

Obituaries

James Fee, 56; His Bleak Photos Depicted U.S. Culture in Decline

By MARY ROURKE
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James Fee, whose photographs of abandoned factories, lonesome highways and disjointed human figures express his sense of loss for what he remembered as better times for this country, died Monday. He was 56.

Fee died of liver cancer at his home in Beverly Hills, his photography dealer, Craig Krull, said.

He photographed what he saw as America's cultural icons in decline, the rusted cars, crumbling drive-in movie theaters and other discards that fascinated him. He worked like "an archeologist, exposing the detritus of a rapidly changing civilization," Krull wrote in a recent essay about Fee's images.

Fee once explained his objective. "Anything that was being torn down and removed from our landscape was of interest to me, because I feel that is what is happening to us as individuals," he said in a 1999 interview with the San Francisco Chronicle.

He photographed in black and white as well as in color, often creating a series of images around a certain theme, such as his "Photographs of America," about decrepit icons. Another series, "Four Days in New York," shows tourist attractions from unusual angles.

An image of the Statue of Liberty titled "True Meaning" refers to the promises of freedom and equal rights the statue represented to Fee. "He was disappointed in what America has become as opposed to what it could be," Krull said of Fee this week.



JAMES FEE

Some compared him to the Beat Generation poets he admired or to writer Raymond Chandler.

His most autobiographical series, "Peleliu Project," is an eerie set of images based on a World War II battle between U.S. and Japanese troops. The show was exhibited at Krull's gallery in Santa Monica in 2001 and later toured.

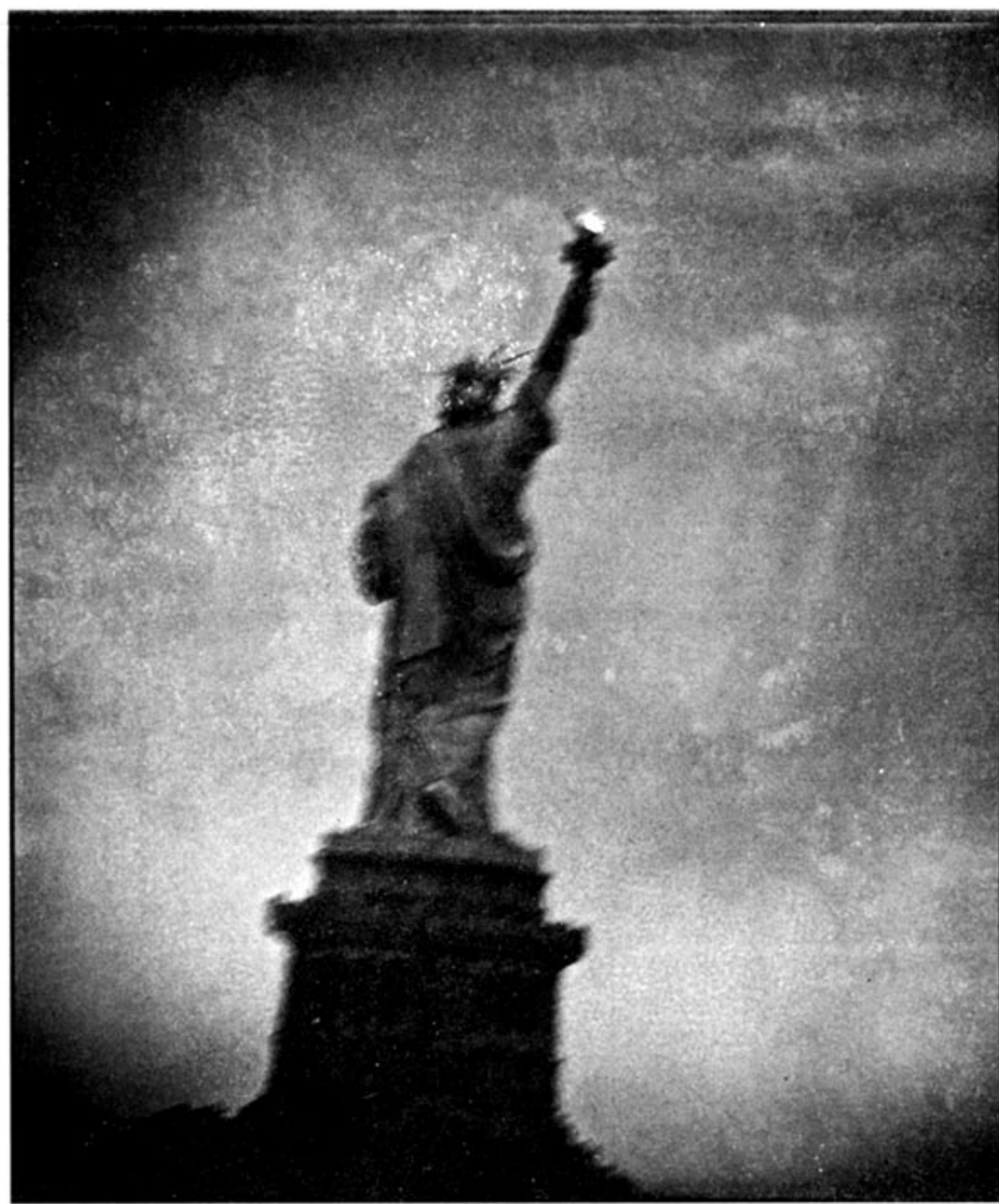
Fee shot most of the images during a visit to Peleliu, a small Pacific island, in 1998. The others were taken by his father, who was a medic with the Marine Corps on Peleliu during a harrowing battle there in 1944.

The conflict began in September that year, when U.S. forces landed on the Japanese-occupied island. Many of the Japanese soldiers hid in caves and picked off Americans. During two months of vicious hand-to-hand combat, U.S. soldiers poured fuel over the caves and ignited them, killing the men inside. There were almost 20,000 casualties altogether.

James Fee photographed rusted weapons, human skulls and the tip of a sunken Japanese fighter plane, among other remnants of the war. His father's straightforward images show Marines firing artillery or posing outside a field hospital, Japanese prisoners, destroyed tanks — all conveying stoic restraint.

"Atmosphere is everything in these works," critic David Pagels wrote in the Los Angeles Times in 2001. Fee embarks on "an inward journey whose goal is to come to terms with the emotional torment that neither father nor son could leave behind on the island."

The violence disturbed Russell Fee for the rest of his life and caused



Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica.

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flashbacks until he committed suicide in 1972.

The bleak aura of Fee's photographs led reviewers of his many exhibitions to refer to his "Apocalypse Now" sensibilities. Some compared him to the Beat Generation poets he admired or to mystery writer Raymond Chandler for his ominous vision of Los Angeles.

Museum curators titled Fee's exhibitions "American Noir" and "The Weight of Time" to suggest his point of view.

A solitary road poet among photographers, Fee once departed from

his usual way to collaborate with sculptor George Herms, who shared his attraction to the Beat Generation. They created a series of photographs and assemblages.

He also photographed nudes, taking his inspiration from painters, especially Paul Cezanne's weighty, geometric figures.

Fee was born Dec. 7, 1949, in Knoxville, Iowa, and raised in several cities around the state. After graduating from high school, he drove across the country and settled in San Francisco. He later lived in New York City before he moved to Los Angeles.

He taught photography at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena for eight years until 2003 and earlier at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles for one year in 1993.

He was married once and had one son before the marriage ended in divorce.

He is survived by his son, Ilya, of San Francisco; two sisters, Kate Fee Fulkerson of Timberlake, N.C., and Mary Fee Steed of Melchior, Iowa; and Keiko Nobe, his companion of many years.

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