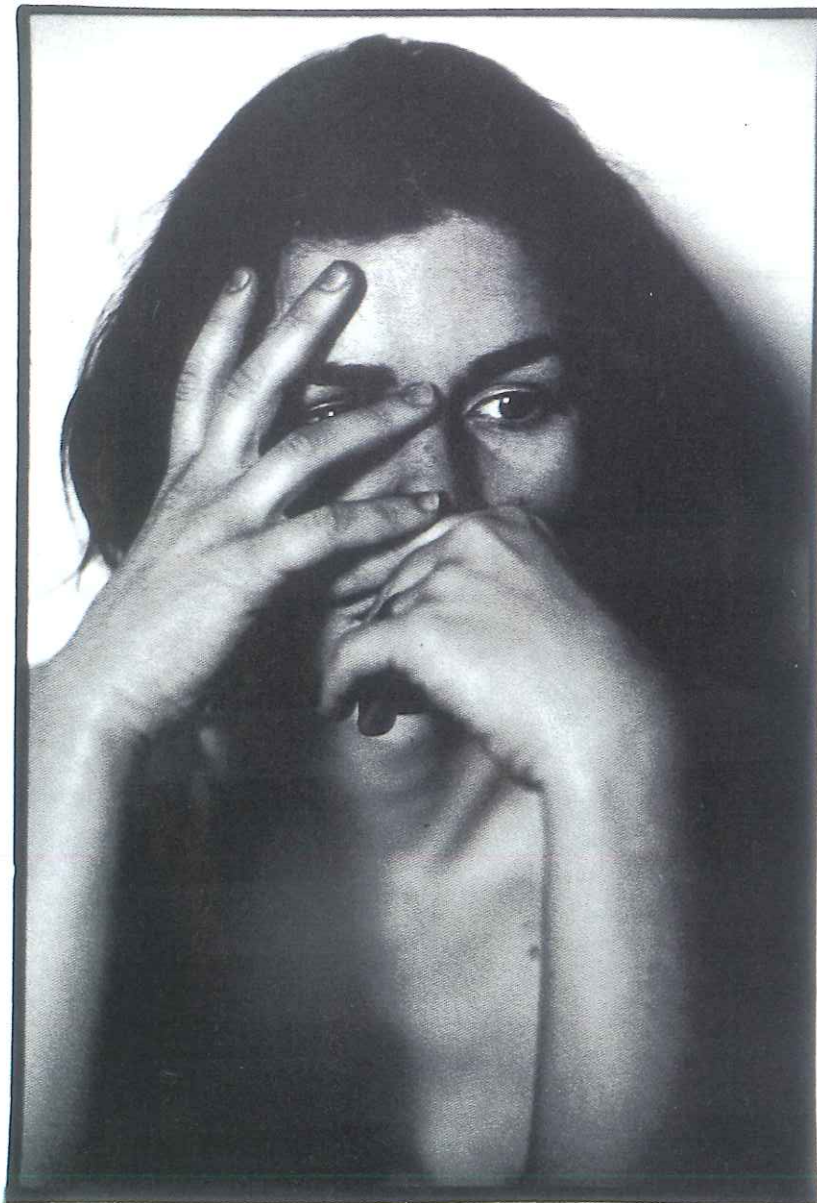


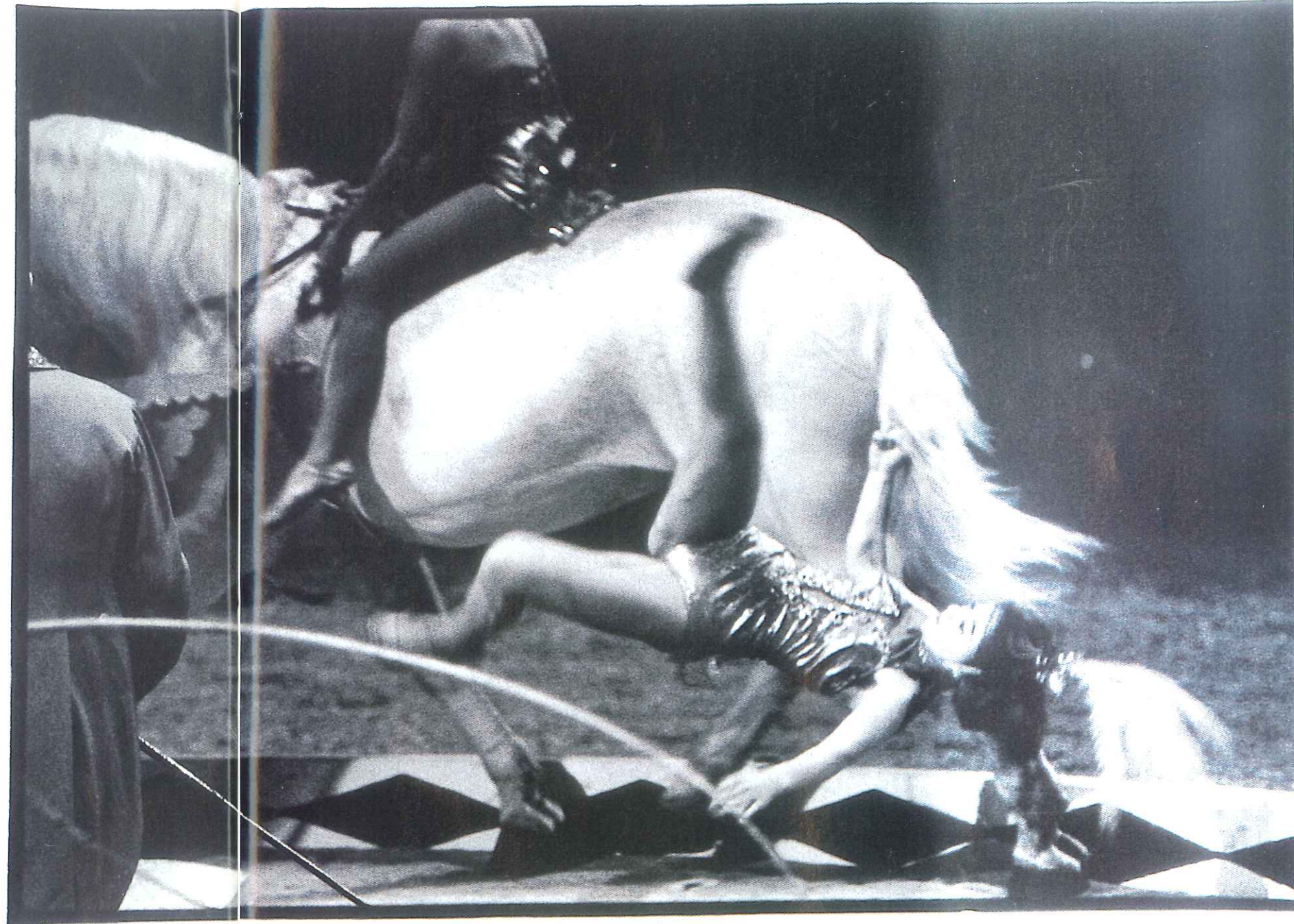
Of Passports and Visas

Steven Manford revisits
the career of Montreal photographer

John Max



In the Open Passport
series, an uncompromising
vision broached
an edgy range of emotions
and situations



Opposite: **John Max**
From the exhibition "Open Passport" [N.F.B.
Stills-Ottawa, 1972], 23G
Vintage gelatin silver print 50.8 x 40.6 cm
©John Max
Courtesy: Stephen Bulger Gallery

Above: **John Max**
From the exhibition "Open Passport" [N.F.B.
Stills-Ottawa, 1972], 42A
Vintage gelatin silver print 40.6 x 50.8 cm
©John Max
Courtesy: Stephen Bulger Gallery

Right: **John Max**
From the exhibition "Open Passport" [N.F.B.
Stills-Ottawa, 1972], 42B
Vintage gelatin silver print 40.6 x 50.8 cm
©John Max
Courtesy: Stephen Bulger Gallery



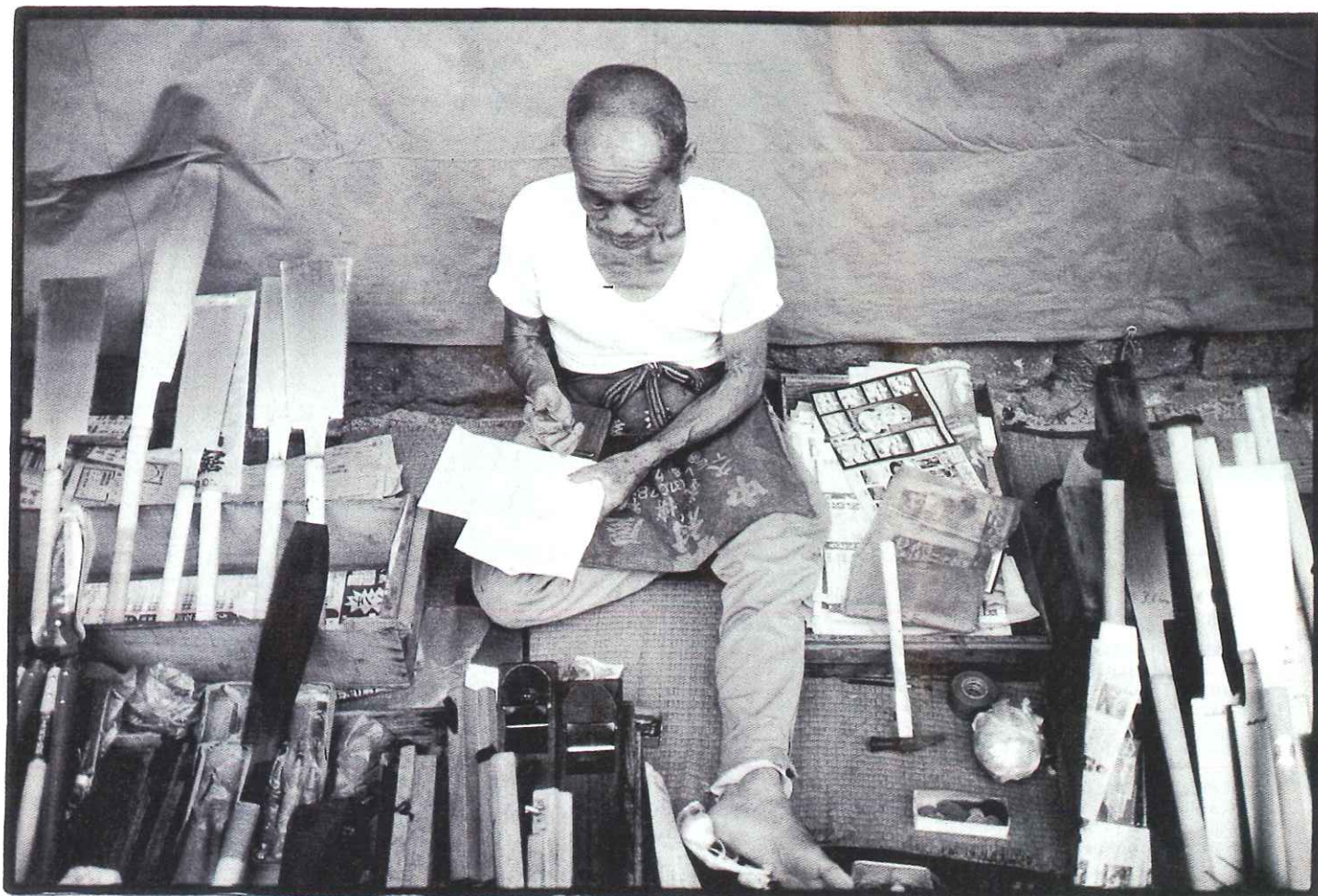
An agile and enthusiastic recorder of Japan at the moment that its traditions were expanding to match its arrival as a financial power,

Max's pictures have the raw energy of street reportage

Right: John Max
From the series *Strike Up The Band* c. 1977
Vintage gelatin silver print 40.6 x 50.8 cm
©John Max
Courtesy: Stephen Bulger Gallery



Below: John Max
From the series *Strike Up The Band* c. 1977
Vintage gelatin silver print 40.6 x 50.8 cm
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Courtesy: Stephen Bulger Gallery



At sixty, John Max is one of the few living, and truly original, historical figures in contemporary Canadian photography. Robert Frank, author of the quintessential postwar photo essay, *The Americans*, has said, "When I think of Canadian photography, his name comes up first."

Max's graphic black and white images are intense, expressive investigations of the human condition. In the nineteen-seventies, when Max's star reached its zenith, his photographs were unique in that they challenged the existing assumptions of objectivity in documentary photography. A curator attending one of his exhibitions noted at the time that Max's photographs "do not keep the visitors indifferent." They roused enthusiasm—and for some, they irritated.

The son of Ukrainian émigrés, raised in Montreal of the nineteen-forties, Max's artistic path wended through painting (under Arthur Lismer) and music (at the McGill Conservatory of Music) before, quite by luck, he passed a window display of photographs by the German-born photographer Lutz Dille—photographs in the reportorial style of Henri Cartier-Bresson and André Kertész. With the discovery, Max found his medium.

During the sixties, Max did magazine work and began to make a name for himself. Then in 1972, a solo exhibition called *Open Passport* pulled together 160 of his photographs. They represented a figurative journey through life, from childhood to old age. When the exhibition opened in Ottawa, critics wondered not whether the pictures were *good*, but whether Max's style should be encouraged. The massing of deep, heavy shadows and the stark, uncompromising vision were as unsettling as the edgy range of emotions, poses and situations that appeared in the images. One reviewer concluded that Max offered only faces of "desperation and loneliness." But while some derided the images, others understood that Max's anonymous, untitled subjects were stand-ins for Everyman. Any anguish captured within Max's viewfinder was an expression of human struggle.

Numerous images in *Open Passport* were of Max's wife, Janet, and son, David. All the requisite rituals of family life were recorded: a birthday, a dinner-table gathering, a mother with a newborn baby. The power of the images lay in this intimacy.

After the success of *Open Passport*, Max began planning a new project. It would take him to Japan. In 1974, he arrived in Tokyo. Captivated but disoriented by the scale and density of the city, he travelled south for awhile. Finally, he settled on the outskirts of Kyoto, where, with camera in hand, he logged miles on foot each day, recording all he saw.

As thumbnail sketches, Max's photos show a photographer who was an agile and enthusiastic recorder of Japan at the very moment its traditions were expanding to match its arrival as a world financial power. The contact sheets are peppered with images of businessmen racing to catch trains, labouring over papers, and immersed in conversation. There is laughter

in the pictures, a raw energy to their street reportage.

All seemed agreeable. Max liked Japan; he was prepared to stay. But in the spring of 1978, his visa expired. He was ordered to report to immigration authorities. He spent several weeks in detention, waiting for a deportation hearing—languishing in cells occupied by illegal Korean immigrants and some exotic dancers from the United States. Then, one day, flanked by security guards, he was put on a flight to Canada.

The return to Montreal was both difficult and embarrassing. After four years in Japan, Max found his Canadian career stalled. Times had changed and so had the people. In two small shows held on his return he showed thirty images—not much for a four-year sojourn. His audience and peers wondered what else might be on the contact sheets, which after some worry and delay had finally arrived from Japan. Coupled with periods of inactivity, and a failed attempt at staging another exhibition, Max retreated. He became known more for the difficulties that had beset him than for the body of original photographs he had built.

Yet Max's images, once regarded as strange and dark and private, today sit smartly alongside recent developments in photography. He has influenced a generation of Quebec photographers and their intimate take on the documentary world.

While in detention in Japan, Max wrote a friend in Canada saying that no matter what happened to him, it was the work that mattered. Today, those stored negatives represent something of an unfinished and frustrating burden for Max. However, given recent shows in Montreal and Toronto, and renewed interest in his work, Max finds himself amidst times that are changing again. ■



John Max
From the series *Strike Up The Band* c. 1977
Vintage gelatin silver print 40.6 x 50.8 cm
©John Max
Courtesy: Stephen Bulger Gallery