

Eye Street

Film gives 'Grapes' artist his due

Photographer's body of work celebrated

BY MATT MUNOZ
Contributing writer

As part of the ongoing celebration to commemorate the 75th anniversary of John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," the Bakersfield Museum of Art will host a screening today with filmmaker David Rabinovitch, writer and producer of the 2006 award-winning documentary "The Compassionate Eye: Horace Bristol, Photojournalist."

"I've had the privilege over the course of my career, meeting and working with some extraordinary people, but Horace was there at the beginning of the whole idea of the photo magazine," said Rabinovitch, in a phone interview from his home in Seattle.

Bristol's extensive body of work contains some of the most significant photographs of the 20th century. He began his professional career alongside photographer Ansel Adams in the Bay Area, before becoming among the first contributors to Life magazine. It was during that time that he began photographing migrant labor camps in a series that became the basis for "The Grapes of Wrath." Bristol also did extensive coverage during World War II.

The idea for the film came to Rabinovitch in 1989 after he read about a first-ever exhibition featuring Bristol at the photographer's alma mater, the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

"That little piece of news really piqued my interest, and as a documentarian, reading about a previously unreleased cache of photographs documenting the mid-20th century immediately intrigued me."

In 1955, following the suicide of Bristol's wife, the photographer



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVID RABINOVITCH

David Rabinovitch is the writer and producer of the documentary "The Compassionate Eye: Horace Bristol, Photojournalist."

'The Compassionate Eye'

When: Today; reception is at 5:30 p.m., with film at 6 p.m.; a Q&A session with the director follows. The film runs 50 minutes.

Where: Bakersfield Museum of Art, 1930 R St.

Admission: \$5 adults; \$4 seniors; \$2 students; free to members.

Information: bmoa.org, 323-7219 or thecompassionate-eye.com

destroyed a large number of his works, while others were locked away for the next 35 years, to be rediscovered by his children.

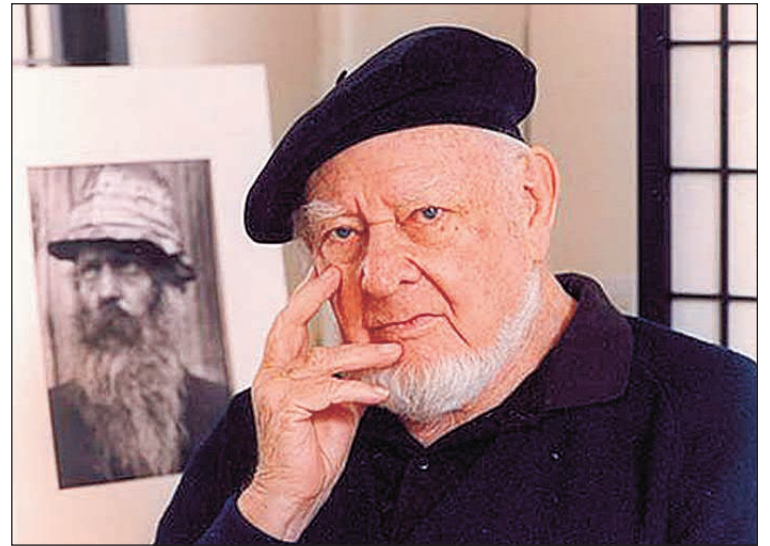
"I have just a suspicion that what was probably burned were a lot of prints and not negatives. Again, the second aspect of renouncing his work at that time was that he just left the field. He

just stopped taking pictures."

To get the ball rolling for his film, Rabinovitch placed a phone call to the photographer at his Ojai home.

"Horace, in his gravelly voice said, 'This sounds incredible. Why don't you come on down to Ojai?'"

"For nearly a 30-year period, until television really begins to take over, that was the way we saw the world, the images of the world. The other aspect of Horace, how he was able to capture the images that he did, was that he was very humble and unassuming, and somehow working with the equipment they had in those days. It's not like shooting with your cellphone. You're carrying a box around. There's something intrusive about it, and working with that heavy, large slow film, that equipment, and to put himself in those moments in the hundreds of



Horace Bristol's extensive body of work contains some of the most significant photographs of the 20th century.

thousands of instances, that was an incredible talent."

Arriving at the photographer's home for his first visit, Rabinovitch recalled that Bristol, in his 80 at the time, couldn't have been more hospitable.

"It was like touching the feet of the angels. The stories that came out of this man were fantastic. ... During our conversations, he didn't hold back much. By that stage of his life, he'd had an extraordinary journey."

Rabinovitch and cinematographer Tim Metzger worked on the film for eight years, landing as narrator singer Graham Nash (of Crosby, Stills and Nash), himself a photo enthusiast who knew Bristol professionally.

Though Bristol died in 1997 at age 89, he was able to see an early version of the film.

"Horace approved. He said, 'It's wonderful. I'm seeing photos I've never seen before. There's someone in the San Francisco bridge there, men in the fog in the background.'"

The photos Bristol shot while traveling with Steinbeck to the

Central Valley during the Dust Bowl era are on display at the museum as well.

"It's absolutely clear how the studio matched the people Horace shot to the scenes in the film "The Grapes of Wrath," Rabinovitch said. "It's unmistakable that 20th Century Fox based visual design of the film on Horace's photographs. Now this takes nothing away from Greg Toland, who was the great cinematographer on the film directed by John Ford, but Horace also had in his correspondence with 20th Century Fox, to see the photographs.

"So, in that documentation, we see that Steinbeck turned the studio onto them, and Horace in his generosity of spirit, sent the photographs to the studio. Horace is the first one to say he didn't write the book, but had Steinbeck been a little more generous, he might have given Horace some kid of attribution or thank you. He received no compensation. What you see in the film is what you get."

— Matt Munoz is marketing director at the Bakersfield Museum of Art

WIN TICKETS TO DAVE ALVIN AND DON FELDER CONCERTS AT THE FOX BY TUNING IN TODAY

Today on "First Look with Scott Cox," Californian Lifestyles Editor Jennifer Self will check in with Richard Collins, dean of the school of humanities at Cal State Bakersfield, on the community celebrations of the 75th anniversary of "The Grapes of Wrath."

Americana hero Dave Alvin will kick off the festivities with a special concert at the Fox on

Friday, and we'll be giving away tickets to the show. Also up for grabs are four tickets to a Valentine's Day concert by Don Felder, right-formerly of the Eagles, who wrote the music to classic rock gem "Hotel California."

For more on Felder, pick up The Californian Sunday for our interview with the guitarist, who discusses his leg-

cy in one of the most successful bands in rock history, and the dysfunction and divisions that ultimately drove him away.

Watch "First Look" at bakersfield.com or tune in at 1180-AM, KERN. The show airs from 7 to 10 a.m. each weekday morning, and the Eye Street segment is on every Thursday at 9.

