

ASPEN HOME

SUMMER 2008

Inside Out

GARDENS FOR SUMMER ENTERTAINING

SELF-EXPRESSION

LOCAL ARCHITECTS' OWN HOMES

FERENC BERKO'S LIVING LEGACY

PLUS

HOME GYMS THAT MOTIVATE
AN ECO-FRIENDLY EMPORIUM
TRENDS FOR TOTS

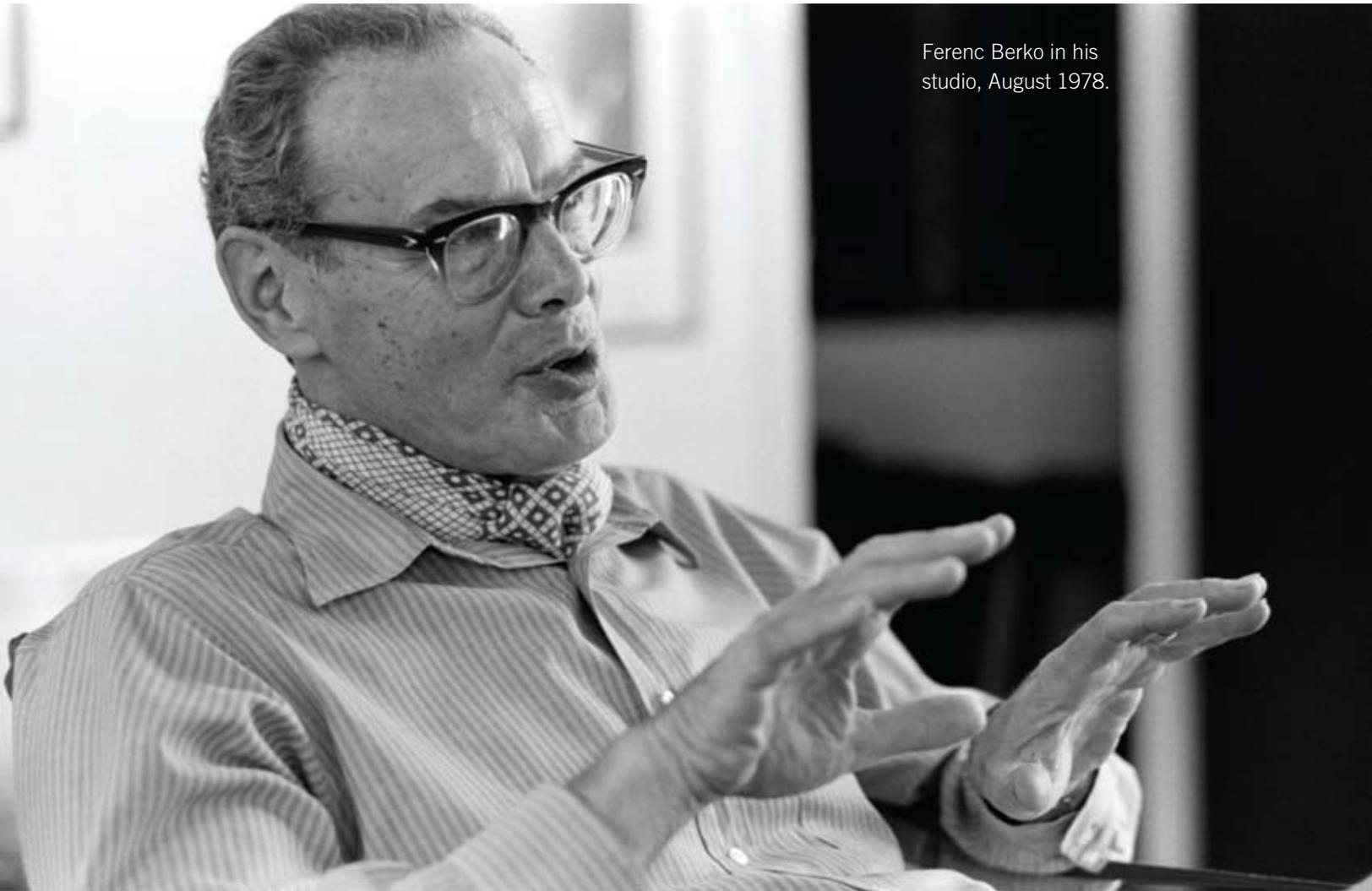
Clockwise, from bottom left: Four of Berko's grandchildren—Mirte Mallory; her brother, Linden; their cousin Dana Fleisher; and sister Eliana Mallory. Daughter Nora Berko looks through the window.



Photographic Memory

FERENC BERKO'S WEST END HOME REMAINS A VITAL PLACE TO SUSTAIN HIS VISION

BY CINDY HIRSCHFELD
PHOTOS BY PAT SUDMEIER



Ferenc Berko in his studio, August 1978.

Chris Cassatt

Photographer Ferenc “Franz” Berko was a pioneer in many ways. Through his innovative abstract images and keen sense of pattern and form, he forged a new aesthetic in photography. He was one of the earliest artists to realize the full potential of color film. When he settled in Aspen in 1949, he joined those at the forefront of reinventing the town as a world-class ski resort and cultural mecca. And he was one of the first to capture Aspen on film so abundantly, in all its many moods and guises.

Berko died at the age of 84 in 2000. But the small Victorian in Aspen’s West End where he and his wife, Mirte, lived since 1957 remains in the family. Two years ago, granddaughter Mirte Mallory, 28, and her fiancé, Philip Jeffreys, moved into the house that Mirte calls “the epicenter of our family.”

An Uncommon Opportunity

In our transient society, it’s not often that one gets—

or even necessarily wants—the opportunity to live in one’s grandparents’ home. But Mirte, with Philip, seems to have struck a healthy balance between honoring the past and making the space her own. “You can bring new life into a house that is infused with history. Making my life in this home doesn’t mean I have forgotten,” she notes.

And infused with history it is. The Hungarian-born Berko and his German wife moved to Aspen soon after Berko’s first visit, as a photographer for the Goethe Bicentennial. Having lived together in London, Paris, Bombay, and Chicago, the couple found in Aspen the beginnings of a cosmopolitan culture paired with the striking beauty of the natural landscape that would inspire and challenge Berko’s work.

Mirte Berko, who passed away in 2007, ran a children’s store, the Toy Counter, in town and, says her granddaughter, “was the strength behind [Berko’s] vision in a lot of ways.”



Berko took this photo of snow-covered mounds along a river in 1951. “He loved the ‘early years’ of Aspen, especially the abundance of snow,” says daughter Nora. “Every building, car, fence became a discovery of contrast and composition. The snow created a playground for the application of Bauhaus concepts—it defined shapes, patterns, and lines more starkly, transcending the ordinary.”

Keeping alive her grandparents’ legacy can be as simple as retracing their steps on errands to the grocery store or the bank. “I’m overjoyed to be home,” says Mirte. “And I’m humbled by how fortunate I am to be third generation [here].” In a more intensive endeavor, she oversees the archives of Berko’s work and delights in discovering new ways of presenting his images that both reinforce and expand on his lifelong artistic quest.

If Walls Could Talk

As an official photographer for the Aspen Institute and the Aspen Music Festival for close to 40 years, Berko met, and befriended, many of the great thinkers and artists of the mid-twentieth century. “My father would always have certain people come to the studio,” says Gina Berko, one of his two daughters. “Robert Kennedy, for instance. We’d go over and shake hands. It was very exciting.” At the same time,

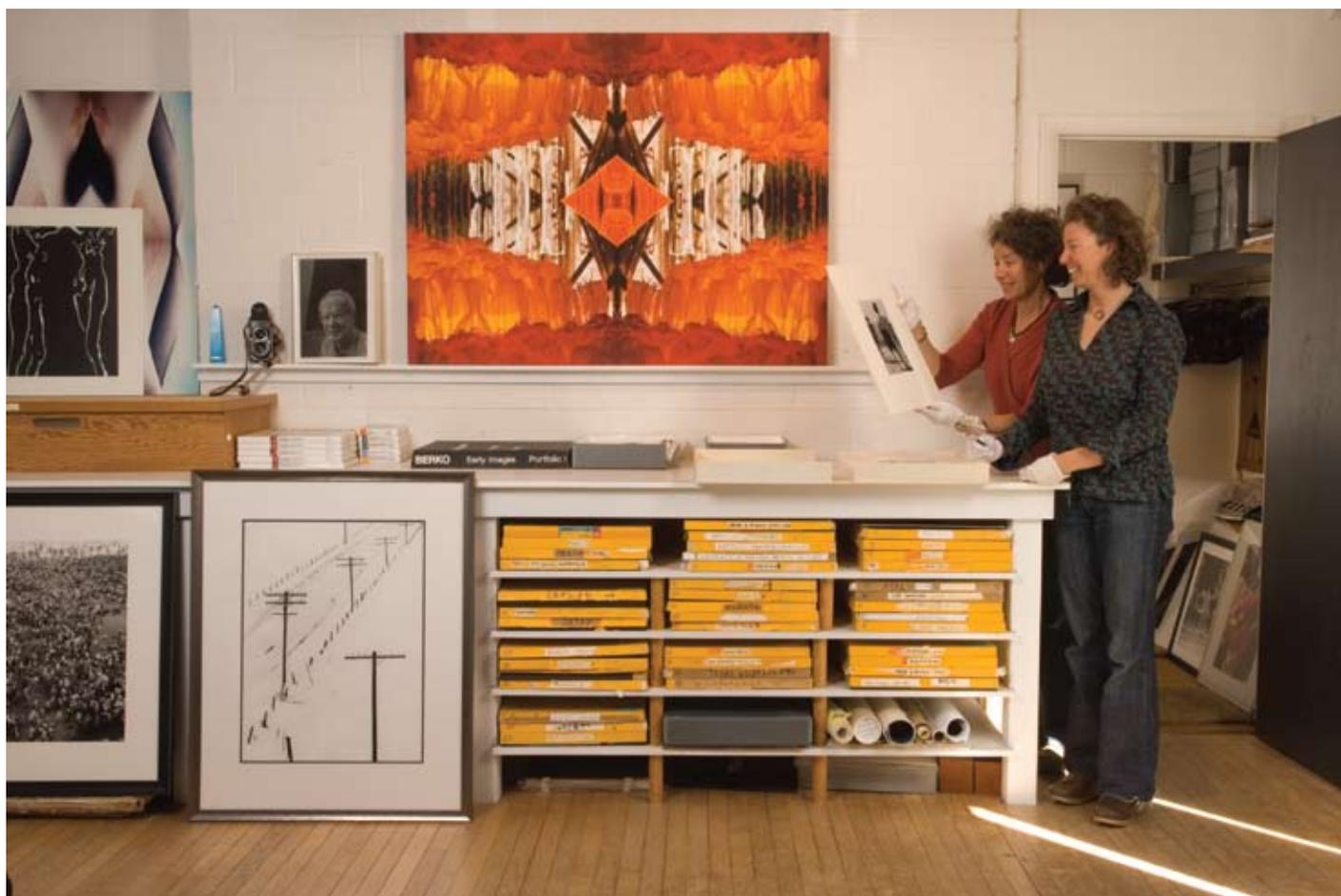
such meetings were also remarkable for their unremarkability. “In the Paepcke Era,” says daughter Nora Berko, “Aspen was very small, and the notables went unnoticed while [also being] embraced by the community.”

During the frequent dinner parties and gatherings at the Berko home, Gina and Nora were often allowed to stay up an hour past bedtime, so they could sit on the stairs in their pajamas and listen to the conversations taking place below.

But, not surprisingly, it’s the more mundane memories of everyday life that resonate most deeply. A small table sits in a corner of the kitchen, next to a

window facing Aspen Mountain. “The kitchen was the centerpoint of our lives,” says Gina. “Nora and I would be doing our homework, my mother would be cooking dinner, and my father would be retouching his photos with bottles of ink. There was always a cat in someone’s lap.” Mirte, too, recalls the same scenario occurring a generation later, when she and her brother would stop by after school.

The house continues to serve as a grounding element for the extended Berko family. “We still know where to find each other for afternoon tea and Linzer torte,” says Nora.



Mirte and her mother, Nora, in the studio, next to one of the quadruples that Berko started experimenting with towards the end of his career. Starting with one of his earlier abstract photos, he manipulated and reversed the negatives in the darkroom to create striking new compositions. “Bauhaus encouraged experimentation,” says Mirte, “not only through the lens but through the

mediums of reproduction.” An example of Berko’s earlier experimentation, in the 1950s, is the small nude at far left (leaning against another quadruple). To create what looks like an abstract sketch, he used the technique of solarization, in which the negative is exposed to light before it is fully developed, resulting in a reversal of the black and white tones.



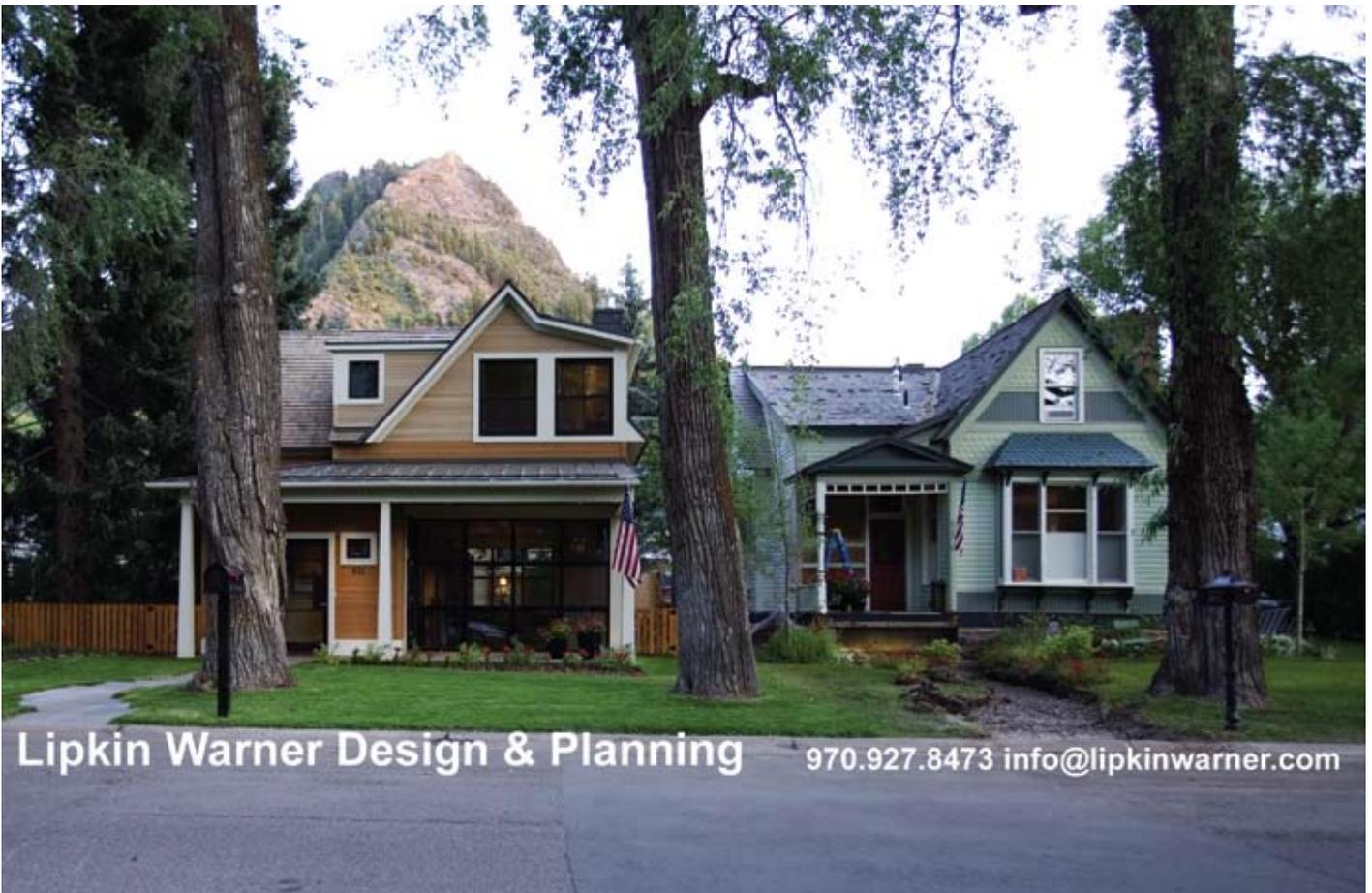
Mirte assembled this abstract triptych to “celebrate [Berko’s] consistency of vision for line, across countries and across subject matters.” At left is the Aspen Music Tent. In the middle are pipes in an Indian cement factory (“he found beauty in the industrial,” notes Mirte) and, at right, an image from the Jantar Mantar, an astrological observatory in India.

A Studio in Contrast

About 20 paces from the house, sheltered by a stand of pines, is Berko’s studio. Designed in 1964 by Ted Mularz, an associate of Aspen architect Fritz Benedict, the studio embodies the Bauhaus ideal of form and function, spareness, and materials, like cinder block, that endure.

“He loved the dialogue between the Victorian and this modern structure,” notes Mirte. “It was very much representative of the time, history with a modernist perspective.”

It was here that her grandfather processed his film, in the basement-level darkroom, and experimented with various means of reproducing his photos. “He saw beyond the image and pushed the limits in all ways,” says Mirte.



Lipkin Warner Design & Planning 970.927.8473 info@lipkinwarner.com



The process began, of course, with what he captured through his lens. To Berko, a pair of aspens wasn't just a couple of trees but a canvas for a series of heavily-browed eyes that appear to gaze out from the trunks. Some of his color images verge on abstract expressionist paintings—though his interest in pattern, repetition, and geometric form came from his immersion in the Bauhaus movement while growing up in Germany.

“My father taught us to see, to discern the beautiful detail in ordinary objects,” says Nora. “Gina and I would so often find him hunched over the camera, looking at some apparently insignificant detail, which became an object of wonder when seen through the lens.”

That fascination with detail, and the related ability to forge connections between seemingly incongruous things, is reflected in the small objects—shells, river stones, pieces of wood—that Berko collected during his travels. He arranged them in groupings that still stand on shelves in the studio.

Overall, it was not things but visual moments that Berko collected, notes Mirte. She recalls talking walks with him and “seeing how he would stoop and what would catch his attention. In his living he exuded teaching.” Her approach to curating his work, she says, “is to present his images in novel ways that pass on the gift he gave me of seeing.”

Berko had just come from Chicago to Aspen when he took these industrial-tinged photos in the summer of 1949. “He focused on the details that are often overlooked,” says Mirte. To accentuate the images, she mounted them on Plexiglas, which adds a bit of three-dimensional depth to the photos. The abstract at left was painted by Mirte’s fiancé.

A Winter’s Tales

When Mirte was a sophomore at Dartmouth, she returned to Aspen that winter to further develop her growing appreciation of her grandfather’s work. Equipped with a tape recorder and notepad, she visited him regularly, sharing memories and insights. “The stories that have been told in these walls span the world,” she explains. “I wanted to hear more of those and to document them.” Her grandfather was obliging, if a bit bemused. One day, recalls Mirte, “I had the tape recorder running, and he looked at me and said, ‘What are you going to do with all this?’ My response was, ‘We’ll see. What’s most important is that we had this time together.’”

The pair spent mornings in the studio, going through photographs. “He’d tell stories, and I’d ask questions,” Mirte says. “I could ask anything, and I did, but there were places he couldn’t go, and I was respectful of that.”

continued on page 68



Mirte Mallory by the living room window where she and her grandfather frequently sat one winter to discuss his life and work. "The spontaneous conversations were the most valuable," she says. "The spark would show in his eyes."

OUR ASPEN HOME continued from page 50

One warm March day, Berko and a few family members rode the gondola up Aspen Mountain to have lunch at the recently remodeled Sundeck. While Berko took in the vista from the top of the mountain, remembers Mirte, "he arched his back and said, 'My god, it's beautiful.' That landscape had been his landscape for the last 50-some years, and here he was with his grandchildren, who had made it their landscape as well."

A few days later Berko passed away. "Thank goodness I came home that winter," Mirte says. "I knew this was what I wanted to do."

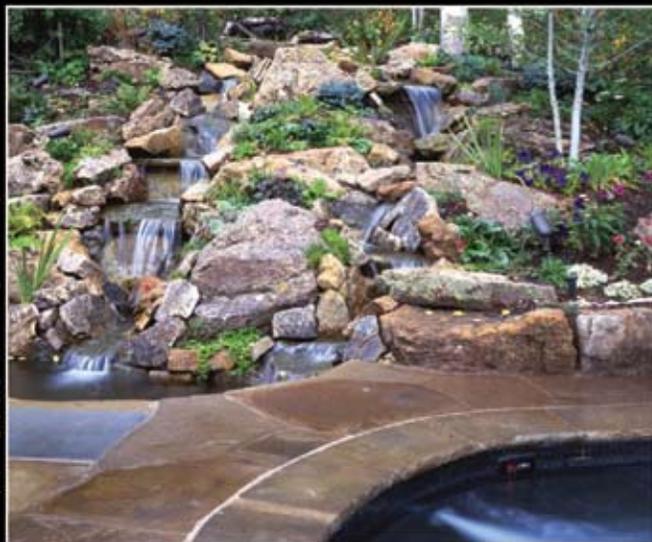
Sense of Stewardship

Over the past couple of years, Mirte has overseen the production of calendars and notecards featuring Berko's work. This spring, some of his most resonant images have been released in archival giclée prints, with custom framing available. The first collection concentrates on black-and-white images of Aspen, including historic scenes and a few abstracts. Another well-known Aspen photographer, George Stranahan, prints many of the photos.

As the gallery of prints expands, it will encompass Berko's international work, too, including documentary images and abstracts in both black and white and color. Plus, Mirte is always looking for new ways to show the photography.

"I'm able to bring in another generation's interpretation of his visions," she says. "I can keep his photos alive knowing he would be happy with the presentation." The same would go for his home. **AF**

Since 1987, Alpine Design & Planning has led homeowners, architects and contractors in designing and constructing custom landscapes.



Landscape photography by Steve Mandinger. Portrait by Jim Paussa



Cathy Markle

ALPINE
Design & Planning
Inc.

Landscape Architecture

P.O. Box 9348 • Aspen, CO • 970.925.6585

www.alpinedesignandplanning.com