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David Pace's Velocity of Life

In [Culture](#) September 29, 2021 by Amani Hamed

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MOTION BLUR The life and works of David Pace were about capturing the fleeting moment with honesty. (photo credit: Amani Hamed)

This Friday, after a brief closure, a memorial gallery dedicated to the late photographer David Pace will reopen at San Jose's Institute of Contemporary Art. Truly a man who contained artistic multitudes, Pace worked across decades, beginning from the moment he was gifted a Brownie Hawkeye camera for his eighth birthday in February, 1959.

The gallery at the back of the ICA is humble, white-walled and concrete-floored. As guests enter, they are welcomed by a dedication from Nicki Moffat, ICA board member and longtime friend of Pace, along with whimsical music videos created with Victor Bellomo. Friends with Pace since they attended Catholic school together in Sunnyvale in the 1950s, Bellomo is one of Pace's first subjects, and appears in his earliest photos, taken with the Hawkeye camera he so loved.

Pace died of leukemia in October of 2020. The current exhibit reads not only as a collection of his works over the years, but as a loving eulogy to a man who carried wonderment and gratitude through his art.

"You see so many elements of him," says Nicki Moffat. "Because he wasn't just one thing, his photographs weren't always the same."

“David Pace: Speaking Through Images” unfolds gradually. The silence and negative space draw the viewer in, inviting viewers to linger on photos presented on the wall to the right.

On the black-and-white back wall, the eye is drawn past a series of “anonymous” photos from World War II, then through images of an abandoned Route 66. When viewers turn around, they are confronted with a larger-than-life, full-color vinyl print of Pace’s personal bookshelf. Diane Jonte-Pace, David’s wife of nearly 50 years, describes the feeling as one of “color shock.”

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Clear throughlines in Pace’s work are honesty and intimacy. While in Burkina Faso, Pace took many spontaneous portraits of dancing couples that lack any feeling of voyeurism so typical of white photographers in Africa.

As Jonte-Pace explains, this is because David wasn’t standing on the periphery taking photos: he was on the dance floor.

“In Burkina Faso, on Friday, it was market day,” Jonte-Pace says. “Friday night, there was always a dance because people come from neighboring villages. So we were dancing in the dark, but David had his flash. He was dancing with the community, and photographing while he danced.”

It was only later that Pace would discover whether or not he had taken a good photo. At the time, the point was simply to engage: to be present with people.

While the startling, nearly technicolor brilliance of Pace’s bookshelf—complete with his own toys and childhood baseball glove—presents a picture of who he was through a collection of his favorite items, the best peek into the mind of David Pace is his “Velocity” series.

Taken from the window of a moving bullet train, the “Velocity” series is named for a poem by Billy Collins—a favorite of Pace’s. After battling Lymphoma, Pace had once again become strong enough to travel, and he and Diane traveled together from Tokyo to Kyoto.

“I was giving a talk in Japan, and so we traveled to Tokyo and then took the bullet train to Kyoto. We got tickets on both sides of the train so that he could move from one side to the other, depending on where the light was best,” Diane explains.

As she does, she laughs and mimics David, jumping back and forth across the aisle of the train to put his camera up to the window. Like his and Diane’s book of photographs, *Where the Time Goes*, “Velocity” is a meditation

on the preciousness of life.

“[‘Velocity’] came out of a sense of realization of the brevity of his own life, the fragility of his own life,” says Jonte-Pace.

The series captures the rushing movement of a body on a train, and the stillness of objects outside: buildings, trees, powerlines. Some snap beautifully into focus, while the rest becomes a blur of motion. “Velocity” forms a commentary on the delicate transience of life: as we rush through it, certain things may come into focus. The movement turns each photograph into the shortest possible timeline: the beginning on the left side of the frame, the ending on the right, and the colorful, fluid blur in the middle.

[David Pace: Speaking Through Images](#)

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