ansel Adams’ *Fiat Lux* project traverses the dark heart of the sixties—1963 to 1968. It’s a sprawling six-year commission from the University of California. *Fiat Lux*’s 7,161 images reveal an artist whose photographic coordinates have become unfixed. We see a renowned photographer off-balance. We witness Adams swimming hard against the tide of relentless change. Through it all, the tumult of the era leaks in around the edges. Consequently, when we examine the complete project archive, we uncover unforeseen wonders and marvelous accidents.



UCI.6.9, December 1966/2024



UCLA.17.4, November 1966/2024



UCB.63.3, September 1966/2024



UCSF.2, August 1964/2024



UCB.66.12, December 1966/2024

UCR ARTS: California Museum of Photography is the photography museum of the University of California. Founded in 1973, the museum stages exhibitions concerned with the intersection of photography, new imaging, and society. With more than 500,000 photographs, negatives, cameras, and objects, it holds the largest and most diverse photo collection in the western United States. The museum serves a California, U.S. and international audience with research, exhibitions, education, performance, programming, and publications.

The California Museum of Photography is located in a two-building complex at 3824 + 3834 Main Street in downtown Riverside. Public Hours are Thurs. & Fri. noon to 5 pm; Sat. & Sun. 11 am to 5 pm.

REASSESSMENT

Cracks in the Ground Glass

This exhibition represents a reassessment of Ansel Adams' full *Fiat Lux* project. Why is such an examination needed now?

Fiat Lux is significant, the largest project of Adams' career. Adams' lifetime production totals some 40,000 negatives, according to biographer and friend James Alinder. *Fiat Lux* alone accounts for 7,161 exposures (far more than the "approximately 1,000" stipulated in his contract with the University of California). It represents years' worth of concentrated effort, a wide-ranging culmination of the photographer's lifelong engagement with his native state. This exhibition is the first based on a complete reexamination of the full *Fiat Lux* archive. What do we find?

Amid the dutiful shot list scutwork and technically masterful flow, we find continual struggle rather than clarity. We find Adams' awkwardness with human subjects producing deeply surreal moments. We encounter a landscape master

Adams has reached the end point of his chilly, magnificently hopeful formalism.

moved off-center by foreign subject matter. We see dystopic tones pushing their way into the self-assured modernist frame. We find a photographer tentatively dipping a toe into the flow of photographic change: inscrutable machinery, freeway tangles, graffitied construction fencing, figures suspended in air. In short, what we find is far more peculiar and more revealing than the high modernism of the carefully curated

1968 *Fiat Lux* book (conceptually outmoded before it was even issued). We find Adams being diligently rigid, but, like sweet pot smoke wafting on a breeze, we witness the sixties creep in around the edges. Despite himself, Adams becomes contaminated by the sixties.

Reviewing the full *Fiat Lux* archive reveals this: Adams has reached the endpoint of his chilly, magnificently hopeful formalism. And he senses it. We see him trying to fight his way out, but he's not able. *Fiat Lux* shows the cracks in Adams' edifice. In our era of dizzying change in visual culture, *Fiat Lux* represents an informative and deeply relevant case study. The new sixties photographers embrace the onrushing future and reject Adams' embalmed past. The contrast is clear—predictions and harbingers versus remembrances and legacies. Under the pressure of the sixties, *Fiat Lux* is rife with slippages in the photographer's decades-long high modernist construction, cracks in the ground glass.



UCLA.48.8, October 1966/2024