

Deco Bookshelf

By Jim Sweeney

***The Restless Decade: John Gutmann's Photographs of the Thirties* (Abrams, \$19.95 paperback)**

Photographic images of the 1930s have been boiled down in the popular imagination to a few scenes, mostly by photographers working on federally funded arts projects. But many other photographers were working then and their images can give us a slightly different take on the era.

That's the best part of *The Restless Decade: John Gutmann's Photographs of the Thirties*: you get excellent photographs (Gutmann considered the work produced then to be his best) combined with a different angle on the period. The book is a paperback reissue of a book first published in the 1980s.

His work showed the influence of avant-garde art movements in Europe from the 1920s and 1930s, when he was studying to be a painter. Self-taught as a photographer, he had a slightly quirky cropping style with tilted angles.

He began teaching art at San Francisco State College in 1936, and founded its creative photography program a decade later. He taught at the college until 1973.

Gutmann, who died in 1998 at age 93, fled Nazi Germany in 1933, moving to San Francisco. He was fascinated by the very different world in which he found himself. The book's chapters cover common themes in Gutmann's work: automobile culture, street scenes and signs, graffiti, people, the Depression, the human spectacle.

"Cord in Harlem" shows both Gutmann's technique and his fascination with cars. It's a wide-angle view of two black men getting into a car on a Harlem street. Almost everything is dark: the men's suits, the street, the buildings. But there's enough light in the sky to highlight the light-colored car, which is the main subject.

He took photos of cars almost everywhere: at an Oregon beach, at a San

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Francisco high school, at a park. His fascination with vehicles also led to offbeat subjects, such as a close-up shot of a bicycle owned by a Mexican barber. It has lights, horns, a speedometer, fur trim and a hood ornament.

Gutmann also photographed cultural monuments: the first drive-in restaurant and drive-in theater in Los Angeles.

Some of his photos will remind viewers of Berenice Abbott's work, espe-