

The Third Annual Sandra S. Whitehead Memorial Lecture

Picturing Puerto Rico under the American Flag: *The Documentary Vision of Edwin and Louise Rosskam*

Dr. Laura Katzman, Professor of Art History, James Madison University

SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 2021 | 2 pm | LIVESTREAM



Louise Rosskam, *Untitled (Children in doorway at Barney Neighborhood Settlement House, 470 N Street, SW, Washington, D.C.)*, c. 1941-42, gelatin silver print, 12 3/8 x 9 1/8 in. Purchase from the artist made possible by the Ethel Tucker Fund for Acquisitions, 2002.

This talk examines an important yet neglected chapter in the history of 20th-century documentary practice in the United States. It focuses on a post-World War II photographic project set up by the Office of Information for Puerto Rico - an island government agency led by progressive *norteamericanos*, Edwin and Louise Rosskam. The Rosskams transported a New Deal idiom of recording social and economic conditions in American states to an impoverished U.S. territory that had been a Spanish colony for 400 years before America's seizure of the island in the Spanish-

American War. Informed by the now-legendary Farm Security Administration photographic project, the photographers documented Puerto Rico's monumental shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy at a watershed moment in its history, when the increasingly powerful Popular Democratic Party sought both political autonomy and economic safeguards from the United States. How the artists created and disseminated a visual language that engaged the complexities of the island nation, including its colonial legacy in the context of U.S. imperial ambition, and how they negotiated their shifting roles in a fraught political landscape, are issues central to this investigation.

Laura Katzman is Professor of Art History at James Madison University. She recently served as the 2018-2019 Terra Foundation Visiting Professor of American Art at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. From 1995 to 2007, she was Associate Professor of Art and Director of Museum Studies at Randolph College (formerly Randolph-Macon Woman's College), where she guest curated numerous exhibitions and helped to build the 20th-century American art collection housed at the Maier Museum, securing an important body of work by Ben Shahn. Dr. Katzman is the recipient of prestigious fellowships from the Smithsonian Institution, the National Gallery of Art (CASVA), and the Fulbright Foundation. Her publications include *Re-viewing Documentary: The Photographic Life of Louise Rosskam* (Penn State University Press, 2014) and the award-winning *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (Yale University Press, 2000).

The Sandra S. Whitehead Memorial Lecture series was established and supported by the Honorable Paul Whitehead, Jr. in memory of his wife, to highlight works from the Collection.