



OUT MY WINDOW

GAIL ALBERT HALABAN

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Photographs by Gail Albert Halaban

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Publicist: nina@powerHouseBooks.com

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telephone: 212.604.9074, fax: 212.366.5247
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INTRODUCTION BY VERNON SILVER

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Brooklyn, NY

I've been spying on my neighbors.

It's gone on for decades. The Manhattan apartment where I grew up faces hundreds of windows, each providing its own show, in a vast array whose delights grew up around me. As a child, in the nights leading up to Christmas, I would spend hours looking into windows, counting how many were decorated with lights. When I got older, I'd scan the same windowscape for distant figures in states of undress. Through the 1970s and 1980s, we marked Passover by gazing out our dining room window to another family's Seder, across the way and a few floors down. Year after year, the family was there, its home gleaming with candles and good silver, a constant part of our sacred tradition. We never knew their names or exchanged a word with them.

Yet what we surely knew, but never talked about, was that they, and our other window-neighbors, were watching us, too. However, to acknowledge the gaze would be mortifying. Even now, I have a hard time admitting having watched. And I hope my neighbors don't read this.

That this dynamic so defines life in a city of windows – yet is so transgressive that it evades acknowledgement between neighbors – is the starting point of what makes Gail Albert Halaban's *Out My Window* so extraordinary.

This book, a collection of 50 images taken through and into windows in New York City, acknowledges the unspoken voyeurism and exhibitionism, tells us to admit we all do it, and then pushes us to confront the hope, isolation, and other emotions that lie behind the gaze. The pictures seem intrusive, but are nearly all posed. The residents are collaborators

and their apartments are lit specifically to make these pictures, which explore a defining urban experience: becoming secretly intimate with the neighbors' most intimate moments in a process laced with shame, sex, curiosity, imagination and anonymity.

Urban towers with banks of windows create a democratic Panopticon. It is alienating, as each person sits alone in his glass box. But it is also inclusive, as the watched and the watchers form their own, silent communities based on what they see – and what they imagine they see.

In several instances, Albert Halaban has paired neighbors' views, showing what one looks like to the other. *Chelsea, Manhattan, Penn South, Anita Checking on Lou* (page 30), depicts Anita, who checks on Lou, who is 97 and lives alone, every morning to see that his shades are up. "She cares for him through the window," she says.

Much of the windowscape experience is about imagination, because we instinctively fill in the unknown details of the silent scenes we witness. Part of *Out My Window* is about how we conjure mental pictures of the unseen spaces and rooms, lives and conversations, just outside our view.

Take the story of the residents of the building in *West Village, Manhattan, Brownstone*, (page 29), who extrapolated a whole tale from the tiny details they'd gathered by watching a young couple across the street, *West Village, Manhattan, Greenwich Street and Bank Street, Recently Engaged* (page 37). The neighbors had correctly determined that the duo was about to get married, having seen them open many gifts. The rest of the couple's story was something about which they became intensely curious.

These layers of meaning and connectedness took years to accrue as this project developed. Albert Halaban began in 2007 by making pictures of people in their homes, looking outward at what they were seeing. The earliest such work in *Out My Window* is *Long Island City, Queens, Bedroom* (page 43), an image of Ariel, a woman looking longingly towards Manhattan. Albert Halaban began to see that most of these views were actually into the windows of yet other people. Shifting gears, she used a large-format view camera to shoot out the window of a friend's studio in 2008. To see how it might look, Albert Halaban made a Polaroid of the building, liked what she saw, and then went across the street, leaving the photo and a note for the residents. The next day the prospective subjects called, and she photographed into their apartment (page 22) as the men prepared dinner.

That process started a pattern repeated for the rest of the project, in which Albert Halaban contacted and collaborated with her subjects.

For method – and imagery – she drew inspiration from the work of Julius Shulman, whose mid-20th century photos of modern homes in Southern California are *Mad Men* versions of what Albert Halaban has tackled here (think glass-box home dangling off cliff over 1960 Los Angeles, with two women chatting inside). In the late 1990s she spent a week photographing houses with Shulman, planting the seed of what became a theme in this book: how the outside informs the inside.

To make *Out My Window*, Albert Halaban got into the homes and lives of the people on either side of the views, drawing out their stories. In *Upper East Side, Manhattan, 1441 3rd Avenue, Looking at the Kids Across the Way at 1438 3rd Avenue* (page 46), a postwar building occupied mostly by elderly men and women looks directly at a seemingly wealthier building, where family after family is stacked one upon the other. As she made pictures from both sides, Albert Halaban learned from the older residents that they had silently adopted the families at a distance.

From a block away, the family that you are watching can look and sound just like the one you miss, or the one you want it to be. The woman at the distant window can be as beautiful as you wish.

Which brings us to sex. Of course, there's frisson in all the watching and exhibiting and concealing.

West Village, Manhattan, New Construction (page 73) is powerful because she's beautiful and exposed and there's a construction worker who seems within reach – yet they can't touch, and we're not sure if she's opening or closing the robe, vulnerable or powerful. (Incidentally, this is the one photo that wasn't set up. The construction worker happened to be there.)

In *Chelsea, Manhattan, West 28th Street, Expecting* (page 41), a woman sits nude, and eight months pregnant, in front of her window. "The guys across the way were excited to watch me shoot this picture from their office for obvious reasons," Albert Halaban says. That information brings new meaning to a photo that, if taken without consent, would be disturbing. Now, knowing that they knew and she knew, well, it redefines the power and sexuality of the image. By making the voyeurism explicit, Albert Halaban grants license.

That doesn't mean *Out My Window* was guilt-free to make. Albert Halaban had been looking from her friend's house into the window of one woman for years, and had wanted to contact her to make a picture, but felt bad about having watched for so long. By chance, they eventually met at a party attended by local moms. The object of Albert Halaban's gaze broke the ice, they discussed the project, and the woman invited her to come shoot. The result is *Chelsea, Manhattan, West 29th Street, Downstairs Neighbors, Getting Ready for the Bath* (page 23).

Because of the intrusive nature of the images – and because the artist is so involved

in creating the scenes – it seems only fair that Albert Halaban weave herself into the work, both subjecting herself to our gaze, and making transparent the role she has. In *Astoria, Queens, Kitchen, Zoe Watching* (page 68) she places her daughter at a window. In another, *Chelsea, Manhattan, West 28th Street, Flower Black, New Baby with Bottle* (page 27) she includes her own home, with her husband giving a bottle to their baby. In *Flatiron, Manhattan, Cakes and Balloons* (page 49) Albert Halaban has set up the shot so that she herself (nine months pregnant) is sitting in her friend's balloon-festooned apartment.

Even before *Out My Window*, Albert Halaban's work long contained a strand of voyeurism as she peered into the lives of partying adolescents, and then later, domestic lives of 30-year-old women. In gaining access to intimate settings, she's become part of strangers' lives and forged relationships. She's also gotten to photograph these people with their stuff – from lavish suburban kitchens and poolside accessories to, in this book, the contents of tenements and penthouses.

Part of what *Out My Window* does is extend this strand of Albert Halaban's work to the full architecture of these lives, pulling back to make the buildings themselves subjects. In the same way she's always made lighting of people and their belongings an important part of her process and images, in these pictures she's lit entire apartment blocks and even Central Park (with the help of the sun, whose rays and shadows she timed by tracking sunrise and sunset times). The total view, set up from outside and inside, and often involving multiple apartments with their individual vignettes, combines to make an entirely new image where the buildings themselves are single ecosystems, creatures made up of many square cells.

Albert Halaban explains this play among people, their material culture, their built environments, and their inner lives as "the tribes people build for themselves, how spaces define people, loneliness, and community." The idea obviously resonates in New York, where there's basis to the cliché that large populations paradoxically breed solitude.

But Albert Halaban says what she's depicting isn't just about New York. "When I drive down the New Jersey Turnpike to visit my parents in D.C., I always wonder who the people are in the houses I pass," she says. Her juxtaposition of home, skyline, and solitude contains nods to Edward Hopper's urban portraits of lone women, sometimes undressed, sitting or standing by windows. *Astoria, Queens, Bridges at Night* (page 57) a nude of a woman who says she enjoys the lack of a view into her apartment, is a direct echo of Hopper.

As solitary as her subjects are, Albert Halaban's work ultimately shows how un-alone we are in a world of windows. Two images made from the same vantage point, *Chelsea, Manhattan, Glass House With Dog*, 2008 and *Chelsea, Manhattan, Glass House at Night* (pages 14 and 15) depict the view into a building with towering windows and flat-screen television sets. Albert Halaban made the photographs from her friend Amy's apartment across the way.

"Amy laughs because she is very choosy about what her son watches on TV, but through the window he watches everything the neighbors watch," she says.

Well, I'm glad to learn it's not just me.

At an age when I should have concentrated on my homework, televisions got big enough that I could see several from my bedroom window. If my parents in the living room were tuned into the same channel as the neighbors, I could even keep an ear on the sound and be transported to a ball game or sitcom without anyone knowing. The neighbor watching the neighbor watching.

As Albert Halaban has affirmed, the possibilities are endless out my window.

Upper East Side, Manhattan
Lexington Avenue and 86th Street
Chandeir and Vacancies, 2010

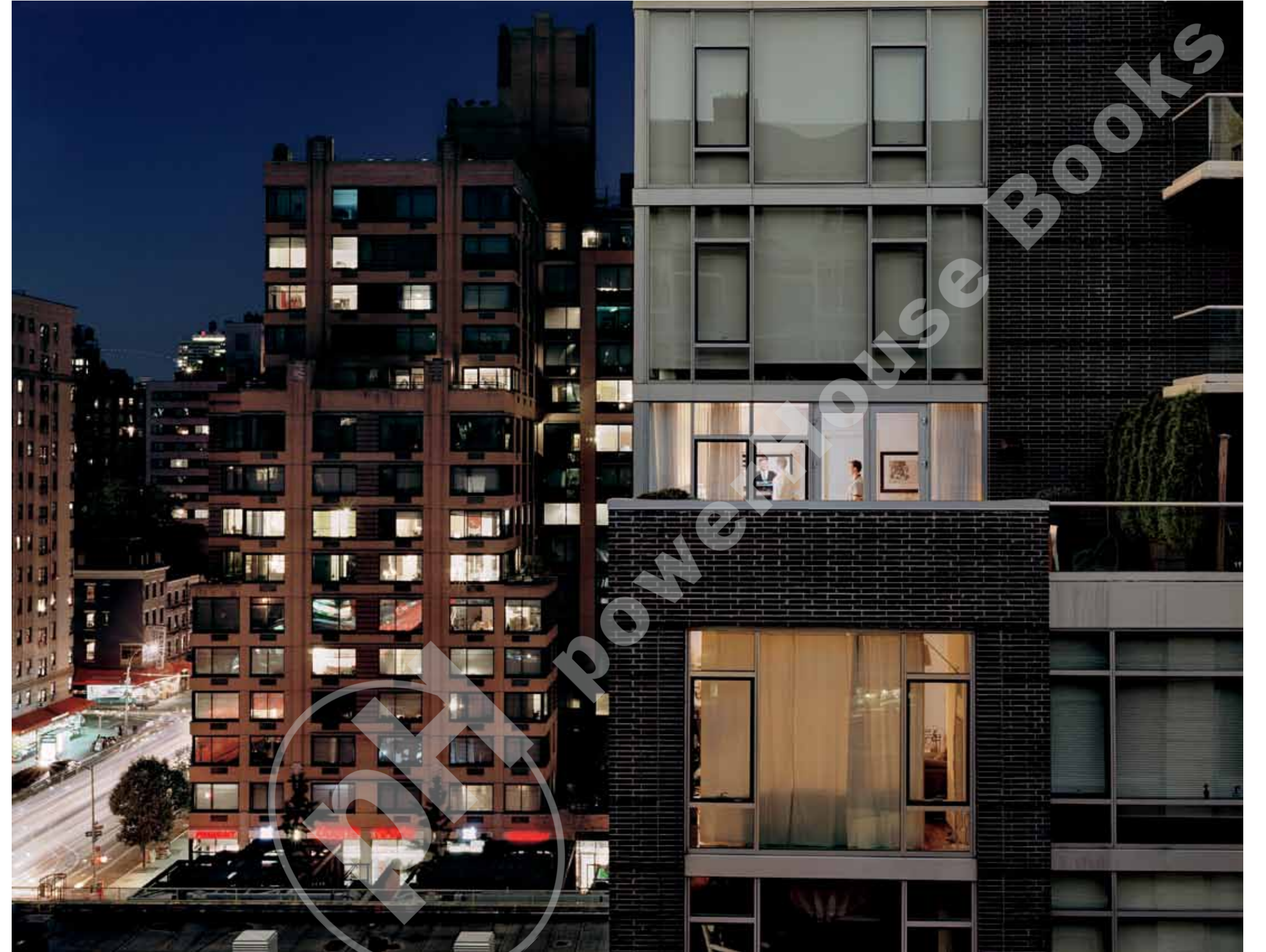


Chelsea, Manhattan
West 26th Street between Broadway and 6th Avenue
Dance Studio, 2009



Chelsea, Manhattan
Bumblebee and Bottle, 2010





previous page, left
Chelsea, Manhattan
Glass House with Dog, 2008

previous page, right
Chelsea, Manhattan
Glass House at Night, 2008

this page
Midtown, Manhattan
Gilsey House, Mother on Phone, 2010



Chelsea, Manhattan
West 19th Street, View from Zwirner Gallery
Mother and Daughter Watching Passersby on the High Line, 2009



Clinton Hill, Brooklyn
Alone at Party, 2010





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