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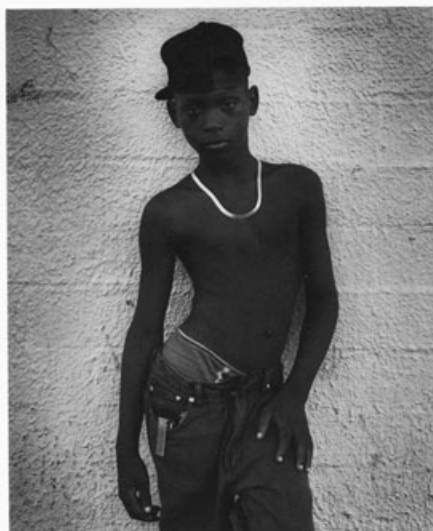
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MULTICULTURALISM

4 Discriminating Tastes: Re-examining the Quality Issue

Myriad issues affect artists working in the multicultural environment. *Jo Ortel*, an audience member at the symposium held in conjunction with the "Message Carriers" exhibition at the Houston Center for Photography, examines the role of the issue of quality in perceptions of the artists' works.

5 Multicultural Message Carriers

Otilia Sanchez responds to questions surrounding the artistic tenets of the American Indian.

EXHIBITIONS

6 The Work of Women

The distinctive work of women photographers in Texas relates the experiences of the individual to the journey of all women. The recent show "Re:Framing the Past: Recent Works by Texas Women Photographers" highlights nine of these photographers. Reviewed by *Mary Visser*.

8 Montage: The Ghost in the Machine

Organizers proclaimed the festival's aim as revealing "the fusion of art and technology." *Hans Staartjes* recounts the high and low points of the event.

9 Drawn to the Light: Montage 1993

After attending the festival, *Charles Wiese* offers a comparison of modern man's attraction to the computer that is not unlike his prehistoric ancestor's pull toward firelight.

10 Pea Pods and Pears

Musings on the unique personalities of collectors and what drives these individuals. *Maggie Olvey* also offers insight into the distinctive "Allan Chasanoff Photographic Collection" at the MFAH.

11 The Rite of Women's Autobiography

The process of writing a woman's life, whether visually or on a page, repositions her in the patriarchal society. "The Visual Diary" at the Houston Center for Photography is examined by *Patricia Lee Yongue*.

15 Measures of Light

In "San Antonio Project: Judy Bankhead 1976-1991" Bankhead has sought to personify societal ills through her portraits of individuals. The revealed emotions strike a chord of agreement in reviewer *Paul Hester*.

16 Trees Abound

Ed Osowski reviews the summer Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston exhibition "Forest for the Trees."

17 Uncivil Wars

Cindy Sherman's "Civil War Series" at Texas Gallery revealed yet another aspect of Sherman's artistic personality. This show was an opportunity to look at the photographer's artistic evolution as well as her current means of personal cultural critique. Reviewed by *Ed Osowski*.

18 Ezra Stoller Looking at Galveston Past

In his review *Ed Osowski* recounts the historical Galveston photographic project undertaken by Stoller to document the city's artistic past. The review coincides with the June reissue of the accompanying book by Rice University Press.

BOOKS

19 Just Plain Folks

By removing the slick guise of many celebrity portraits, Gus Van Sant has lifted the veil and exposed the "sameness" we all share. *Gus Van Sant: 108 Portraits* by Gus Van Sant. Reviewed by *Michael G. DeVoll*.

20 For Love of the Show

In *Indian Circus* by Mary Ellen Mark with a foreword by John Irving, the itinerant life of the circus performer is examined. Reviewed by *Holly Hildebrand*.

21 Pixel Vision

Traversing the history of image-making from Pliny the Elder's account of the subject to the impact of contemporary digital technology on thought and practice. *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* by William J. Mitchell. Reviewed by *Mark Frohman*.

22 Books Received

EDITOR'S NOTE

"The portrait is a magic mirror in which the dead return and come to life. We see again in this mirror the men and women who were the artist's contemporaries. From this gallery of portraits, the physiognomy of history itself arises." This description of portraiture, written by Edmund and Jules de Goncourt in the nineteenth century, still provides a glimpse into the allure of the art. What is so enticing to many of us when viewing a show of portraits, whether painted or photographed, is the motivations of the artist and his acquaintances. Hence, the frenzied attendance of glitzy portrait exhibitions such as the Annie Leibovitz at the MFAH. Included in this issue of SPOT are essays and reviews that touch on the wide range of image-making styles included in portraiture.

Just Plain Folks, Michael G. DeVoll's review of *Gus Van Sant: 108 Portraits*, strips away the mystery of this filmmaker and photographer's often idolized friends and colleagues. DeVoll's review emphasizes the "democratic" qualities of Van Sant's portraits which express his deliberate efforts to reject the aims and results of Hollywood glamour photography and of photographers like Baron de Meyer or Cecil Beaton. Van Sant's own sexual preference—or that aspect of it that is counter-cultural—may also find expression here. The Houston Center for Photography and Jamison Thomas Gallery (Portland, OR) have organized a traveling exhibition of this series, *Casting Couch: Portraits by Gus Van Sant*.

Also in this issue, *For Love of the Show*, Holly Hildebrand's review of *Indian Circus* by Mary Ellen Mark includes some unusual portraits of people who make the Indian circus their life. The majority are children who use the circus as means of survival—bypassing lives of prostitution or crime to support themselves. Mark made several trips with numerous competing circus troupes to compile these photos.

A special section to accompany "The Visual Diary" exhibition at the Houston Center for Photography, which is part of the Women in Photography Conference, is also included in this issue of SPOT. Patricia Lee Yongue compares the awakenings gained through autobiographical art to those found by a writer in the novel *The Land of the Pointed Firs*.

Karen Gillen Allen

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Editor's Note: The following letter was received in response to Linda Benedict Jones' review of Paul Hendrickson's biography of Marion Post Wolcott published in the Summer 1993 issue of SPOT.

Dear Editor,

It was my good fortune to get to know Marion Post Wolcott and Lee during the last twenty years of Marion's life. I was one of the people who helped get Marion back into the public domain, although Lee Witkin deserves the bulk of the credit.

I went with Lee Witkin on that fateful day when he found Marion and Lee living in retirement in Mendocino, California. Marion had not done any printing since before her FSA days. With the offer of a show in the Witkin Gallery she eagerly embraced the idea of getting her old negatives from the Library of Congress and printing them anew. Lee Wolcott was in total support of the idea. I took on the task of helping her re-learn printing. Lee and Marion moved from Mendocino to San Francisco to become my neighbors. Both Lee and Marion spent many hours printing in my darkroom. We became good friends, and they let my wife, Brook Gray, and me enter into their lives as only good friends can. I think we know a great deal about their lives together.

While Paul Hendrickson did a fine service to photography with his book, I believe he fell into a writer's trap when he depicted Lee Wolcott as both Marion's lover and principal foe. Lover he surely was, but in no way was he her foe. It makes a good read, and in this time of feminist rhetoric it comes off as politically correct, but it does a disservice to Lee.

Lee is a strong personality, no doubt—but Marion was no panty-waist. In Lee's own words, "Marion was one tough cookie." She had to be, to have the courage to travel the South alone and venture into juke joints and other worlds forbidden to women. If any woman was a match for the men around her, it was Marion.

What happened to Marion was a product of the times. By the time Marion left the FSA, the whole project was going down the tube, suffering much the same fate as the NEA in our time. A lot of political nerds thought the FSA was a communist conspiracy. Stryker had a difficult time keeping the operation going in the face of mounting criticism to the effect that FSA photographs were somehow un-American. Not too long after Marion's departure the whole ball of wax melted. What happened to Marion after that ran parallel to what happened to the rest of the FSA photographers. Their hot streak was over. Walker Evans became a *Fortune* magazine editor and only worked sporadically behind a camera. Rothstein became a magazine editor. Dorothea Lange worked off and on. She did manage to carve out a place for herself as some kind of pop icon. What ever happened to Russell Lee? He continued to work at annual report photography and the like, but his reputation is based on FSA. How about Vachon, Ben Shahn, Theo Jung, Collier? What do we hear from them as photographers after FSA? Very little, I would say. They all suffered similar fates. The only difference with Marion is that she became a wife, mother, farmer, world traveler, instead of a magazine editor. She also continued to photograph. I've seen some of this work and it deserves to be seen. No doubt, the rest of the FSA gang continued to photograph, and some day we will mine that silver lode. Lee Wolcott is trying to pull together Marion's later work and get it printed. Hardly the act of her "principle foe."

continued on page 22

Cover: Amy Blakemore, *Sister and Brother*, 1990, gelatin silver print. See story on pg 6.

DISCRIMINATING TASTES: Re-examining the Quality Issue

This essay is in response to a symposium and exhibition, Message Carriers at Houston Center for Photography September 10-October 24, 1993 Organized by the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University.

Jo Ortel

In 1990, Howardena Pindell, an African American woman artist, published the first in a two-part series of articles in *The New Art Examiner* in which she accused the art world of racism.¹ She included first-hand accounts of racist treatment she and other artists of color had experienced at the hands of gallery owners, dealers, museum curators, critics and art historians. She further based her charge on statistics she had gathered for an earlier, larger research document on the subject.² Her data clearly showed that artists of color are severely under-exhibited compared to their white colleagues. For Pindell, the appalling paucity of artists of color in the venues of the art world could only be attributed to racial discrimination.

Not surprisingly, Pindell's article provoked controversy. In this post-Civil Rights era of simultaneous high racial tension and sensitivity to "political correctness," her charge is serious and stinging—all the more so when directed at a sector of society that generally prides itself on its liberalism. But it was Pindell's suggestion that the art world invokes the issue of quality as a veil to cover overt racism that perhaps rankles most. Pindell wrote, "Double speak" and "double-think" codes are used in the art world to imply the ability of one group of artists (people of European descent) to produce 'quality' work, and the inability of another group of artists (people who are not of European descent) to produce 'quality' work. The word 'quality' is therefore used as if it were synonymous with skin pigmentation and ancestry, but is stated publicly as signifying an unsullied and courageous color-blind standard.³

Despite Pindell's solid artistic reputation, one can almost hear her opponents suggesting in retaliation that hers were the charges of an artist who refused to accept the possibility that maybe her art was not good enough to be exhibited; bitter, she played her only trump card and made the accusation of racism. It is a familiar counterattack, similar to the one with which feminist artists are regaled when they accuse the art world of sexist practices.

I could not help but think of Pindell's article when the question of artistic quality was raised in one local review of "Message Carriers," the recent exhibition of photographic work by eight contemporary Native American artists held at the Houston Center for Photography. Included in the show were Patricia Deadman, Zig Jackson, Carm Little Turtle, James Luna, Larry McNeil, Jolene Rickard, Hulleah J. Tsinhahjinnie and Richard Ray Whitman. The exhibition, which travelled to HCP from the Photographic Resource Center in Boston, was curated by Theresa Harlan (also a Native American of Laguna, Santo Domingo, and

Jemez Pueblo descent). The response was overwhelmingly positive. Some reviewers, however, suggested that the organizers had suspended their critical judgment in an effort to present a show that would conform to current standards of political correctness. Once again, we circle back to the ubiquitous issue of quality.

What is this notion of quality? On what do we base quality judgments? What are our priorities concerning "good" art? More importantly, where do these criteria come from? Who or what is determining—or has predetermined—them?

In an article entitled "Critical Reflections," Thomas McEvilley wrote that "the mainstream tradition in Western philosophy... has argued for universal and unchanging criteria of quality that are supposedly valid for

good have been observed to change from age to age."⁴

Eunice Lipton, too, de-mystified the process in her essay for the catalogue accompanying the 1990 exhibition, "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s." "As scientific as twentieth-century art critics have tried to be," she wrote, "or insisted they have been, any evaluation of style is obviously a personal matter, a question of taste."⁵ Assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, quality does not inhere in certain works of art; rather, the notion of quality is a cultural construct. Judgments about good and bad art are fluid, shifting historically and culturally specific.

The whole unwieldy apparatus we call the art world is engaged in the business of establishing taste, setting standards. Art critics, dealers, museum curators, art historians

duced by artists with experiences that differ from our own to fit neatly into our boxes. But this ought to make us reflect upon and perhaps even reconsider our criteria—not the art we are trying to make conform—and our motives in imperiously imposing our standards as if they were universal and absolute. McEvilley is justified in suggesting that, "when one community of taste attempts to enforce its idea of quality on another, an irrational and dangerous act is performed that can only arise from hidden, perhaps violent motives."⁶ Again, Lipton: "Finally, the most important question must be: Whose voices have access to distribution and power, and whose don't? And why?"⁷

Through cultural and social events of the past thirty years, many of us have recognized the necessity and desirability of being pluralis-



Jolene Rickard, from the series *I See Red* in '92, 1992, original in color



all times and places."⁸ McEvilley continued, "There are differences in expression... but it is a shared idea that correct judgments are based on a correct perception of universals, and incorrect ones on a misperception of them. Absolute values, in this view, are inborn to all humans identically in all times and places... Some people can apprehend these inborn ideas clearly, and some, because of a variety of obscuring factors, cannot."⁹

This belief in absolute quality and in the ability of some to discern it where others are unable has informed much art critical writing in the past century, if not longer. A substantial coterie of "cultural arbiters" continues to cling to these beliefs. In a recent documentary film about the feminist group, the *Guerrilla Girls*, one art consultant was asked how he identifies quality in art. "That is a mysterious process," he exclaimed, "Like describing how one falls in love." Apparently, quality inheres in the work of art, the ability to recognize it is a god-given gift, and the process by which one discerns it is inexplicable, intangible, but nonetheless real.

Yet, others have pointed out the dubious base upon which such a belief in the universality of quality rests. As McEvilley notes, the evidence would suggest that it is subjective and relative. "First, there is the historical evidence: the simple fact that taste changes over time. Countless examples could be invoked to illustrate this; we're all familiar with them. Artists seen as great by their own generation may seem mediocre to a later one, and vice versa. The very notions of what makes a work

(myself included) are all implicated to one degree or another. Pronouncements from the cultural arbiters carry great weight, especially today. Large sums of money change hands, careers are made or broken on the pronouncements of the "art experts." Through even the most guileless choices we make when we curate or review exhibitions, publish scholarly articles, or design academic courses, we implicitly help to determine which works will end up in the canon of Art (with a capital "A"), which works are great, mediocre, or just plain kitsch. Sorting through the vast array of cultural production, we determine what has quality or merit and what does not.

The authority of these gatekeepers of culture derives from education and training. "They have learned the 'history' of past art and know what to look for in present art," Lipton has written.¹⁰ But what privileges have they enjoyed (or taken for granted) that enabled them the luxury of learning history, and whose history are they learning? Just what is the relationship between one's socio-economic background and one's conception of art? As McEvilley has mused, "It seems clear that we take as objective measures of value what we have been conditioned to take that way... One of [the conditioning factors] is the cultural tradition in which one lives. In the Western tradition in general, for example, any art that rises from the Greco-Roman lineage... looks recognizable as art and thus will correspond to some degree to our tradition of connoisseurship."¹¹

Conversely, we should not expect art pro-

tic, "panoramic" in our definitions of art and in our evaluations of quality. Yet for even the most open-minded, certain parameters persist. For example, we may embrace the obligatory postmodern theories of the artist (I refer to Roland Barthes' notion of the death of the author), but at the most fundamental, unacknowledged level, our expectations still encompass the person of the artist, and his or her motivations in producing art.¹² I was reminded of some of these unquestioned boundaries and trenchant assumptions when, a few years ago, a friend suggested we browse a "gallery" that catered to tourist trade and was filled with mass-produced paintings. "What? That's not art," I exclaimed. "That's kitsch!" I may be liberal, but no self-respecting art historian would set foot in such a den of crass commercialization, just as none will likely be found at the "starving artist" sales regularly promoted in tiresome television commercials.

We cultural arbiters have a vested interest in maintaining hierarchies. Do away with these dubious distinctions and the need for the art expert vanishes. Mary Edwards Walker, nineteenth-century physician, feminist and reformer, once said, "You [men] are not our protectors... If you were, who would there be to protect us from?" Shift the focus and Walker's pithy comment would apply in this context.

Like McEvilley, I am not advocating that we dispense with value judgments altogether; that need not be the ultimate goal. Whenever we find ourselves making evaluative judg-



Zig Jackson, *Indian Photographing Tourist Photographing Indian*, 1992

ments about art, or dismissing work with an invocation of "quality," we might instead simply proceed cautiously, with greater self-consciousness. We ought to take a moment to acknowledge our assumptions and our conditioning to ourselves and to our audience. We would be well-served, I think, to notice how our experiences—economic, ethnic, social, political—are framing our picture of a work of art.

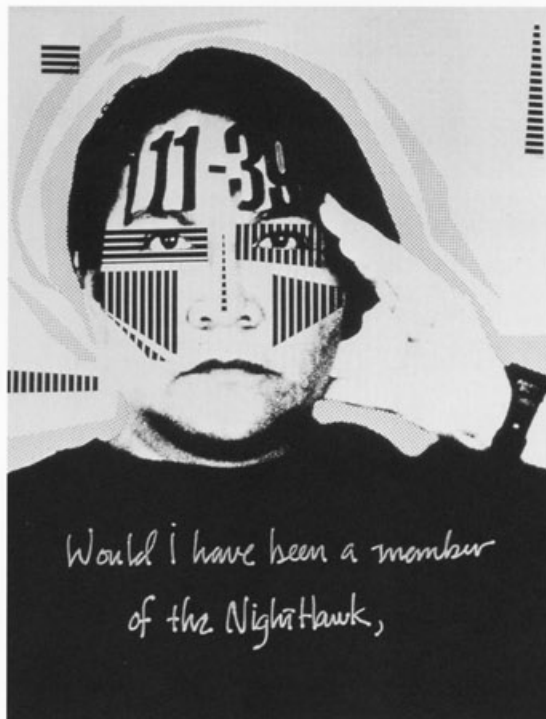
Let me suggest how this process can work. Over the course of my study of the sometimes thorny issues swirling around the multiculturalism debate in the arts, I have been troubled by the decision of some artists of color to be very protective of their art and extraordinarily selective about where and in what context their works are seen, reproduced, exhibited. The artists included in "Message Carriers" together with curator Theresa Harlan expressed this sentiment in the lively symposium that took place at HCP on September 11, 1993.¹⁴ This careful control would, they argued, help prevent the work of artists of color from being misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misjudged according to an inappropriate and ill-sorted set of criteria.

The position seemed problematic to me. I was disturbed by the implication that the art could not stand on its own. If it did not convey its message effectively without words, speeches, and symposia attached, without a carefully-controlled environment, how would the art possibly stand the test of time? What was to keep it from being misunderstood or misinterpreted later? I wondered, too, if these artists could really afford the luxury of being so selective about where and how their works were seen. Did they not desire visibility and recognition within the mainstream and if so, wasn't such protectiveness counter-productive? Finally, I was bothered by the implicit re-introduction of a hierarchical model, in which the artist's interpretation of her work is given greater significance than the viewer's.

Slowly, though, I am realizing that my concerns are saturated with Eurocentric, modernist expectations and assumptions—which may or may not overlap with those of the Native American artists included in "Message Carriers." I have been unthinkingly imposing my priorities for art and how art should function where they may not pertain. In probing why I place such importance on the autonomy of the art object, I have come to see that in a society so dominated by capitalism as ours is, the self-contained, self-referential work of art is valued because of its long-term market saleability. By extension, the modernist, universalist decree that art should transcend its cultural and historical moment has also been

shaped by these pervasive market forces. Recognizing where these priorities come from, I am better able to critique or relativize them: is there really any reason why this definition of a work of art is better than one which conceives art wholly differently, as larger (and perhaps more abstract, less materially-based) than the object/artifact per se? A work which resonated with our grandparents' generation but that today seems "dated" cannot, by our current criteria, be a great work of art. The definitions we take for granted suddenly seem arbitrary and altogether too rigid.

In fact, there is an analogous Native American belief (obviously generated from very different circumstances) that art can continue to communicate independently and beyond the life of its creator.¹⁵ Significantly, though, the panel discussion at HCP only marginally touched upon the photographs as objects. Eunice Lipton was right when she asserted that market forces—largely unacknowledged but ever present—are what drive our culture's desire for "codified and confirmed notions of quality and originality" in art critical discourse.¹⁶ Indeed, they drive our very conception of art and of how art should function.



Hulleah J. Tsinnahjinnie, *Census Makes a Native Artist*, detail, 1991

I begin to understand why Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie and Jolene Rickard (to name only two) are protective of their work. I sit uncomfortably here before my computer as I reread the closing words of Theresa Harlan's essay about native photographic messages: "So often, the task of interpretation is handed to non-native art historians or anthropologists

continued on page 20

AMERICAN INDIAN MESSAGE CARRIERS IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Editor's Note: The following interview was taken from talks with Otilia Sanchez, a panelist in the symposium accompanying the HCP "Message Carriers" exhibit. Sanchez is an active member of the Intertribal Council of Houston. She is founder of the American Indian Chamber of Commerce and has been involved in numerous outreach programs on a national, regional and local level. She is of Yaqui descent.

Editor: What place does art hold in American Indian culture?

Sanchez: The living spirit of the American Indian is his art—whether the medium is the flute, the drum, pottery, wood carvings, beadwork, paintings, photography, or songs. By his art, the American Indian perpetuates his own identity and culture; in this sense, art is a gift of understanding. His art serves as a "message carrier" about his identity to cultures outside his own—explaining who he is and what molds him. Serving as a message carrier to non-American Indian cultures is an educational process by which the American Indian can avoid the fragmentation and isolation caused by outside forces.

Ed.: How does the "Message Carriers" exhibit fit this idea of art?

Sanchez: The exhibit, "Message Carriers," is a fine example of American Indian beliefs regarding the artistic process of photography augmented by various art media and text. The eight photographers featured—Patricia Deadman, Zig Jackson, Carmen Little

Turtle, James Luna, Larry McNeil, Jolene Rickard, Hulleah J. Tsinnahjinnie, and Richard Ray Whitman—conveyed compelling messages to the audience, not only of identity but also of objectification and insensitivity. These messages deal with outsider (non-Indian) versus insider (Indian) views of American Indian culture and focus on history, social conflicts, and art.

Ed: Where does the notion of the "Noble Savage" come from and is there any truth to these perceptions?

Sanchez: Historically, outsiders have viewed the American Indian as a "noble savage" leading an idyllic life in total communion with nature. It's interesting to note that the labeling of American Indians as savages, as Chief Standing Bear wrote in his autobiography *The Land of the Spotted Eagle*, was "the last abuse" cast upon them. But all the years of calling the Indian a savage has never made him one. . .

This view is evident, for example, in the works of German writers and artists, most notably the novelist Karl May (1870s) and the artist August Macke (early 1900s). Theirs was a highly romanticized literary image of the American Indian, the natural man whose

life was apolitical and whose culture was not materialistic. Indeed, modern-day Germans still have a romantic view of American Indians and routinely participate in re-enactments of Indian dramas at the "Indian" city of Bad Segeberg or retreat to the recesses of Germany's Black Forest to revert to living the way the Cheyenne did, donning authentic-looking native dress, setting up tipis, and cooking over open fires.

As Lakota Chief Standing Bear wrote, "Let the American Indian write his own history; let him convey his message to the outside world." The realities of American Indian life and history, far from being glamorous, are more apparent to the insider than to the outsider.

Ed.: What is modern life like for American Indians?

Sanchez: Life for the American Indian, especially today, is plagued by social, educational, economic, and health problems experienced daily. Social problems deal primarily with the issue of identity, addressed by



Larry McNeil, *Americas*, 1491, 1992

Tsinnahjinnie in her black-and-white self-portraits, *Census Makes a Native Artist*. We are dealing with the problem of determining who is Indian and who is not. Does a tribal roll or Census number make one any more Indian than not having a number? How does one determine who is Indian—by blood quantum? Why is it even necessary to prove one's heritage?

The enactment of Public Law 101-644, "The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990," requiring native artists to prove their heritage, places the burden of proving "Indianness" on the Indian for the benefit of the outsider who wants to buy authentic Indian art. Why should the burden be placed on the artist and not on the consumer? If the potential buyer of Indian art is not knowledgeable, the problem is due to the outsider's own cast of mind which has failed to seek understanding and knowledge of what is or isn't Indian art.

Ed.: Are these realities at the root of the art of many modern American Indian artists?

Sanchez: This is often the case. For example, objectification and insensitivity of outside cultures are addressed in Zig Jackson's photograph, *Indian Photographing Tourist Photographing Indian*. Indians have long been treated as objects, and insensitive tourists often thrust their cameras at the "object" of their fancy, totally oblivious to the concept of invasion of one's space.

Each photographer succinctly brings a message to the audience, both Indian and non-Indian; and the audience leaves the exhibit with a questioning mind if not with a better understanding of modern-day American Indian culture. If the observer truly wants understanding, he will seek answers to the questions raised by the photographic art in "Message Carriers."

The Work of Women

Re:Framing the Past: Recent Work from Texas Women Photographers. Curated by Jean Caslin, Executive Director, Houston Center for Photography for Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, Texas, July 1-August 1, 1993. Galveston Art Center, March 3-April 24, 1994. Temple Art Center, June 1-July 1, 1994

Mary Visser

In "Re:Framing the Past" nine women artists question the political, societal and cultural content that has been given value by the status quo. Each image contributes to the whole concept of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal culture. The exhibition presents women who work as artists in the photographic medium as individuals and as part of the concept of *woman* that is constantly being redefined and expanded. The work asks that the viewer reexamine their assumptions about the role of women in this society.

In selecting this body of work Caslin has presented two interconnecting issues. The first has to do with the expanding format of photography within the artworld and the other has to do with how these women approach issues of gender and race through the photographic medium. I found the artwork to be not just an exhibition of the individual works of Texas women photographers but a rediscovery of women as producers of culture and meaning. These artists deconstruct the roles women have had superimposed upon them by a patriarchal society. The violence that women have suffered, the stereotyping of roles, the very definition of what it means to be a woman have been examined and reexamined by these artists.

Barbara DeGenevieve, a feminist photographer working to change oppressive representations of women and minorities in society, has written, "Photographic images carry ideological messages which cumulatively shape the culture's ideas, values, and attitudes. They are the bearers of cultural mythologies. If we see enough pictures of a certain type (women being brutalized by men, minorities as ghetto residents) we can conclude that such imagery is valuable to the culture. Especially, if certain aspects of society are not represented, it is most likely due to the fact that no importance

Susan Kae Grant, *Faith*, 1985, original in color



K. Johnson Bowles, *Post Catholic Relic #2: The Suffering of M.M.*, 1992, mixed media photo sculpture

is given to them or that they have a negative value for the culture (vulnerability in male sexuality, non-stereotypical images of women and people of color)."

In this exhibition the photographers ques-



Amy Blakemore, *Girl In Hedges*, 1992

tion the images we have of women and of ourselves. The exhibition records society's need to revalue women and let women define their own lives. Each artist presents a view we women have been told is ours in such a way that we are confronted by the damage and limitations imposed upon our gender.

Griselda Pollack and Deborah Cherry, both feminist art historians, make the following point about how women have been positioned in fine art, "Representing creativity as masculine and circulating woman as the beautiful image for the desiring male gaze, High Culture systematically denies knowledge of women as producers of culture and meaning."

Contemporary photography has become increasingly important as an avenue of artistic expression. Modernists once demanded that a work of art stand on its own "without relying on subject matter." This tenet looked to form, rather than subject, as the important element. This modernist theme moved photography into a place of acceptance within the fine art world. Important examples of this work are seen in Edward Weston's finely-crafted nudes and formalistic images of vegetables such as the *Pepper Series*.

This approach to image making can be found in the work of Amy Blakemore who works in the straight style which is the basis for the modernist theme, but who places the content of the subject over a formal approach to structure. Blakemore uses the technique of isolating the subject from its environment by using extreme contrasts in tone development. This separation of the subject from its surroundings gives the subject visual priority. Her use of the inexpensive Diana camera allows the details and tonality of the image to be defined by the qualities inherent in the plastic lens.

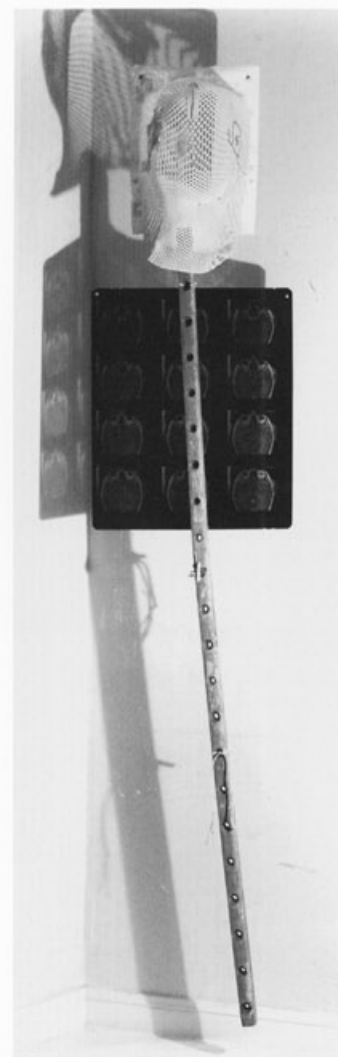
Many modernist photographers used the technique of compressing tonalities to heighten the viewer's attention to the formal qualities of their images such as shape and form. But Blakemore uses it to focus the viewer's perception on the content to be found within the subjects. She understands that when capturing the image one must allow the subject to be in control of his or her own presence. The photographer observes and then selects the moment when the subject reveals that presence.

In the work *Girl in Hedges*, a young girl looks back over her shoulder as she runs into a rectangular opening between two large box hedges. You receive an impression of both delight and danger from this slightly blurred view of the moment. Blakemore's photographs are portraits of the subject's interaction with the environment and with the viewer's memory. It is up to the viewer to complete

the content of the moment by bringing his or her own experience to the image. Blakemore visually isolates the subject to create an intimacy between the viewer and subject. The image is blurred and detail is obscured with purpose. The viewer must depend upon a sense of knowledge of the subject based upon interaction rather than observation.

In *Sister and Brother*, Blakemore uses Diane Arbus's confrontational mode of image making. However, there is a subtle but important difference when Blakemore uses this mode. In this work the subjects confront the viewer not the photographer. In Arbus's work one is always aware that the subject is being photographed. The photographer's presence creates a voyeuristic feeling in the images, and the viewer is made to feel an intruder. In Blakemore's image there is no such feeling of intrusion. You feel that sister and brother are responding directly to your gaze. The choice of vantage point is important to Blakemore. Vantage point allows the artist to declare a personal way of seeing which prevails even in the most complicated field of view. In *Three Girls*, Blakemore uses the camera low, placing the young girl central to the visual data surrounding her relaxed, but commanding presence. Blakemore's compositions may be formalistic, but her intent is to deliver the content with impact and enough ambiguity to force an interaction based upon the viewer's experiences. As a straight photographer she has been true to the formalistic structure of defining an image, but as a postmodernist she has given content priority. We are more aware of the subject of the moment and what we bring to the image than of the formal structure of these images.

Walker Evans stated that "We sense nothing in isolation, that we sense this for what it is only by reference to another thing." K. Johnson Bowles with her post-Catholic relics of mixed media assemblages, calls into question the tenets of a patriarchal culture that imposes upon its female members a role



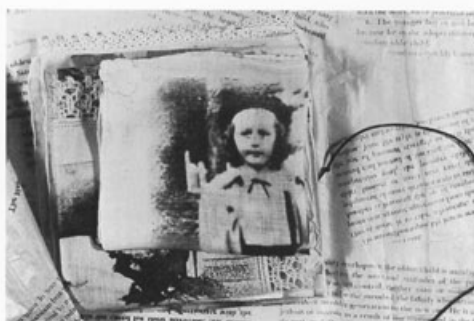
Maggie Olvey, *Fallout (Self-Portrait)*, 1992, mixed media photo sculpture

that denies the reality of women's lives. In her work *Post Catholic Relic #2*, we are faced with a pair of red stiletto heels as an icon for the suffering women undergo to become accepted within this society's definition of female. The nails leave no question that the wearing of these shoes is torture. Bowles examines the absurdity of this construct by making a relic out of this well known signifier of femininity. Its importance is acknowledged by the fact that women continue to submit to small and large forms of body pain to be attractive. Bowles uses her Catholic heritage to deconstruct issues of sexuality and identity. Within the context of a relic she gives these issues an importance and value not yet accepted within society. She deals with issues of self esteem based upon a stereotype of beauty that is unreal while focusing on issues of guilt and original sin that have been laid at the feet of

untitled (Me). In this image the face of a toddler girl has been cut out leaving a black gaping hole. The accompanying image is a photocopy of a young woman with her hands tearing at her hair and her mouth contorted in a silent scream. The contrast between the two images reconstructs the reality of the snapshot memory. DeBusk forces the viewer to reconstruct the lives of these little girls that is far different from what the snapshot conveys.

Like Blakemore, Robin Dru Germany asks the viewer to complete the story from his or her own personal experiences and memories. The image *The Story of the Earth is Long* is a mixed-media collage based upon images of individuals known or unknown to the artist. In the center is a photo booth strip shot showing a woman of the 1940s in four different poses. This strip is surrounded by images of planes dropping bombs and other war time imagery. Germany's photo collage tells of a war time madonna waiting for her man. In the mixed media work titled *Second View*, Germany has placed the image of a young girl on the lid of a hanging box surrounded by stereotypes of women and their body parts. When the lid is opened a dissected view of the internal reproductive organs along with a side view of the pubic region is juxtaposed with a glamour photo of a woman's profile. What must the viewer make of this collaboration of images? Germany states

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Kathy Lovas, *One of Two*, (Detail), 1990

women for centuries. If the patriarchal culture demands an artificial face and behavior that is so important that women are judged and valued by how well they adhere to the ideal, then that ideal should be held sacred she argues. But we are made acutely aware of the absurdity of these values when the relics of such policies are on view.

Cara Catherine DeBusk takes on issues of violence against women as a personal event and a general issue. In *untitled (Daddy)* completed in 1992, the image is composed of parallel images. On the left is a sepia-toned photo of a family scene coupled on the right with a photocopied image of a young woman's face expressing pain, anguish, and anger. The family scene appears calm except for the underlying tone of danger or threat. The threat appears to come from the father figure which has been replaced with a white silhouette. Two small girls are standing in the background and the empty silhouette of the father holds something in his hand in stabbing gesture. The little girl's expressions appear strange and tense rather than comfortable in the presence of this ominous figure. The accompanying photocopied image on the right shows a young woman's face twisting across the page with intense contortions of pain. The same coupling of painful individual memory versus the innocuous calm of a snapshot image appears in the photograph titled

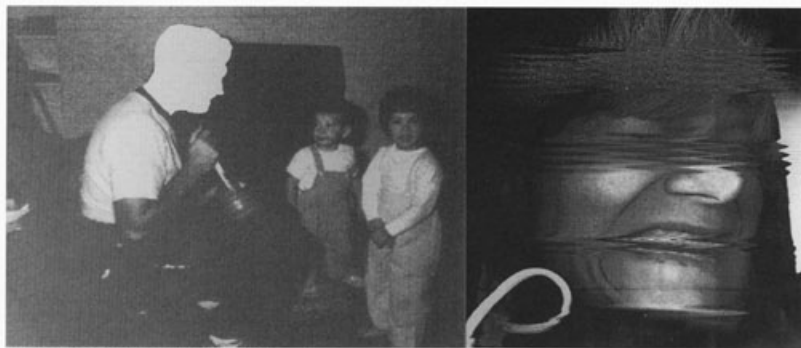


Janice Rubin, from the series *In Season*, 1993

in the catalog that in telling these stories she expresses her "own concerns about her identity as a woman, as artist: a person with one set of futures who ended up in another."

The influence of place and culture on personal identity is the subject of Kathy Lovas' work. Past and present are brought together by perceptions and associations with images

Scottie Stapleton, *Six to Six*, 1991



Cara C. DeBusk, *untitled (Daddy)*, 1992

and objects. In *One of Two*, a lace handkerchief imprinted with the image of a young girl is wrapped in paper taken from a textbook. The print is clearly visible and describes in academic tones the expected behavior of an older girl child when a new baby is brought into the home. Here the individual is reduced to a stereotyped role of generalities of expected behaviors. The question is—are women's individualities being observed or is this study merely prescriptive for expected behaviors? Who makes these observations? How objective are these observations? How are they used? As we continue to open the package, the role for young girls becomes more and more limiting. Just like the old nursery rhyme, "What are little girls made of? Sugar and Spice and everything nice."

Susan Kae Grant's chromogenic technical or prints are autobiographical dramas. Sometimes the narratives are ambiguous, but in others the meanings are technicolor sharp. For example in *Faith*, Grant photographs a young woman praying against a blue background that has been divided at the horizon line by a thin shelf overburdened with religious statuary. This young woman is being

choked from behind by very large male hands. As a light shines on her profile, it becomes evident that she is so lost in prayer she is unaware of his choking grip. The multiple meanings are very clear in this image and the issues are many. Similar issues are brought up again in the image *Expectations*. Wall clocks float around a young woman sitting in a white dress who appears to have shot herself with a handgun. How long did the bride wait for a groom who never showed? Society perpetuates this myth of salvation through marriage. The artist does not allow us to ignore the obvious issues. She asks us to review our own blind vision, our own acceptance of the status quo by holding a light up to the various situations that constrain or define who we are.

Who we are is often predetermined by the perceptions of others. Scottie Stapleton is well aware as an African-American woman that stereotypes perpetuated by this culture are damaging. Stapleton's work causes the viewer to recognize the absurdity of such stereotypes. In the image *Six to Six* her character's separation from her role is just as evident by the crossed arms as it is by the use of color to separate the subject from its background. Stapleton creates a visual interruption of the expected meaning of the image by coloring only the figure. Presence is very important to Stapleton's working method. She uses the visual elements of the image to establish the inner presence of these women. And in using

her own image as the model in each photograph we are forced to examine how limiting the use of stereotypes are in informing us about individuals.

Janice Rubin's work from the series *In Season* presents us with yet another view of how women in our society are inculcated with the roles that have been defined for them. Rubin documents through the photographic image the social rituals created by families and communities. These rituals connect individuals to their peers and their past, but these traditions also define the identity and role that women must play. Rubin's images challenge the viewer to examine these traditions in the glaring sharp-edged light of the camera. Isolated and detailed these images make the viewer aware of the shallowness of our perceptions.

Struggle, survival, and developing new definitions of our own identities are things that women have been doing for some time now. Many women have been awakened by the voice of others, but more often than not that call for change came from an internal struggle. Maggie Olvey's work is part of her struggle for survival. The assemblages present metaphors of her experiences while coping with difficult diagnoses and potent treatments. In *Recollections*, Olvey stretches the photographic format beyond the traditional photographic print to photosculture as she reinterprets her lived experience with near death. Her self-portrait *Fallout* redefines her interior image as she focuses on the magnetic resonating images of her disease.

Caslin has brought together a variety of works that show a broad range of photographically-based styles from personal documentary in black-and-white to mixed-media photosculture. Although the images are diverse, the threads holding the exhibition together are neatly woven into an intricate pattern revealing the complexities of women's lived experience.

Mary Visser is associate professor of Art & associate chair of Women's Studies at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas.

Robin Dru Germany, *The Story of the Earth is Long*, 1992, mixed media photo sculpture



MONTAGE: The Ghost in the Machine



Hans Staartjes, Virtual Reality Helmet

Editor's Note: Montage '93—the "International Festival of the Image"—was held for the first time in Rochester, N.Y. in July, 1993. Organizers described its aim as revealing "the fusion of art and technology." The festival, dedicated to the latest advances in digital imaging, included sixteen shows incorporating photography, film, two-dimensional and three-dimensional electronic imagery, as well as interactive media installations. Scheduled events included performing arts, trade show exhibits, educational events, and also featured virtual reality. President of Montage '93 was Nathan Lyons, director of the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. Sponsors of the proposed triennial event included the City of Rochester, N.Y., Eastman Kodak Company, Xerox Corporation, Bausch and Lomb, Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A. Citibank, Greater Rochester Cablevision, Mobil, Polaroid Corporation, and Rochester Telephone Corporation.

Hans Staartjes

Struggling with the question of reality, Descartes concluded he could only be sure of the existence of his mind—"I think therefore I am." The mental and the material worlds were totally separate for Descartes, and the difficulty of explaining the connection between mind and body became known as the "ghost in the machine" dilemma. A reality tinkerer such as virtual reality inventor Jaron Lanier (one of the major personalities at Montage '93), might have solved Descartes' problem by placing a virtual reality helmet over the philosopher's head and turning the ghost into a machine or the machine into a ghost! At any rate, during his lecture at the Eastman Theatre, Lanier proposed making reality an academic question, or at least blurring the lines of what we consider "real" by introducing a new artificial and computerized "reality" in a body suit, with simulative sensations of sight, sound, and touch.

Lanier's talk confirmed in me the strong feeling of trepidation and excitement I had arriving in Rochester. I was excited about seeing the new possibilities of expression and attending conferences dealing with the uses and effects of this new technology on art and artists. In the back of my mind, however, I felt hesitation: computer imaging, 3-D pics, holograms and virtual reality often do little except dazzle and impress. In terms of exhibitions, a clear propensity towards the former could be found in the shows at Eastman House (*The New Images*, organized by Ginette Major and Hervé Fischer) and at the Strong Museum (*Perspectives, Proximities, Perceptions: Expressions in Three Dimensional Graphic and Electronic Media*, organized by Lance Speer.)

These shows were brimming with startling images, including holographic and three-dimensional male and female nudes that leapt out into your arms, interactive videos for viewer participation and poly-chromatic computer collages. It's interesting how the most startling of technical feats can leave you walking out of a museum with a totally hollow feeling.

On the other hand, *Iterations: The New Digital Imaging* at the Memorial Art Gallery (curated by Charles Stainback, associate director of exhibitions at the International Center for Photography and Tim Druckery, a well known critical writer on digital imagery) was without question the perfect encapsulation of the Montage digital and electronic mandate. This show, with interactive works such as Graham Weinbren's piece *Sonata*, English artist Keith Piper's multi-screen video piece *Tagging the Other* (1992), and Alan Rath's *Challenger* (1990), revealed the boldest strides into a new artistic territory, albeit a territory that could be fraught with curatorial disaster.

The complexity of the equipment involved must have presented considerable logistical headaches for the organizers. Some of the artists themselves had some major difficulties. A case in point was Ken Feingold's *Childhood/Hot & Cold Wars* (The appearance of nature.) It was comprised of a TV screen with



Hans Staartjes, Photograph of Virtual Reality Image

a superimposed pair of clock hands, and a clear sphere in the foreground (representing the Earth) which the viewer could turn to change the display. Tucked in a dark corner, the machine remained lifeless despite the efforts of the figure crouched next to it, intent on a pair of soldering clips underneath a small spot light. Bombarded by all the technical wizardry shown here, the viewer might not be blamed for thinking at first this was a performance piece. Graham Weinbren's *Sonata* (a clever visual allegory about a Freudian dream), was out of order on my second visit; on my first, I was only able to view the exterior of the installation. "Interaction," was impossible because a young boy (a Nintendo addict?) could not be budged from the touch-sensitive TV screen. This was a disappointment for me; Weinbren made some of the most interesting and engaging comments about interactive art at one of the lectures at Eastman House, and is at the forefront of this new art.

Among the glitch-free exhibits was Rath's piece *Challenger*. It was a sight and sound installation comprised of an ever-changing row of large red LED numbers and letters, seven television monitors representing the seven astronauts) and a cage of hovering ping-pong balls. Footage included J.F.K.'s famous speech about the space program, the landing on the moon, and of course the news commentary during the Challenger explosion.

The cold technology of the installation itself lent irony to our faith in "fail-proof systems." *Tagging the Other*, an angry piece by Piper, was mainly comprised of four video screens with continuous and confrontational footage of identification photos. Although it was obviously a comment on racism, it was also about surveillance and loss of human dignity. Less subject to equipment failure, the more traditional digitally-manipulated fine art pieces hanging on the walls included thoughtful and quite well known pieces by Michael Brodsky, Esther Parada and MANUAL.

Without a doubt, the main attraction at Montage was virtual reality. The technology expo at the Riverside Convention Center had as its central attraction the present manifestation of the Lanier dream. I was as curious as anyone to try out these famous virtual reality helmets. Needless to say, I was not the only

ket.) The scientific uses of this technology are extensive. One of Lanier's first contracts was with NASA, which uses virtual reality in various simulative situations. The possibilities are limited only by the sophistication of the data, and by making the sensory input seem as real as possible. Lanier foresees unprecedented future refinements that could offer a more seamless sensation; a design tied more directly into the human nervous system with devices that "flood the sense organs."

Thankfully, *Montage* was not all technology, and primitive communication still existed. One of my most memorable experiences was listening to Joanna Frueh (professor and feminist art critic at the University of Nevada) at the State University of New York at Brockport. Her stirring speech (which included some beautiful *a cappella* singing) entitled *Love and Prophecy* examined our relationship with the technological world. The biblical prophecy of doom and a "shocking and unproductive future" in our culture, is a main fuel for technology. "Technology," explained Frueh, "is the system by which society provides its members with practical things that they need and desire. . . Love and prophecy are knowledge applied to human beings' ways of doing things. Most people don't think of love and prophecy as practical, but love, or lack of it, orders intimate and political relationships amongst people." Frueh added, the love of "practical things" today has brought about the triumph of technology and an inevitable effect on social and cultural relationships. Today "technophilia has triumphed over art." The flagship of technology, the computer, has been "fetishized." Now "computer students get enamored with the machine and forget about art. Information which includes images," she warned, "is simply hidden ideology." The counter force, according to Frueh, is "love." "Love is the heart of the seemingly dismembered body of reality. . . where human flesh is indiscreet. . . joining people in sex, romance and familial, national, and global ties." Love "rotates the earth on its axis."

There was little of the love Frueh spoke about in Dawn Dedeaux's *Urban Warrior*, but it was one of the most moving and jarring shows at Montage, and an admirable revelation of the courage of this white female artist. It was a complex multi-media installation benefiting from a run down warehouse locale (the Hallman's Chevrolet warehouse.) The autobiographical confessions of African American, New Orleans criminals and killers were blared out through loud speakers onto a derelict side street. Inside the warehouse was a corrugated metal structure with a series of wrought iron doorways that led you into indi-

one with this brilliant idea. When I arrived, business executives were twirling around in gyroscopic cages wearing squared visorless helmets; it was a very odd sight. A monitor showed what they were seeing: a waving, pixelated, serpentine tunnel with dolphins darting in and out of the screen. (Perhaps an ideal slot machine for a bored child at a local supermarket.)

Dawn Dedeaux, *Hall of Judgement*, 1993, installation, photo by James Bevins

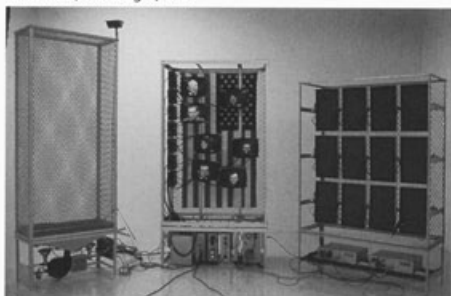


vidual rooms or "cells" with "comfy" chairs. Once inside the rooms, you could watch video loops of autobiographical details of lives of young crack mothers and Uzi-wielding gang members. In one room, an elderly white couple viewed a street-side shooting scene while seated in two living room chairs—not much different from being at home. This, however, was a half hour of excruciating detail of a dying victim, with his family and a crowd gathered round him. Dedeaux uses the viewer's voyeuristic interest in gang violence as a double irony. Eventually, the viewer is lead to the central element of the show, the *Hall of Judgment* and the *Tomb of the Urban Warrior*. These are like Dante's *Inferno* with surveillance cameras. At the end of the hall is a full-length portrait of *Wayne Hardy* (former gang leader) as *Pan-Ku*, the Chinese God of Fate and Chaos, holding a dart board at waist level. The image is printed on translucent mylar and outlined with brush strokes of gold. The *Tomb of the Urban Warrior* holds a beautiful series of the *Hardy Boys* (Wayne and his brother Paul) in various ancient and modern mythological guises, with titles such as: *Baal: Babylonian God of Destruction*, *John Wayne*, *The Frog Prince: Kinder Gentler*, *McEnroe: Class War*, *Nike: Cross Dressed*. One of the last rooms in this show was a testimonial entitled *Hope*. It included footage of women inmates singing songs of redemption in the gospel tradition, of a reformed juvenile offender, and of a street celebration for Louisiana Governor Edwin Edwards. But there was very little in the way of hope for resolution of racial issues in this show. It was more of a wrenching exorcism that erred a little on the side of gratuitous violence with the videos shown, and the side of over-beautification with the *Hardy Boys*.

Notice that the word "art" in the Montage '93 slogan "*the Fusion of Art and Technology*" is sandwiched in the middle of two technological words. This is a telling indication of the state of the arts and our culture today. Artists, as all other people, get caught in the obsession with the latest technical innovations, but artists should be among the individuals able to step aside from the fray, to trust emotions and a sensitive eye; otherwise they risk becoming unwitting participants. Marvin Minski, professor of media arts and sciences at the MIT media lab, has said: "We are entering into a century in which you are connected to the world, to the virtual world, and much more intimately than you are connected to the real world. Our connection to the real world is very thin, and our connection with the artificial world is going to be more intimate and more satisfying." These mellow words can easily seduce one. They undermine the complexity of a real world which human beings are constantly striving to understand. These words originate from our present day mechanistic and dualistic mentality which, in turn, can be traced back to thinkers like Descartes, who first separated the self from nature. Getting wrapped up completely in the world of computers might well be a form of escapism that encourages a disconcerting submersion into Self, and a lack of concern for nature.

Hans Staartjes is a photographic artist of Dutch nationality, living and working in Houston. He is studying for a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Houston.

Alan Rath, *Challenger*, 1991

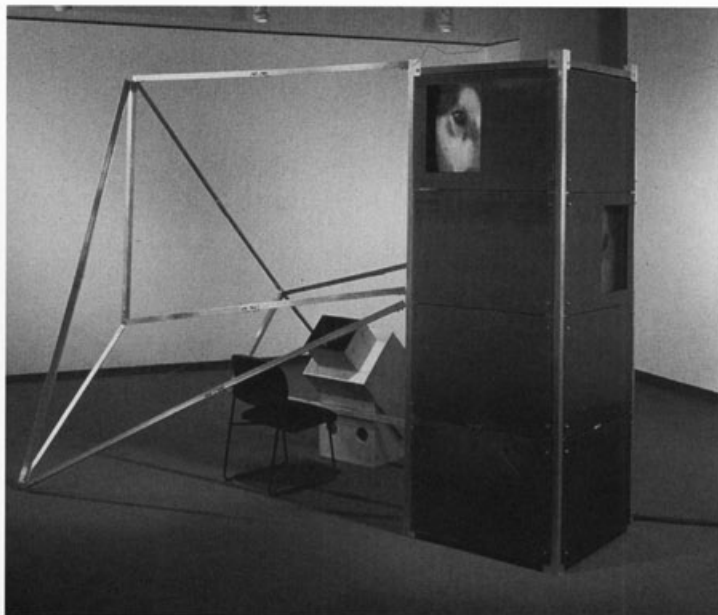


Drawn to the Light: Montage 1993

Charles Wiese

Montage '93 was a promising and seductive glow on the horizon. I work with digital media to produce my own artwork, and so, my expectations for the Montage festival were understandably high—at last, a city filled with digital art! Little did I suspect what awaited me.

The "Iterations" show at the Memorial Gallery was by far the strongest of the curated shows. The range of artworks exhibited spanned from Jim Campbell's haunting interactive videos which evoke issues of memory, history, and self-awareness to MANUAL's ongoing photographic/video installation dealing with culture, technology, and deforestation. Keith Piper's installation of digital video was a breathtaking barrage of montaged voice, text, video, and graphics spread across four synchronized monitors. Embedded in this artwork are expressed concerns of the role technology can play in the determination and structure of personal identity. Here technology was focused to accomplish the goals of the artist rather than producing the often lurid displays of technological excess seen elsewhere. The show effectively pointed out a number of meaningful directions that the artist may choose from when working with



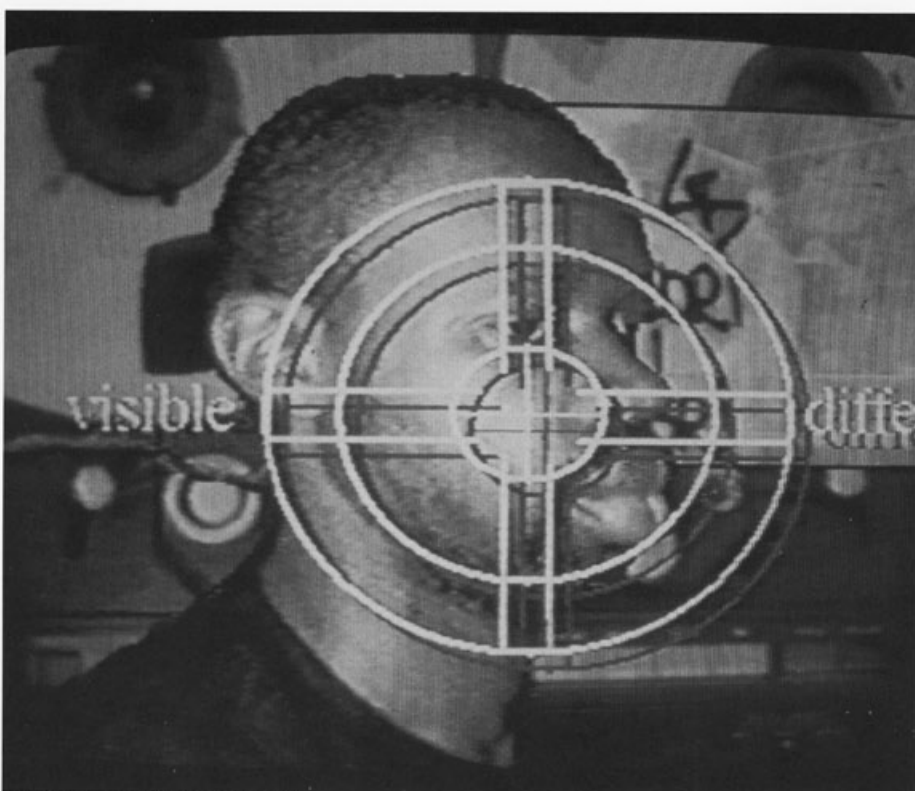
Grahame Weinbren, *Sonata*, 1991/93

ticular medium mandates a new basis for judging the quality of artistic expression. It would seem a convenient way to argue a lack of sophistication that may be found in a body of work—to resort to claims for a new aesthetic—and one that seems to distance the

monitor bears striking similarity?) Key to the success of either is a form of acceptance of what is displayed. One suspends aspects of their critical eye in order to engender an involvement with what is broadcast. To enter into the glowing image (television and cinema) in

this manner is to open oneself to a form of seduction. Similar problems may await the digital artist. Seated before the computer monitor one's critical faculties may be challenged by the learned passive acceptance of a glowing screen.

I have seen artists approach a new medium and recreate its stereotypes in the process of learning it. This occurs despite a sophisticated aesthetic sense in other media. Many of the works on display at Montage suggested that they were created by those still enthralled by the possibilities that digital media affords. Expressions of beauty, intelligence, and wit could also be



Keith Piper, *Tagging the Other* (detail), 1992

digital media. Significantly, each of the artworks on display stand as strong examples of the potential that such tools offer.

The Eastman House and Strong Museum both chose to showcase the various expressions possible using digital media. The diversity contained within these exhibitions created some serious problems. One unfortunate consequence was to create the effect of a trade show exhibiting new technologies for advertising displays, rather than an art exhibition. The hodgepodge of works could only be categorized under the general thematic of the technological tools used to produce them. I did not sense an incisive exploration of a new digital aesthetic, or of subjects that may draw strength from their chosen methods of production. The artworks seemed to be more about the medium and not enough about what could be expressed with it.

Claims are made for the advent of a new set of aesthetics. That somehow, the use of a par-

work from the critical discourse that awaits all artistic production. Further assertions that the computer and graphics software provide new possibilities for creating images were not consistently demonstrated in the exhibitions. The use of text and diagrams, collage, and montage are not unique to digital art. One can find these same tools plied by both the *Dada* artists in the earlier part of this century and contemporary artists, all using "traditional" methods of production. Asserting a new aesthetic seems premature. It may be proven in time, certainly the potential is there.

I wonder at the possible reasons for the uneven quality of the curated shows at Montage. I have pondered the relationship between firelight and the animated glow of the computer monitor as one explanation. It is not a relationship of utility alone, but the flames can also set spark to the imagination. Could it be that the animated field of the computer monitor captivates in a similar manner to a dancing flame? Or might it be a consequence of the passive relationship that many have developed when viewing television or the cinema (to which the glowing screen of a computer

found in Rochester, but you had to look for them.

Perhaps one of the values of Montage was to show the state of expression found in artworks produced with digital media. What I saw there were pockets of hope. From the vantage afforded by the best artworks I saw a landscape of possibilities, one that I expect to be exciting and rewarding. But I also saw an all too common problem. Many seem still trapped within the glow of their computer monitors, and like moths drawn to the flame, their efforts seem more a result of that kind of entrancement than of artists who understand and command their medium.

Charles Wiese is a Houston artist.

PEA PODS AND PEARS

The Allan Chasanoff Photographic Collection: Tradition and the Unpredictable, *Museum of Fine Arts, Houston*. January 16-March 27, 1994

Maggie Olvey

We all collect images. Passively or actively, obsessively or casually, mentally or physically, we accumulate and become possessors of pictures. Collecting begins early. The boy of a few decades ago amassed baseball cards and proudly exhibited his knowledge of the trivia imprinted on the back; today's youngsters plead for all the available video games for their computer/game machine in order to conquer the next electronic challenge. Collecting extends throughout our lifetimes. Grandmothers collect family pictures while travelers regale us with their scrapbooks and slide or video shows. We recall images in dreams, flashbacks, and musings. When it comes to pictures, we all resemble pack rats.

However, the image collector under discussion here is a different breed. His appetite for pictures is more specific and its focus less plebeian. According to a *Wall Street Journal* article, dealers say that generally photography collections are centered on five categories: themes (e.g. pea pods and pears), styles and periods (Post-modernism), techniques (platinum), master prints (photo perfection), and individual photographers (Paul Strand or Joel Peter Witkin).

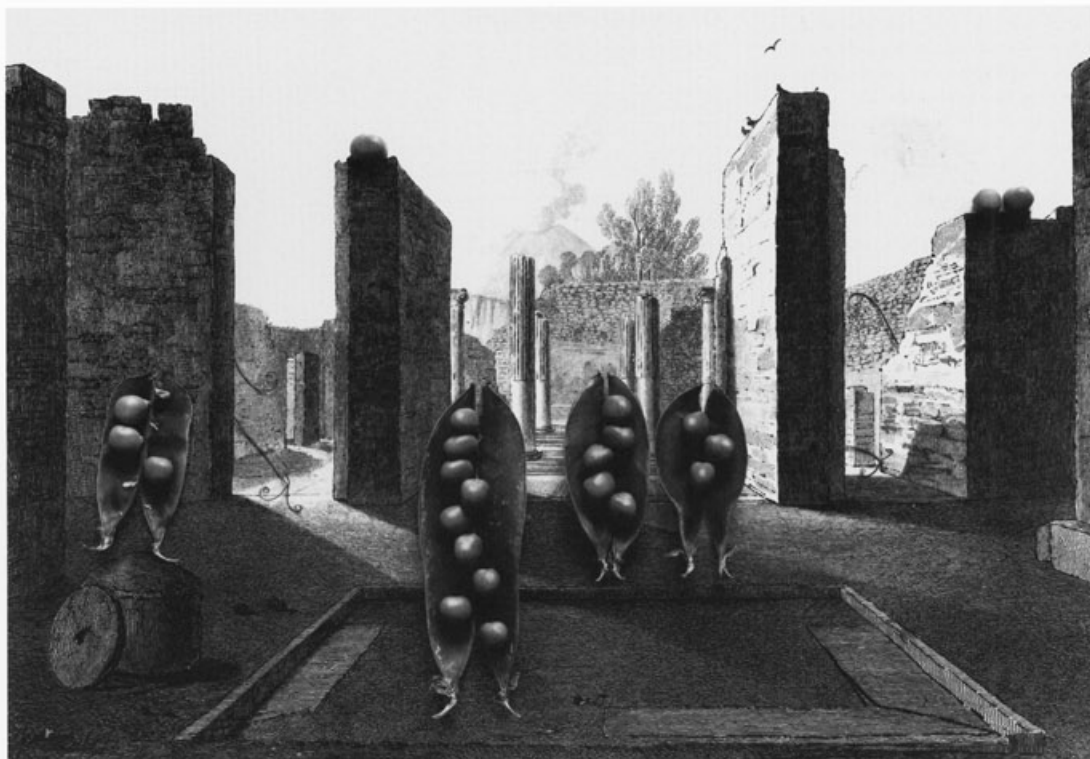
Corollary to these five categories, a range of individual approaches to collecting the medium may come into play. The intuitive pursuit of "I like what I like," or interesting presentations of, say, the hand, or photographs taken in Mongolia necessitates little, if any, intellectual effort. Assembling historical or biographical collections entails some library research and lots of reading and looking. And *fine* print collecting seemingly requires a lifetime of experience. This is not to suggest, though, that these approaches are so strictly delimited as they seem here. In fact, collecting images that speak to you, that evoke an intuitive or emotional response, no matter their historical or aesthetic worth, is a universally recommended path to take.

Recently, Susan Sontag published *The Volcano Lover*, from which several passages are quoted in this essay.¹ Begging the reader's pardon for this digression, I suppose that I should not be overly surprised that the author of *On Photography*, a pivotal examination of the medium, should turn her attention to a novelized critique of collecting. Both activities are acquisitive, motivated by the desire to possess either materially or by proxy. Her incisive commentary, while describing a single collector, presents a number of different facets that motivate acquisitiveness. Each aspect could well describe an approach attributable to various types of photography collectors: the investor, the exhibitionist, the do-gooder, and the tastemaker.

THE INVESTOR

A gratifying symmetry, that collecting most things requires money but then the things collected themselves turn into more money. Though money was the faintly disreputable, necessary by-product of this passion, collecting was still a virile occupation: not merely recognizing but bestowing value on things, by including them in one's collection. (22)

Corporate collections often are based on this premise. The pictures themselves may or may not have an emotional appeal to their owner, except insofar as they represent profit as salable commodities. These collections are



Parker, Olivia (American, born 1941) *Can Dance*, 1976 *Historicity*/theme: One of several pea pod photographs in the Chasanoff collection, Parker's amusing image harkens back to nineteenth-century prints wherein inanimate objects speak and interact as if human.

rarely accessible to the public. If they become so valuable as to constitute an important, major collection, their owners may collaborate with an art museum to provide a forum to exhibit the photographs. A recent example is the Gilman Paper Company Collection shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Another aspect to collecting in general is provenance—where an individual image came from and who owned the picture prior to its acquisition. As Sontag suggests, certain owners, by virtue of the quality of their other holdings, bestow a value and/or prestige on a new acquisition that it might not otherwise have held. Thus both the photograph and the owner achieve higher regard. The investor capitalizes on this duality: he himself attains a degree of personal prestige and power (as an exhibitionist, see following category), and his investment—originally a pragmatic, fiduciary commodity—becomes an object endowed with an aura of worth beyond its insurance value.

THE EXHIBITIONIST

Conversely, a valuable object confers value on its owner. A collector is happy to be known, mainly known, as the proprietor of what—through so much effort—has been collected. (138)

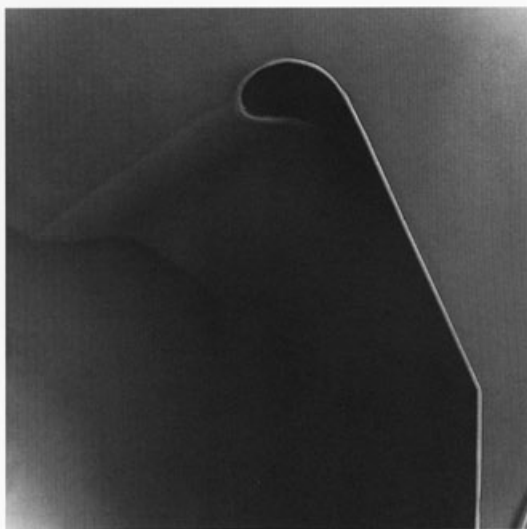
Referring once again to recent

Metropolitan traveling exhibitions, John C. Waddell's once private collection, acquired by the Met partially through purchase and partially by donation, provided the grist for "The New Vision" exhibition, seen in Houston during the summer of 1991. An example of an historically-oriented type of collection, as revealed by the smaller-sized exhibition, it also offered an incisive view of the collector himself: cool, intellectual, and thoughtful. Waddell's reputation as a savvy and dedicated collector was well known to the small circle of collectors and curators of the medium, but not at all to the public at large. The donation certainly conferred a degree of fame and name recognition he did not previously enjoy.

THE DO-GOODER

To collect is to rescue things, valuable things, from neglect, from oblivion, or simply from the ignoble destiny of being in someone else's collection rather than one's own. (25)

Ostensibly, as put forth in the owner's statement to the Met's "The Waking Dream" catalogue, Howard Gilman felt some of these conservationist stirrings. To save photographs from oblivion and/or destruction is certainly a laudable motivation, provided that the "savior" knows how to supply the proper environment for their longevity. Good collectors consult with professionals to ensure the well-being of their holdings; neglectful owners sometimes prove to be more dangerous than the attic trunk when it comes to safekeeping their charges. As to having to possess an image so



Moers, Denny R. (American, born 1953) *Untitled #16*, 1980 *Technique*: This print has been selectively fogged during development to eliminate everything but this J-shaped line. What else had been there that we can no longer see?

that someone else can't, just visit an auction. . .

THE TASTEMAKER

The sweet doom of the collector (or tastemaker . . . but tastemakers are usually collectors): to be in advance and, as others catch up, to be priced out of the competition for what they have pioneered. (71)

This moniker most frequently applies to the curatorial enterprise, whether performed in the service of a private collector or for a museum or gallery. Often an exhibition presenting work theretofore unknown to the collecting public, engenders a flurry of purchases, raising the prices and diluting the market. A good example is the exhibition, "Czech

Modernism" presented by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 1989. What once was a moderately priced 1920s composition by any one of a number of accomplished Czech photographers, now has a value far exceeding the means of most collectors. This once obscure style/era/technique in photographic history now has cachet.

In light of these various categories and motivations, The Allan Chasanoff Photographic Collection, recently acquired by the MFAH, fails to identify itself as belonging to any one of them. A self-motivated entrepreneur, Chasanoff himself defies classification. Twice-retired, never inactive, and always on the forefront of innovation, this collector acquires photographs to inspire his own work. It matters not whether the print is pristine, made by a known or unfamiliar photographer, or even whether the image is the "best" that may be had for the price. What is important to Chasanoff, it seems, is not the object itself, but what the picture stimulates in the viewer's psyche: questions to answer, puzzles to solve, constructions to analyze. Not one of the over 1000 images in the collection does not require a second look. Whether it involves optical illusion, manipulation, or irony, each image insists on viewer involvement.²

Maggie Olvey has worked with various aspects of the Chasanoff Collection during the past two years and has benefited greatly from the challenges it poses, both from intellectual and artistic standpoints.

FOOTNOTES

1 Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover: A Romance*, NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992. Parenthetical numbers following quotations refer to this book.

2 Illustrations for this article are photographs by artists in the Chasanoff Collection but not included in the exhibition chosen to offer a wider appreciation for the depth and breadth of the collection. Parker's *Can Dance* inspired the title for this essay. Several instances of pea pods and pears surface within the collection, but they do not constitute a Chasanoff "category" such as "the letter J"—as represented by the Denny Moers photo. After Chasanoff had acquired a number of photographs, he recognized certain patterns in his collecting. These patterns were identified and category names designated; some photographs were assigned more than one slot. However, this process was specifically not meant to be a static outline for future acquisition. It was simply an assessment of what was already there.

Photographs from The Allan Chasanoff Photographic Collection, courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Patricia Lee Yonque

Editor's note: The Visual Diary is an exhibition of eighteen women photographers, video and book artists drawing on the tradition of the written diary to create visual texts. The exhibition is held in conjunction with HCP's national Women in Photography Conference. The show is curated by Adele Horne, video artist and Program Coordinator at HCP and Nels P. Highberg, writer and graduate associate at Ohio State University.

In the pivotal scene of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), a panoply of stories constructed as woman's autobiography, the narrator imagines the lost and found wholeness of womanhood through a communion between herself and her summer landlady in the coastal village of Dunnet Landing, Maine. The writer seeks in the picturesque town and Almira Todd's house refuge from some undisclosed but appreciable emotional crisis that had splintered her sense of identity. She had planned to vacate her personal fragmented self in the "dark woods" of the country and, as a professional writer, complete a "long piece of writing" she was being paid to do.

Instead, she discovers that fragmentation and marginality had always been woman's reality and wholeness but an illusion. Viewing the problem in terms of the canonized dualities of personal and professional, interior and exterior, civilization and nature, male and female, merely scratched the surface, perhaps the problem itself. She came to understand the doubly doubled condition of woman's dissonance and existence on the peripheries. Patriarchy had anciently and biblically and rigidly hitched woman's wholeness and holiness to man, thus detaching her—and society—from her rich, unique, and sacred nature. She had become a spectator but not the subject of her own life.

For woman, autobiography is the first stage, the first theater of operation in rediscovery. The act of writing must, therefore, be an un-writing and unmaking of canonized images and processes, the demystifying of patriarchal representations of woman which have fixed her value as an objectification/projection of male desire and experience and into which she vanishes.

The narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* gets back (to) the self by writing autobiographically. As Jewett represents it, woman's autobiography is a textual reclamation of womanly autonomy over her life and her discourse. Anticipating Carolyn Heilbrun's perspective in both *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979) and *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), and even the core of Julia Kristeva's theory in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Jewett apprehends that turning discourse around is central to the renovation of thought and social change. Those prosaic "literary employments" binding women to patriarchal pre-scriptions about art and representation are renegotiated, so that woman can have her "say."

Woman's autobiography is the use of an apparatus, in this case discourse, to reverse what that apparatus was originally authored and authorized by patriarchy to do: to rigidify and objectify the female self, to curtail the powerful feminine flow, and to suborn women into the "employments" of writing herself out of significance. Women learned the dominant discourse and eventually to traffic in it, but learned as well that they were left out of it.

Poetic discourse is as close as articulated language gets to approximating itself and the reality of the repressed maternal, the essentially feminine: its nonlinear process, its interiority, its integrative modes, its unsurprised acceptance of difference and arbitrariness.



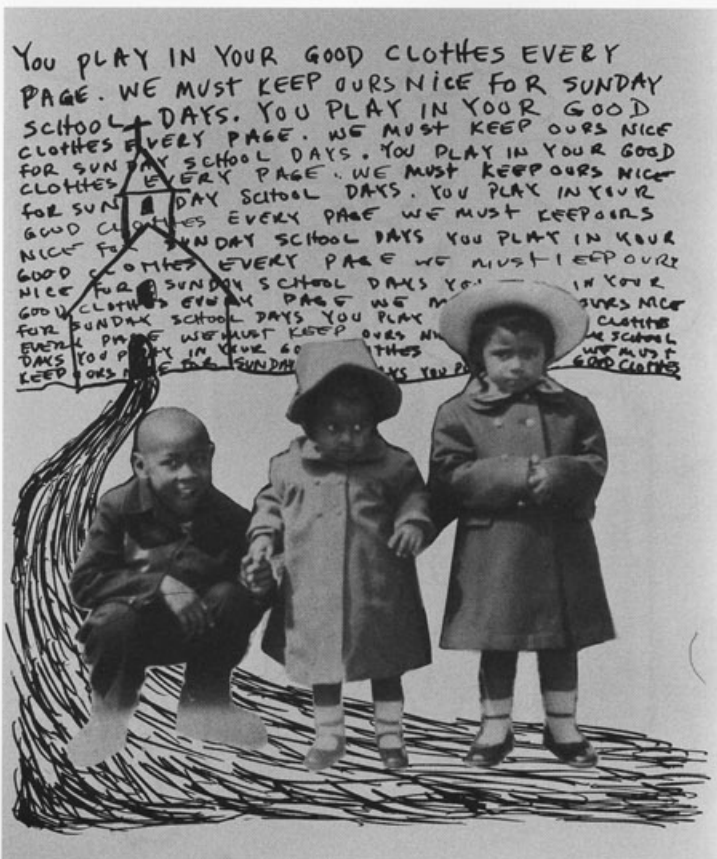
Karen E. Johnson, *Valuable Papers* with Museum Case #1, 1990-91

Translated incorrectly by author and reader, however—that is, only in terms of recognizable, canonical standards—even poetic discourse can be used to mute and mutilate woman.

The woman artist in particular must permit herself reattachment to her mother, for, as Virginia Woolf said, "we think back to our mothers if we are women" and so "we" must

bilitation. Having arrived at the familiar pasture and before she leads the writer to that secret place where the precious pennyroyal grows best, Mrs. Todd takes out of her gingham bag a daguerreotype miniature—"tis mother's picture"—followed by another, a separate one,—"That's me"—and, finally, a third one, showing her brother "William an' father together." Not unlike the religious

The Rite of Women's AUTOBIOGRAPHY



Clarissa Sligh, from the artist's book, *Reading Dick and Jane With Me*, 1989

have a tradition to draw upon, a "sentence" of our own making. Without the artist's willingness to reclaim and accept her womanly self, which means working through women, neither she nor her culture will see wholeness.

Hence, when the novel's character Mrs. Todd invites her young lodger to accompany her to the pasture to gather pennyroyal, an herb used primarily for mosquito control in the region but also to remedy reproductive health, she initiates a process of mythic reha-

iconography visualizing what meanings churchgoers are enjoined to believe, the daguerreotypes in Mrs. Todd's bag image the meaning, "order," and dynamics of patriarchy. Patriarchy, represented by "William an' father together," is the result of the detachment of mother from daughter and the making of the womb the "places of great grief and silence." The transgression against women, and society, is not so much attaching women to men as it is the perversity of that attachment in the

demand that women give up their attachment to their mothers and thus to other women and a tradition of self-awareness, knowledge, and meaning.

Heilbrun writes that women must begin the process of reconnection and restoration and the creation of a new aesthetic, autobiographically, by telling one another their stories. These truly "ancient" stories, trivialized or forced underground and into a kind of coding, must then be made public, as the character of the writer in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* makes them public, as Jewett makes them public, for actual "lives do not serve as models; only stories do that."

The brief collaboration of photographic image and written text that Jewett negotiates in this important scene of female vision is no diminished affair for its brevity. Like everything about *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, it is quiet and fertile—and pointed. She conducts a theoretical inquiry into the relationship of technologically produced images and art, and how they might be used in the behalf, instead of toward the deletion, of woman's voice and vision. Proposed almost one hundred years ago, her inquiry anticipates that of the exhibition "The Visual Diary: Women's Own Stories."

Photography in America saw its birth, its power to promote radical social change, and its ability to influence people's sense of time and space during the span of the Industrial Revolution. Like the fiction termed "local color," which describes a dimension of Jewett's stories, the beginnings of photography aimed at recording a way of life before it vanished permanently. Photography also played to the demand for realism and accuracy (as opposed to representation) thus becoming a medium for history, biography and portraiture. However, ironically, the Civil War added to the early stages of photography a deeper association with finality and death. The fixed photographic image was often the

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Karen E. Johnson, *Valuable Papers with Museum Case #1*. (Detail). 1990-91

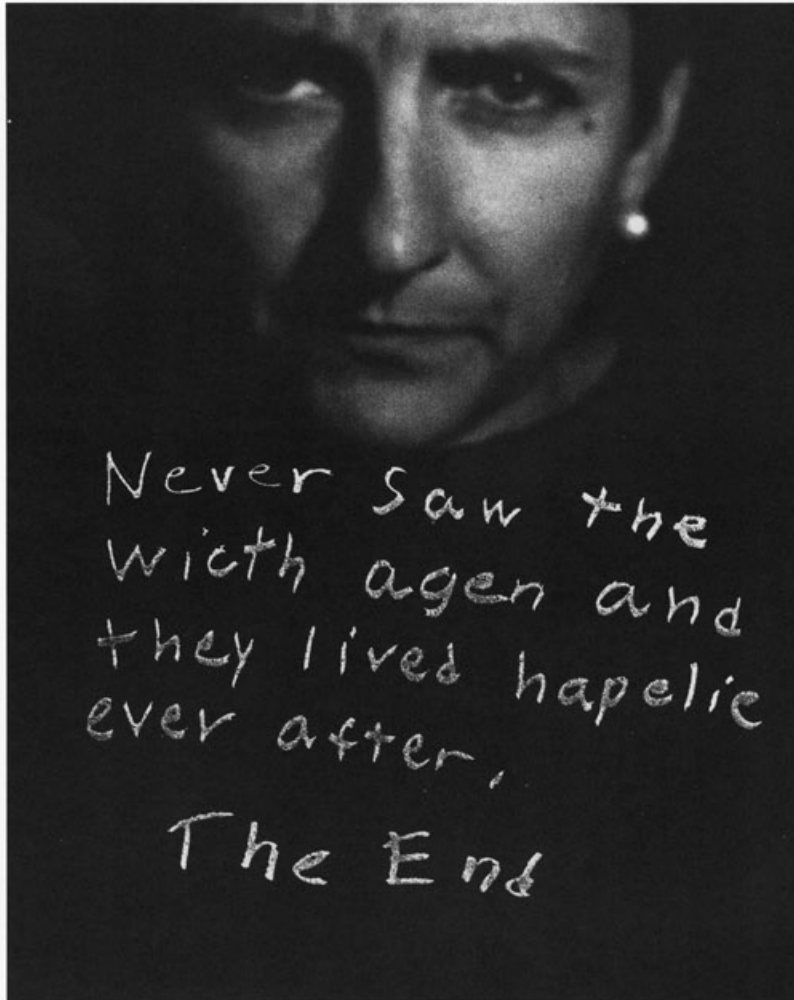




Betsy Davids, *Sites and Passages*, 1992



Barbara Robin Molloy, *Fifth Street*, from the artist's book "So



Bea Nettles, from the artist's book *Life's Lessons: A Mother's Journal*, 1990



Mindy Faber, *Delirium*, video still, 1993



Yung Moon, from the artist's book, *A Portrait of Us*, 1991

Once, I called my mother
"Mrs. Mu Chang Moon."

She replied, "I have my own name.
My name is Hwaja Lee."



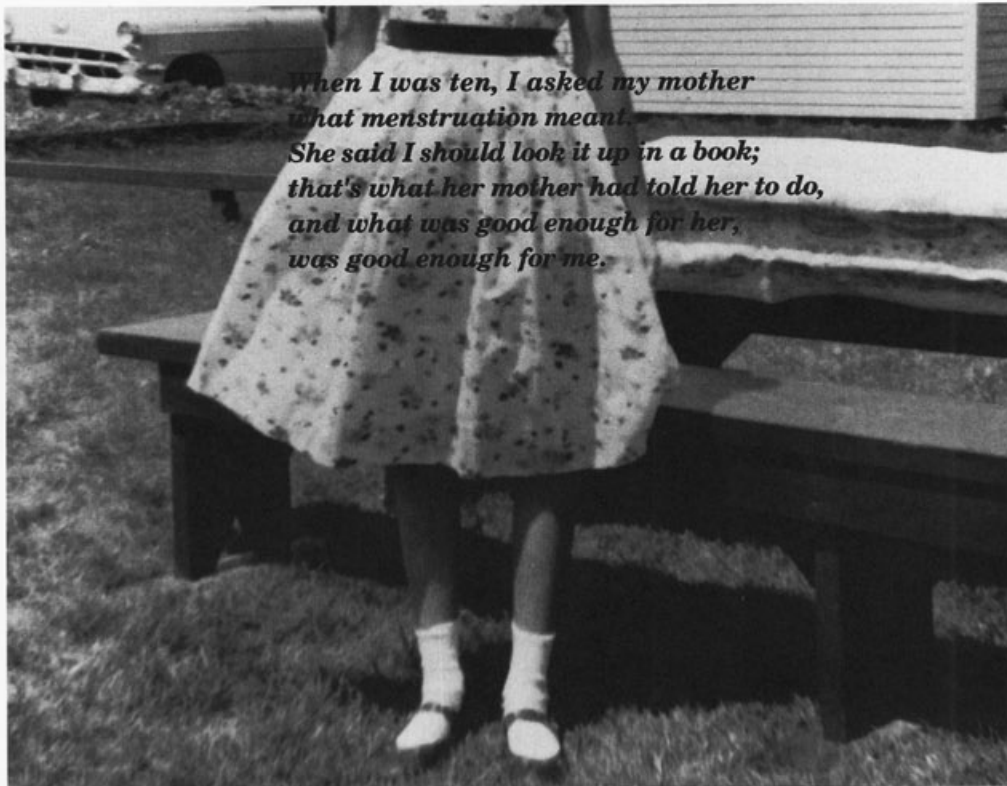
Susan Jahoda, *Family Picture*, 1991



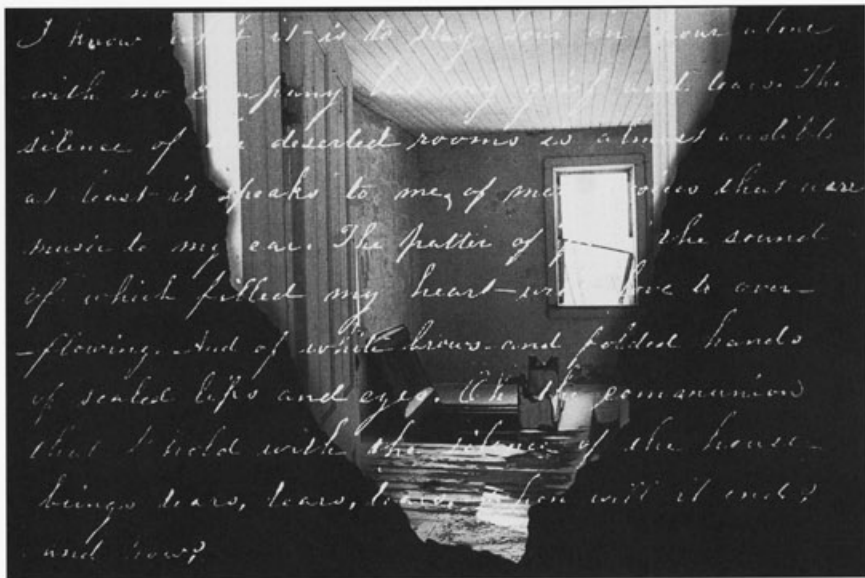
ok," 1992



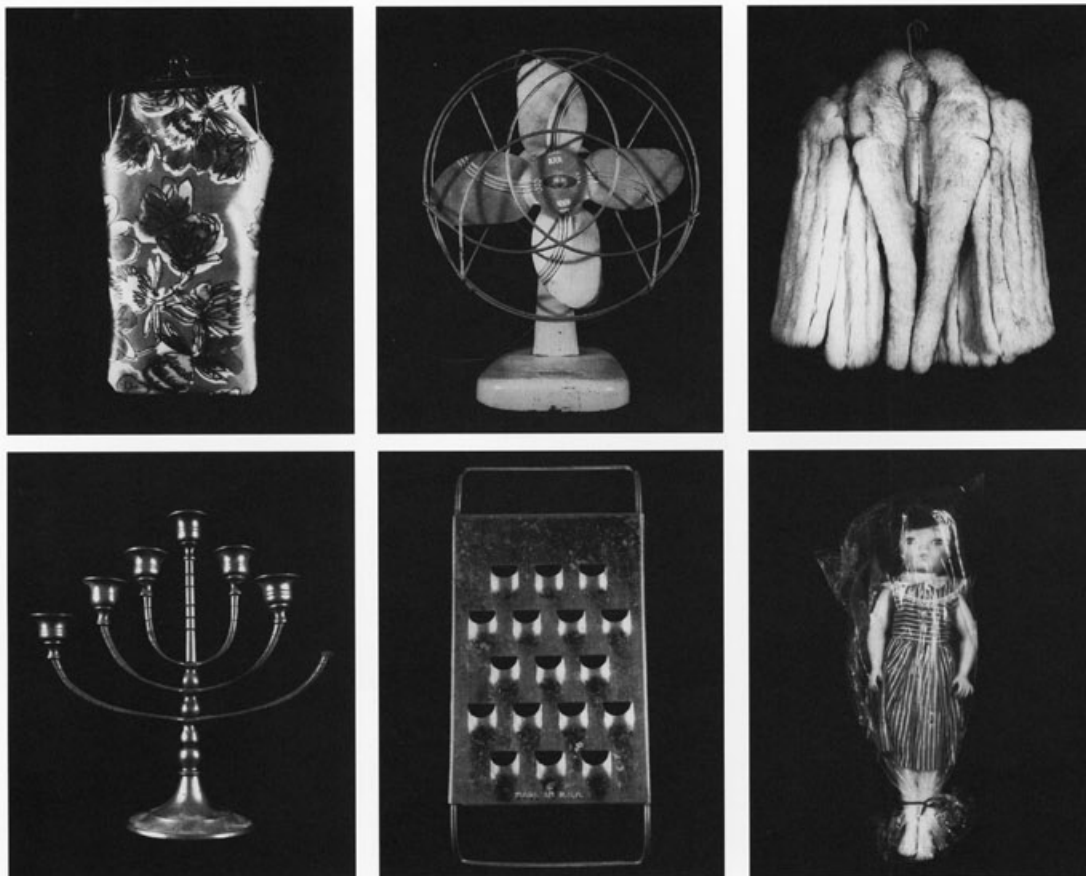
Susan Kae Grant, Giving Fear a Proper Name: Detroit, 1981-85



Judy Gelles, Menstruation from series Memories, 1991



Cynthia S. Greig, The Silence of the House, 1991



Margaret Stratton, *Inventory of My Mother's House (Detail)*, 1991

continued from page 11
last event of the subject's present existence. In other words, the image used to confirm existence, the filling of a space, simultaneously predicted erasure, an emptying, a change or death.

The daguerreotypes Mrs. Todd exhibits to the young writer in the pennyroyal field certify life and its continuum and continuity, just as the "primeval" pennyroyal does. The portraits announce autobiographically, "I have always been." Most importantly, Mrs. Todd verifies over and over that she was a girl and that she has and has always had, a mother. There is connection. If there is a sinister component, it is, of course, that the separate portraits suggest an inauspicious separation of women, in light of the togetherness of the Blackett men. Mothers and children are separated biologically, but patriarchy has, through language and technology, separated mothers and daughters spiritually as well, which means they cannot apprehend the fullest meaning and power of their original, material connection. Cynthia Greig's collection in "The Visual Diary" combines the diaries of nineteenth century women with photographs of derelict interiors to metaphor and reverse woman drained of her self and her discourse.

In the twentieth century, photography evolved into a major agency of woman's entrapment in a discourse, now visualized and repeated constantly and accessible moment after moment. Woman—her role and certainly her cosmetic beauty—had always been fixed, rigidified because she has become, even in her own eyes, an objectification of man's desire and needs. In terms of popular appeal, photography immortalized and confined woman to this script. They had no need of their mental and physical fullness or their voice, only of an ambition and a capacity to stay young and ideally beautiful for men—and silent—forever. The primeval pennyroyal mattered not a whit.

Women became practitioners of photography forty years after its invention. They had always been objects of the male gaze. Male photographers acted as gods creating them in their own idea of female beauty. The whole and dynamic woman was destroyed and replaced by a commodified fixed image which

woman herself bought. Appropriately, in "The Visual Diary," Karen Johnson depicts her mother through a series of photographs of objects and object fragments. Woman became the ultimate object, a technology like the camera itself, a tool of male power used most effectively against herself.

Now, with the twentieth century ending, women are rewriting the story of photography by using it to write and ritualize their own stories and to make themselves the subjects of their own unique discourse. What is so fasci-

photographic image into soundtracked video—Mindy Faber's stunning *Delirium*, for example—celebrates and symbolizes the release into language and mobility while retaining a connection with origin. Faber gives her mother and herself place and voice.

Perhaps the most compelling technical and theoretical process occurring before our eyes, in terms of linking autobiography and photography (two forms of making visible text on a page) is the combination of photographic image and written text—climaxing in

own discourses, but also with woman's way of relating to her own existence and to others. She is more inclusive, more able to represent, because her body itself represents, paradox, and the human practice of objectifying is in her less fixed, more amorphous. She is also more inclined toward openly admitting "I" wish to relate to my subject, rather than creating distance and hierarchical authority. In the process of composing autobiographically, she can, in Emily Dickinson's words, feel "my life with both my hands."

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Diane Tani, *Hard Glance*, 1989

inating, from a theoretical perspective, about "The Visual Diary" project is that the women photo(auto)biographers are all quite involved in deconstructively turning the woman-predatory camera, as well as the necessary fixed and mute image, against itself. The artists hope to release the woman from the oppression of her objectification and into the place of subjectivity and continuous alteration signified by the maternal space through their work. The grids of images in the exhibition, paralleling the twenty-four separate but related (and relational) stories that make a novel of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, are dynamic and developmental. Even the transformation of the mute

the photographic book/diary—that has traditionally been avoided for the presumed invasiveness of language upon the photographic image. Clarissa Sligh's book portrays violation as inscription on the bodies of African American children. But in light of the male tendency to privilege sight and the visible, the photographic image is seen as purer and more able to control the spectator. And, in more sophisticated practice, using the visual to produce an invisible image preempts transgressive text.

Integrating text and photographic image, however, is consistent not only with woman's need to redefine aesthetics and establish her

Measures of Light

San Antonio Project:

Judy Bankhead 1976-1991

Organized by the Southwest Craft Center
Presented in conjunction with
San Antonio's Contemporary Art Month
July 22-August 31, 1993

Paul Hester

When I was a student at Rice University in the late 60s, we had a meter that measured light by comparing the value of available light to a standard gray dot contained within the meter. You aimed the thing at a surface, and turned a dial until the gray in the meter was the same as the light you were seeing.

I thought about the meter during my drive to San Antonio to see this exhibition. It seems we are always using the comparative method of that light meter to evaluate many things. Do I measure up to my ideal of someone else that I respect or idolize? Do I measure up to what I think I should look like? We are constantly measuring the light outside, and twisting our internal dials up or down to bring our image of ourselves into conformity with the external bright spot of the moment.

Whose San Antonio did I expect to see in these photographs? A selection by the Chamber of Commerce of "What to See and Do in San Antonio?" What I found, with few exceptions, were pictures made in the public domain: streets, bus stops, parades, intersections of one photographer's very private responses to public situations.

In an era of photographers striving to make their practices equal to those of the other arts through the use of color, large prints, painting on the surface, and elaborate studio set-ups, these quiet, unassuming observations in black-and-white appeared obstinately "untrendy."

What I was confronted with was the discrepancy between what I saw in her pictures and my idealized preferences for the way the world should look. She demanded that I admit my biases and assumptions and take another look at the world. It wasn't a question of whether I liked or disliked her photographs, but whether or not I liked the world! I had been going around with my meter, comparing this subject with that, this moment with that, establishing a hierarchy of values, and her photographs whispered, "Are you sure about that?"

Bankhead is certainly playing by the rules of documentary: 35mm, eye level, straight ahead, "everydayness." She photographs what anyone can see, nothing obviously exotic or bizarre or inaccessible. But within this framework, what has she chosen to show us? What does she intend for us to see?

She studied photography in the early seventies with Russell Lee, one of the exceptional photographers employed by the Farm Securities Administration (FSA) in the 30s. With these photographs, we have the privatization of the public experience; the documentary style has been cut adrift from any connection to a larger social purpose of the FSA. We are now suspicious of the ability of government programs to make any improvements in our quality of life, suspicious of all gestures in the public arena, from press conferences to

beauty contests. Our expectations are reduced to mistrust. One picture shows a young man seated in a church, looking down into a plastic drinking cup. Worshipers in the other pews are listening to the off-camera priest, but this young man seems disengaged. Why is he here? In another, we approach an African-American woman seated at a bus stop, looking suspiciously over her shoulder at us. Meanwhile, innocent bystanders line the wall in shadow. In a third, a young girl stands holding two balloons in the midst of hundreds of discarded beer cans and the other remains of a street party.

Does Judy Bankhead love or hate what she is photographing? The FSA and the Photo League photographers (among them Aaron Siskind, one of Bankhead's teachers in graduate school at Rhode Island School of Design) photographed from a stated desire to change the world. Can we figure out her position toward what we see in the pictures? Are there clues to decipher her attitude toward what she is showing to us? A man is standing with a rolling stretcher, a body covered with a black cloth embroidered "Angelus Chapel." He is waiting in front of two elevator doors. Will he go up or down? Questions of choice.

The traditional stance of the documentary style presumed an objectivity that implied neutrality: "And that's the way it was." I disapprove of much that I see in her pictures—what it means to get old in our society, the way cities are organized around the convenience of fire-belching mechanical monsters, the roles reserved for women in society or the



Judy Bankhead, *Untitled*, 1983

imbalance between nature and things man-made—so I assume she, too, is critical of the same things. I am projecting my own attitudes on to her pictures, but is it a neutral field? For example, we see two older women in scarves waiting for the bus. One has her hand on the pole of the bus stop sign, looking down, holding her cane. The other woman is looking at the camera. Half her face is covered with her scarf. Her arms are folded, lips pursed. She is mistrustful, closed off. Do I recognize myself in this picture?

Bankhead subverts our expectations, as in a press conference with several still and video



Judy Bankhead, *Untitled*, 1983/93

cameras all pointing the same direction, her camera is looking the other way. She identifies her pictures with numbers, withholding any clues about why she took this particular picture, why the people are doing what they are doing, no easy label of a short

title that is too easily dismissed as "what this picture is about." She requires that we determine the story, examine our assumptions about what makes a good picture, about what is legitimate subject matter. She confronts us with one of those fleeting perceptions that goes right by without so much as a second thought. It is right there on the wall for us to remember, analyze, dissect, peruse, and contemplate.

Notice a street scene looking toward an intersection, with telephone and light poles bisecting the sky. On the left, the golden arches of McDonald's rise above the artificial planting of a gas station. In the right half of the picture, the large bell tower of a church rises above a dense grove of trees. Three neglected metal frames for portable signs float in the wide expanse of concrete foreground, offering to balance the scales in our weighing of these two cultural values. It is a subtle and delicately composed image, posing a philosophical question at the same time as it juggles the fragments of a city street into a whole worthy of our serious attention.

Susan Sontag wrote that all photographs attain the status of art by becoming old. I am curious how historians in the future will decipher our culture through Bankhead's photographs. It is a wonderful irony that the pictures made in grocery stores were funded by the HEB grocery chain, showing us not the idealized shoppers of advertising, but images to be hung in the corporate headquarters to remind the managers who the customer is. For example, the back of a man in a sweat-stained shirt, with a rag from a chenille bedspread in his hip pocket, a six-pack in each hand. In the magazine rack to his left an African-American woman on the cover of *Black Hair Care* magazine advertises

"All the Best New Looks for Summer."

The pictures are full of gestures, caresses, facial expressions, postures, depicting with care how people hold themselves, carry the baggage of their lives and their bodies. There is an extraordinary photograph of a woman waiting for the bus, standing in front of a luggage store window, holding an empty plastic clothes basket. Her face is tight, eyes closed, facing into the sun as if soaking up light to keep warm. Her jacket is buttoned up to her neck. A large white sign above her head, taped to the window, is advertising

trash bags. Standing to her right with his foot on some pipes coming out of the wall is a young man. In contrast to his patient, bland expression, we see her taunt neck muscles, the paleness of her skin. Her hair is pulled back, her glasses removed and in her hand. The shadow of a pole falls across the sidewalk and up the wall, separating them.

There is a photograph of a man's face with a mask of two eyes held over his own eyes. The representation of the eyes are not "the real thing," merely a picture of the thing, without any of its function. Instead of seeing, they obscure the vision of the man. He is blindfolded, and the gaze of the male has been denied. The blindfold is also a disguise. Are they feminine eyes? Is it an attempt for a man to see the world through a woman's eyes? What does it mean when he can't? Is that his inability to see in her way, or is it a reference to the constructions that she feels have been forced on her, to see the world through a man's eyes (male teachers, male curators, male father?) It made me wonder about the curatorial process that selected these 100 images from the 45,000 negatives she made in this fifteen year period. It is different in style from the other pictures. Here the subject is engaged, invited to participate in the making of the image. Does it refer to the protection of the self offered by the guise of documentary objectivity, where you remain invisible behind the camera, protected, not expressing yourself, only showing what was out there?

The primacy of the visual in our culture is most apparent in the popularity of photography. Success is based on appearances; Miss America is not the brightest or most talented, but chosen for how she looks when she walks around in high heels in her swimming suit. In one picture, we see the back of a beauty contestant, her face and dress reflected in a mirror. (It suggests the manner in which we all evaluate ourselves in terms of how others see us.) But the photographer's flash and own reflection are the central attraction in the mirror. Is the photographer comparing herself to this traditional standard of beauty and womanhood? If so, the bright light of her flash is insistent that she be judged by her actions as a photographer rather than her appearance, which is obscured.

Among the many photographs of single individuals, there are two of people eating alone. In one an older woman is sitting in an aluminum folding chair near a campfire at

continued on page 16



Judy Bankhead, *Untitled*, 1988/93

continued from page 16
 night. She is turned away from the camera, pouring from a sauce pan into a big cup. A large tree branch intrudes into the frame between the woman and the viewer. In the other a man is seated in a cafe with an empty napkin dispenser, empty bottles and discarded plates and cups around him. His hand is stuck into a white paper sack. The camera's flash bounces brightly from a large photo mural of trees on the wall behind him. The images are of isolation, of the feeling of being outside, left out, shut out, alone in places of little warmth or comfort, of wandering around, on a search, looking for something.

This observation prompts me to ask what the significance of this show is for the photographer. Fifteen years is a large chunk of work to summarize in 100 pictures. Especially if the period began the year your father died, and ended in your fortieth year, with your mother dying just as you are finishing the editing. This is the exhibition of a mid-life artist, asking the question of what comes next through the process of examining what she has been doing for fifteen years. It is a dividing line between one way and another, between what was and what will be. To look at these 100 pictures in that light, is to find in them an attitude toward the future. In the opening sequence of the exhibition is a photograph made on the edge of town, standing on the sidewalk, looking toward the undeveloped landscape. The sidewalk ends abruptly, grass continues, an old newspaper lies on the ground. It is a question about continuity. Skinny trees, worthless now, but implying a faith that someone will enjoy the shade of this tree, even if it's not you who plants it. Or is this sidewalk an implication of interruption? The absence of people in this photograph and so many others: the empty chairs by the swimming pool, empty chairs at the awards ceremony, empty streets and parks, abandoned childhood toys, a vacant merry-go-round.

The question of what comes next is both personal and public. It deals with the photographer's own life and work, and it involves a larger question about history and memory.

Judy Bankhead, *Untitled*, 1979



How do we see ourselves as part of the continuity of culture? In these photographs Bankhead offers a serious critique of the dominant cultural values, and an equally serious questioning of what is worth saving.

At the same time there is clearly great affection for the individuals she so carefully observes. She accepts our warts, speed bumps, and failures, and accords each a quiet dignity and special place in her San Antonio. Her pictures both make me laugh and allow me to cry.

Paul Hester is a photographer. He recently moved his headquarters to Fayetteville, Texas



Sally Gall, *Untitled*, 1984

Trees Abound

Seeing the Forest through the Trees
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston
 August 14-October 10, 1993

Ed Osowski

During the summer months New York galleries mount exhibitions that do little to tax the brain but do much to please the senses. One can almost hear curators breathing collectively with relief and saying, "Enough of theory! Bring on the pretty pictures." Several months ago, I saw "The Body in Nature" at the James Danzinger Gallery. This exhibition was filled with delightful, haunting, and, in some cases, downright-sexy images of people out-of-doors. It was also filled with the subtle message that there were better things to do than to look at art. An acquaintance recently described to me a quirky exhibition of photographs, titled "On the Elbow," at the Witkin Gallery in which over 50 photographs called attention to that under-appreciated

modernist claim of Alfred Stieglitz and his followers in which the medium is of less importance than the image and idea presented.

Of the twenty-six artists included in the exhibition, thirteen were photographers. And in the installation of the works—fifteen photographs and thirteen pieces in other fields—the photographic images were equal to the etchings, paintings, and pieces of sculpture capturing what Herbert called in published notes the "sense of lawlessness [that] the rules have been thrown out, order as we know it has been turned upside down, and a sense of abandon awaits."

Working within the confines of the CAM's somewhat restricting Gallery Two, Herbert turned the room's limitations into an asset. The works were arranged with the same dense, crowded feel one finds in a forest. It was also an installation keen on setting up visual echoes—allowing the Steichen to speak to an equally stunning Sally Gall photograph *Untitled*, 1984, which, in turn, seemed caught up in conversation with Sylvia Mangold's

anatomical feature, the elbow.

On first viewing, "Seeing the Forest through the Trees," which opened at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum during the Dog Days of summer, it appeared that Lynn Herbert took her cues from this New York tradition. Herbert's curatorial selections avoided intellectual engagement for something simpler, purer, and more direct—the enjoyment of seeing a group of skillfully selected works with one goal in mind—to charm the viewer with a very limited glance at how some artists, most working today, have depicted trees. But in her selections a subtle intellectual argument emerges, an argument that takes its cue from the earliest work in the exhibition, Edward Steichen's *Trees, Long Island*, 1905. Steichen's work is beautiful, a fine example of the photo-pictorialist effort to establish photography as an equal partner with other arts. "Seeing the Forest through the Trees" used as its critical vocabulary the

1990 etching *Pin Oak*. Earle Hudnall's *Strangler Fig Tree*, 1990 and George Tice's 1970 *Oak Tree, Holmdel, New Jersey*, were small photographs but rich in feeling and seemed partners with Page Kempner's delicate bronze *In the Garden... Counting to Ten*, 1993. Hudnall's work, in turn, was balanced with Lucas Johnson's small 1992 painting *Untitled (Marie Le Veau)*.

The works by Hudnall, Tice, and Kempner made it clear that less can be more especially when set against Rodney Graham's three enormous sepia prints of British oaks (all from 1990). Graham prints his images large—approximately three by five feet—and hangs them upside down. Those two facts alone make them of interest. Including three works by Graham—the only artist so singled out—was Herbert's only wrong step. For size that conveyed significance one contrasted the Graham works, inflated and self-important, with Frank Marton's *The Oldest and Wiest of*



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1988/93

All Trees in All the World, 1993, a magnificent photographic monoprint, its surface a dense, almost abstract web of pattern and mystery.

Photographs by MANUAL Skeet McCauley, and Peter Brown reminded the viewer that trees—as the most obvious symbols of the natural world—exist in a world that is threatened. They raised issues more pressing than one found in the “romantic” images that dominated the exhibition. To varying degrees these four realized that irony is necessary when viewing a natural world under attack by economic and political forces.

One could question how Herbert made the leap from Steichen’s 1905 photograph to Tice’s 1970 image with no stops between them. But her purpose never seemed to be to provide a scholarly overview of her subject. One could just as easily have wondered why other photographers—Alain Clement comes immediately to mind—who have worked with trees as subjects were not selected. And one could also have wondered why Herbert did not try to place her works within a larger tradition of the “landscape” or why her interest in raising ecological questions was so fleeting. But these were minor concerns. “Seeing the Forest through the Trees” was a summer show, one that deserved close attention to its parts, and not to the absence of a shaping or defining thesis.

Ed Osowski is president of the Houston Center for Photography and a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

Uncivil Wars

Civil War Series by Cindy Sherman commissioned by the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina and shown in 1991 at the Gibbes Museum of Art as part of the group show Places with a Past: New Site Specific Art in Charleston at Texas Gallery June 15-July 24, 1993

Ed Osowski

At forty, Cindy Sherman is approaching the chronological midpoint of her career. An exhibition of six photographic images from her “Civil War Series” and a seventh unrelated image provided an opportunity to review her career and achievements.¹

Central to Sherman’s photographic work has been her use of the human figure. As she gained recognition as a personality, the presence of her image became a defining factor in her photographs. Part of the visual pleasure of viewing her photographs was finding Sherman beneath the disguises and identifying what had been added to create the image seen in the photograph.

Throughout her career, what Sherman has done by her persistent use of the body has been, quite simply, to reject the vocabulary and aims of modernism. Her early works, now so familiar that they seem to have been always part of the visual and intellectual terrain of our times, hardly need to be described. In brief, they are intelligent, politicized, and charged by their engagement with social and cultural issues.² But they are also anything but mere illustrations of a critique of the culture. The viewer of a Sherman photograph senses that there is a narrative at work in the image—that the photograph is part of a story—but that the remaining parts of the text will not be supplied. Sherman challenges the viewer to provide the remainder of the text and furnish only that one image with which to reconstruct the text.

The second room at Texas Gallery was devoted to the six images from the “Civil War Series.” In these works, signs of death are everywhere—a leg, a foot, an arm, a hand, an open palm. Pieces of bodies we believe have fallen in battle. What makes these works unusual for Sherman is her disappearance from each photograph’s surface. The viewer never sees a face and thus is never able to identify the sex of these body parts. To suggest that these

“must” be men simply because women did not fight in the American Civil War is to fall into Sherman’s trap: Nothing about these images places them firmly in our Civil War. They could be Sherman’s version of events in Bosnia or refer more broadly to domestic violence—the civil/domestic wars that terrorize women.

In two images, Sherman planted human skulls among the arms and legs. What are we to make of them? They seem to defy logic, these symbols of destruction and death, introduced like metaphors onto a battlefield strewn with fresh body parts. But the last thing driving Sherman is illustration. Her aim is to remind the viewer that merely illustrating scenes from the Civil War holds no appeal for her. These images are works representing the effects of any civil or domestic war, a reading supported by one image in which a vaguely feminine looking leg and thigh clothed in a white undergarment fills the horizontal space.

To search for actual images Sherman may

“OUTDOORS, at the foot of a tree, I noticed a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, etcetera, a full load for a one-horse cart.”

—Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days*

have used as models is a vain exercise. While there may be hints of works by Alexander Gardner or Timothy H. O’Sullivan in certain images, they remain, at best, only tantalizing hints. Sherman’s concern, surely, is not to pay homage to war photographers. Knowing the works of Matthew Brady and his compatriots enhances our appreciation for what Sherman has done but doesn’t explain what she has accomplished.

We remember that her “history portraits” point indirectly at the works they echo. So, these six works, quiet and calm and eerie, “feel” like Gardner’s *Home for a Rebel Sharpshooter*. And, like Gardner’s photograph, these are also manipulated photographs, bodies and props arranged to produce a powerful effect. What Sherman does quote are the silence and stasis of the large body of Civil War photographs. Prevailing technology was incapable of supporting the picture-making of war photographers such as Cornell Capa. For Sherman and her nineteenth century antecedents war images become part of the meditative act.

Instead, it seems more appropriate to consider the works of two contemporary artists—the filmmaker David Lynch and photographer Andres Serrano—when considering Sherman’s series. In the opening scenes of Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* the camera focuses with great attention on a body in the grass—a striking similarity to Sherman’s point of view. She has shot them at ground level, her camera barely removed from the scenes it captures. In Serrano’s *Morgue* photographs we find the same quiet brooding and reverential qualities that underline Sherman’s images.

Always concerned with directing the viewer toward the artificiality of her art, Sherman aims to liberate photography from its link to literal description and free it from illustration and verisimilitude. She has done this, not by opting for locating abstract images in the “real” world as Aaron Siskind has chosen, but through a more radical approach that teases us with appearance of reality. So these six “Civil War” images—with their layers of jelly spread thinly to resemble blood, with badly created wounds, artificial grass and fake insects—contain nothing to trick the viewer into thinking that Sherman has somehow stepped back in time. Her images could only be taken now. In these six works, Sherman has dropped the theatrics of her older works for a new approach, a new angle.³ These are bravura works that achieve their hold on the viewer by how very different they are from her other works.

FOOTNOTES

1 Born in 1954, Sherman has been exhibiting for nearly twenty years. In 1976 she graduated SUNY at Buffalo and was included in a group show at Buffalo’s Albright-Knox Gallery. Four years later her brief apprenticeship ended with a one-person show at New York’s Metro Pictures—still her New York dealer. She received a one-person show at the CAM, Houston in 1982 and was featured in a 1982 Texas Gallery exhibition.

2 Sherman’s earliest works resembled “B” movie stills. Between 1976 and 1982 she cast herself in various disguises—waif, victim, perky co-ed. Initially, these images seemed derived from popular films such as those of Hitchcock, Vadim or Godard. Clearly it was Sherman beneath the wigs and costumes, both behind and in front of the camera, controlling the image-making process and, from an equally important feminist position, controlling the content.

3 The author acknowledges and appreciates a conversation with Susie Morgan during which Morgan provided her views on Sherman’s “theatrics.”

LOOKING AT GALVESTON PAST

Ezra Stoller
Galveston Historical Society
September 4-30, 1993

Ed Osowski

In 1963, architectural photographers Ezra Stoller and Henri Cartier-Bresson were commissioned to produce photographs to accompany Houston architect Howard Barnstone's text *The Galveston That Was* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts and New York: MacMillan Co., 1966). Working in Galveston for nine days, Stoller created a group of images documenting a wide range of nineteenth century domestic and commercial buildings at a specific and rather depressing period in Galveston's history—before preservationists began efforts to save the city's architectural heritage.

During September 1993 thirty-two of Stoller's photographs (seven vintage prints and the remainder modern prints) from the Galveston project, including several omitted from the book, were shown at Galveston's Artists' Loft & Gallery. The exhibition was funded by the Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), the Galveston Renaissance Foundation, and the Stoller Family.

Stoller began his career in 1939 and was a key player in the campaign to establish European modernism as the architectural style for American buildings by the 1960s. Barnstone, a supporter also of Mies van der Rohe's modernist vocabulary, and Stoller may have at first seemed an odd pair for a project seeking to rescue Galveston's past before it disappeared. (Cartier-Bresson's more humanistic and emotional style seemed more appropriate to capture the spirit of Galveston's past.) But Stoller's and Barnstone's modernism actually made them perfect partners. Their skeptical vision may have made them more receptive to the city's hidden treasures.

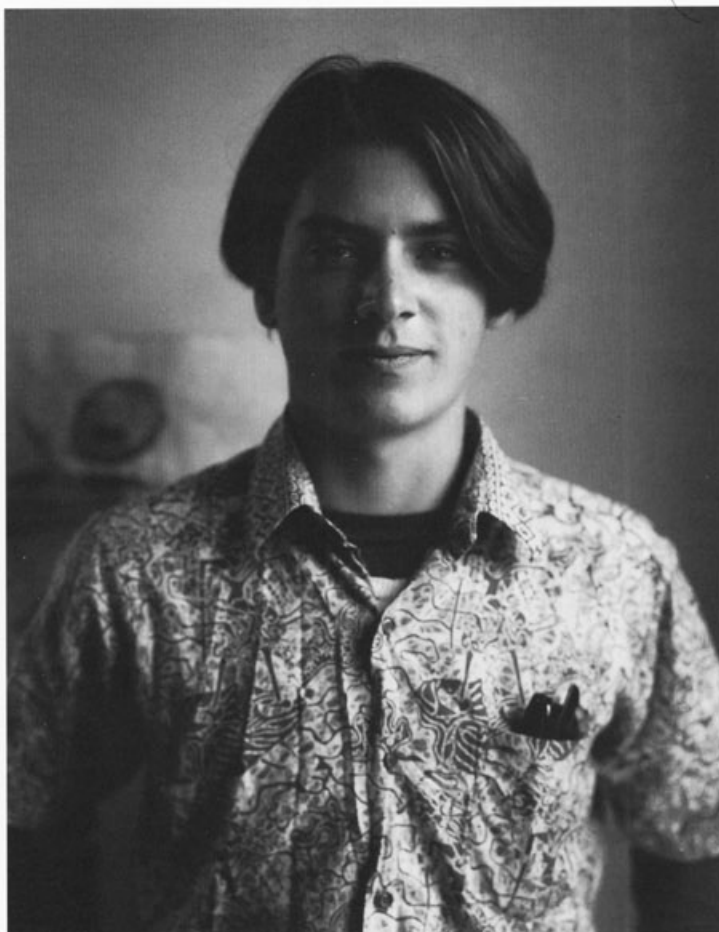
Looking through Barnstone's book before viewing the exhibition, one realizes how differently Stoller and Cartier-Bresson interpreted their assignments. (Cartier-Bresson's images were not on display, so familiarity with them depended on familiarity with the book, scheduled for republication by Rice University Press in June). Stoller's images are precise, clearly lit, direct, ordered, cool—all qualities one associates with the aims of architectural photography. Cartier-Bresson's works are much more of their moment and location, perhaps sentimental and warm when viewed

against Stoller's coolness. But Stoller was also able to anchor the building's residents in a particular place—two goals of architectural photography—providing the facts of the building and offering the viewer the experience of how the building is used. As the exhibition demonstrated, Stoller brought these aims with him when he documented Galveston.

Stoller's approach eschewed nostalgia—for him the city's buildings could be likened to pieces of sculpture, abstract and pure, waiting for his camera to focus on them. The organizers of the exhibition, however, ignoring the photographic evidence before their eyes, write in gallery notes that Stoller's mission was "to depict the buildings as they had been used in the nineteenth century." The photographs speak otherwise: his *Darragh Residence, East Elevation* deserves a close reading. Dating from 1886, the building was a grand structure that combined elements of the Greek Revival and Italianate styles and stood until 1991 when it was destroyed by a fire. In Stoller's photograph, its grand days are past. One sees clothing hanging to dry on the second floor porch and seven mailboxes by the front door; the tower windows lack covers. Barnstone's summary of its fate at the time of Stoller's photograph is brief, "The building is now a rooming house with eight or ten apartments in poor repair."

Somewhat frustrating, from an historical viewpoint, was GHF's failure to document fully many photographs exhibited. Several buildings—especially one of a wooden Gothic Revival church—were simply not identified. And the description "demolished," found in a number of captions, failed to distinguish between buildings ruthlessly destroyed and others, such as the Darragh House, which fell to an arsonist despite GHF efforts to find a buyer for it.

Not since 1971, when Museum of Fine Arts, Houston showed the Cartier-Bresson and Stoller photographs from the book (they are part of the Museum's holdings) have these works been seen. In 1961 Stoller was the first photographer to receive the American Institute of Architects gold medal. His Galveston photographs offer the chance to study a master at work, applying his sharp definition and emotion-free stance, to a city and its romantic architecture that seem the direct antithesis of his modernism.



Gus Van Sant, Scott Green, Portland, OR, 1990

Just Plain Folks

Gus Van Sant: 108 Portraits
Twin Palms Publishers
Santa Fe, NM, 1992, 112 pages, \$50

Michael G. DeVoll

I've always enjoyed a good book. "To be a good book," the content will interest me, but it should also be pleasing in its physical presence. This notion was nurtured during my years in the retail book business. I began noticing specific publishers or imprints that appealed to me. There were a few that stood out as having consistently high-quality workmanship—interesting cover art; paper that was pleasing to the touch; end papers with delicate, intricate or unusual printings; and exceptional reproductions and press work.

Of course, once I have admired a book as an object, the content also must have lasting impact. *Gus Van Sant: 108 Portraits* is such a book.

Published by Twin Palms Publishers, a small company specializing in high-quality photography and art books, this book stands out on first glance because the dark, matte finish of the cover with its stark, white lettering has such graphic impact, a little severe yet clean. When you pick up the book, it is heavy, but not burdensome and the cover feels smooth, almost waxy. If you look under the slipcover (the only way to fully appreciate the craft of book binding), the black fabric cover is embossed with the title, appearing as black-on-black. You then turn to the heavy, black, matte, textured end paper inside the front cover. The title page (replicating the sans-serif, capitalized type treatment from the cover) and the introduction are on a matte paper with white type reversed out of a lush, rich black ink printed full bleed. What follows is the real treat of this book, the 108 portraits. With such a build up, you expect high-quality reproductions and, typical of Twin Palms, you are not disappointed.

The publishers decided to use an older, more labor intensive process, the photogravure, that uses a chemically-etched copper plate. If the photos were enlarged, the dot pattern of the standard halftone process would not be evident, but rather a mesh-like pattern resulting in much more subtle gradations, from crisp whites to deep, rich blacks. But as mentioned before, the subject matter of the book is what must ultimately hold your attention, and again, this book does not fail.

The 108 portraits were taken by the independent filmmaker Gus Van Sant between 1988 and 1992. These photographs started in the casting sessions for his films *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*. In the introduction, he talks of the awkward moment at the end of an interview when the interviewer is tempted to rudely say "next." Instead, Van Sant asked the subjects if he could take their picture. No one has yet to turn him down. Moving from a pre-determined location with good natural light and an unobtrusive background, he'd give no other warning than "Okay, ready" and take

Ezra Stoller, from *The Galveston That Was* project, 1963



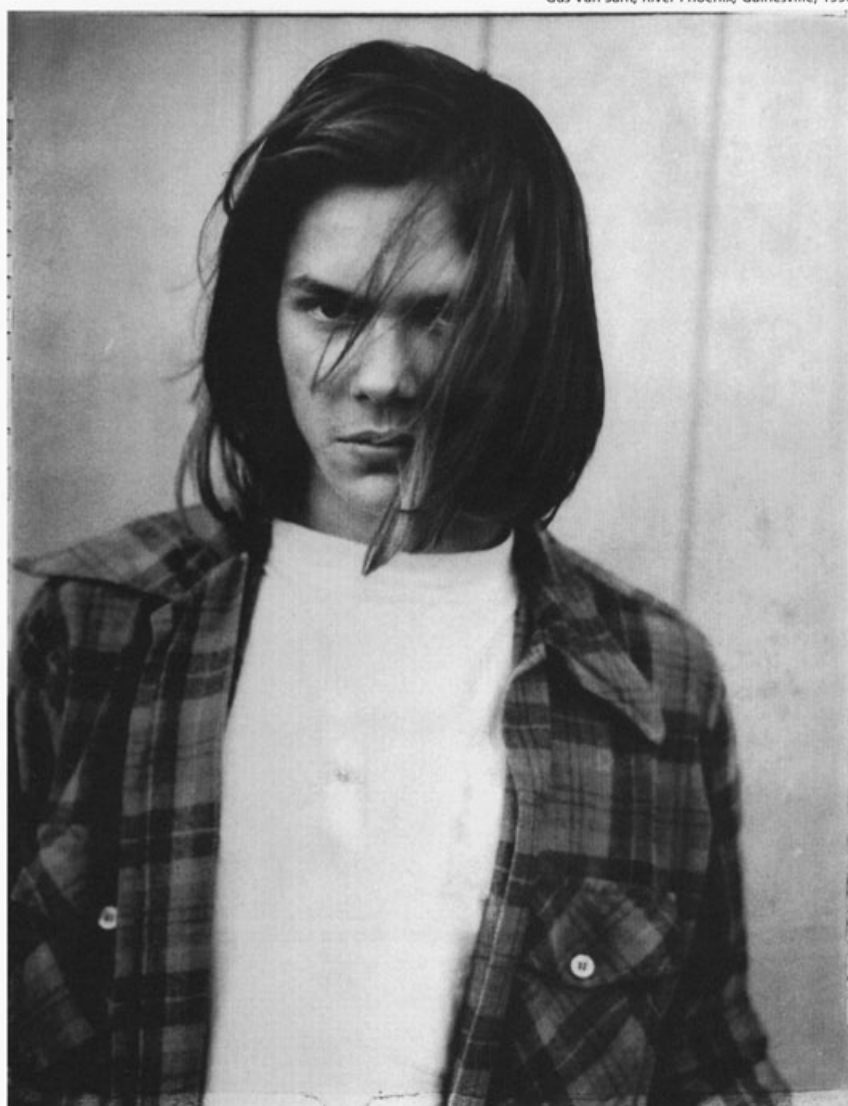
one picture. He used a Polaroid land camera with Polaroid P/N film that gives an instant black-and-white print and a black-and-white negative. Van Sant explains that initially these small prints helped him visualize the characters and casting possibilities. Eventually, he took these snapshots of anyone he met in "the business." The result of this progression is a collection of portraits of the famous, the near-famous, and the nowhere-close-to-being-famous. The most intriguing aspect of this work is that all of these people are presented in the same, straight-forward, un-glamorous way. Many of the images even have large scratches or flares on them. These are not the slick, glamorous celebrity portraits of Annie Leibovitz, Herb Ritts or Greg Gorman: these are not even the publicity stills that agents send out. These are completely outside the Hollywood framework.

All the subjects are shown half length and the distinctive Polaroid rough border is always present. This consistency of format lends itself to presentation in book form. Each image is presented full frame, one image per page (almost to the edge of the page), with an unobtrusive page number in the inner lower corner. This allows the reader to turn pages and "read" each person without interruption. Although there is some variance in the backgrounds, most are nondescript, instead focusing attention on the subject. Flipping through the book without much thought, I began recognizing a few of the faces. I then looked for a listing of who these people were—almost like a visual memory test. Those I recognized from this movie or that TV series or that music video didn't look much different from the people I didn't recognize. (If you watch many independent films, you will probably do better on the test than your friends who don't.) But recalling the premise under which the photographs were made, I realized that these were not images about these people being famous, but being "just plain folks."

This "sameness" caused me to go back and look again, to try and figure out why some of these people were famous and others were not. On repeated trips through the book, certain common personal characteristics stand out. You notice the hair—long, loose, pulled back, "fixed," and the really bad-hair-day hair. The stances of the people vary. Most are facing forward with their arms down at their sides with some notable exceptions. Adult film star *Traci Lords* is turned sideways, her tight black shirt accentuating her figure against the white background. Some of the people have their arms crossed in front of them giving two different impressions: daring and proud (*Sandra Bernhard*, *Kevin Dillon*, and *Loneheart*) or protective and scared (*Heather Graham* and *Patti D'Arbanville*). Also notable is the clothing: The bare shoulder, the coat and tie, the bra strap showing, the suspenders, the grunge look (before it was fashionable), the scarf around the neck, the flower-print polyester dress, and lots of t-shirts. Most of the people pictured were just out and about on a normal day so these things at least hint at the



Gus Van Sant, Faye Dunaway, Portland, 1992



Gus Van Sant, River Phoenix, Gainesville, 1990

individual behind the facade.

As you look through the book, the eyes strike you the most. Those "windows of the soul" become almost haunting. Like the accouterments with which the people choose to adorn themselves, the eyes are varied and telling. Many come across as innocent (*Laurie Parker*, *John Knight*, *Felix Howard*, *Rodney Eastman*, *Kristy Swanson*), others as not so innocent (*Traci Lind*, *Jennifer Jason Leigh*, *Scott Coffey*, *Peter Gallagher*, *Peter Murnik*). Many, with their direct stare, have piercing eyes (*Nicholas Kallen*, *Meg Foster*, *Udo Kier*, *Rodney Harvey*, *River Phoenix*), others just seem tired (*Amy Wright*, *William S. Burroughs*, *Josh Deparrie*, *Bill Richert*, *Grace Zabriske*, *Pat Morita*, *Bruno*, *Steve Buscemi*, *Rick Schroder*). The years and wisdom of some are revealed in their eyes (*David Byrne*, *Dennis Hopper*, *Allen Ginsberg*, *Tracy Chapman*, *Faye Dunaway*). Others have a knowing sadness that belies their few years (*Rebecca Ross*, *Phong Truont*, *Balthazar Getty*). For any number of reasons, some have eyes that just seem empty (*Josh Evans*, *Ione Sleye*, *Keanu Reeves*, *Anthony Kiedis*, *Bernie Coulson*, *Danny Perkin*). The portrait of *Bradley Gregg* makes your heart ache because he looks scared and lost.

As a whole, the book, with its superb craftsmanship and powerful imagery, is one that impresses you each time you look at it and stays with you after you put it down. Van Sant, in the introduction, talks about the "power a single person carries around with them" and the fact that they "embody huge potentials for success or failure, for nervousness or calm, for sainthood or deviltry." He has captured these people in compelling portraits at varying stages of their progression through their potential. Some are more successful at projecting their "power" but the "sameness" that is present indicates that there is also a certain amount of luck and timing involved in being "famous." This book allows you to peek in on a moment in these peoples' lives while reinforcing that we are all made of the same flesh and blood.

Michael G. DeVoll is administrative director of the Houston Center for Photography and a frequent contributor to SPOT.

MESSAGE CARRIERS

continued from page 5

who cannot properly evaluate the work because they do not have access to native experience or ownership. . . Art reviewers who are unable to understand messages tend to dismiss what is unfamiliar with avoidance, sentimental empathy, or trite comments. The challenge for non-native viewers is to become informed. The uninformed art historian and critic alike must step away from the podium or computer—tools of informational control—and acknowledge that they lack the references to understand native symbolism or dialogue. This issue of control is essential; the uninformed viewer must grapple with the humility of not knowing. While those with a formal art education who visit museums and galleries constitute a small, elite group, it is this same group that find themselves challenged as they cannot rely fully on the canons of European art history. The "universal" is no longer universal.¹⁷

At least initially, we all try to understand the unfamiliar in relation to the familiar and the known. If the unfamiliar work does not fit neatly and easily into our cultural framework, we may find it lacking in some way. Too often, we invoke the notion of quality and dismiss the work without another thought.

Lippard has written, "Such sheeplike fidelity to a single criterion for good art. . . remains firmly embedded in educational and artistic circles, producing audiences who are afraid to think for themselves."¹⁸ I agree. In our culture, it is usually a compliment to tell someone they are discriminating in their taste. I think it is time to reconsider.

Jo Ortel received a Ph.D. in art history from Stanford University and is currently teaching at the University of Houston.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank photographer Laura Letinsky and the students who participated in my seminar on "Cultural Representations of/by the Other" for helping me to clarify and refine my thoughts about multicultural diversity in the arts.

FOOTNOTES

1. Howardena Pindell, "Breaking the Silence," *New Art Examiner*, 18 no. 2 (October, 1990), pp. 18-23. The second article in the series appeared in *New Art Examiner* in November, 1990.
2. The results of Pindell's research were originally presented as a lecture at the Agencies of Survival Conference held at Hunter College, New York, June 27, 1987. They were subsequently published in Pindell, "Art world racism: a documentation," *New Art Examiner*, 16 no. 7 (March, 1989), pp. 32-36.
3. Pindell, "Breaking the Silence," p. 19.
4. Thomas McEvilley, "Critical Reflections," *Artforum*, 30 no. 3 (November, 1991), p. 114. (Reprinted as "Revaluing the Value Judgment," in McEvilley, *Art and Otherness, Crisis in Cultural Identity*. Kingston, NY: Documentext, McPherson & Co., 1992.)
5. McEvilley, p. 114.
6. The film, entitled "Guerrillas in our Midst," was made by Amy Harrison in 1992.
7. McEvilley, p. 114.
8. Eunice Lipton, "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? Some Plots for a Dismantling," in *The Decade Show, Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*. New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, & The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990, p. 29.
9. Lipton, p. 32.
10. McEvilley, pp. 114-115.
11. McEvilley, *Art and Otherness*, pp. 23-24.
12. Lipton, p. 31.
13. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Images, Music, Text*. Transl. Stephen Heath. NY: Hill and Wang, 1977, pp. 142-148. And see Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ed. with intro. by Donald F. Bouchard. Transl. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977, pp. 113-138.
14. Margo Machida, Asian-American artist and independent curator has adopted a similar position in her efforts at investigating and documenting contemporary Asian-American cultural production.
15. Theresa Harlan, "Message Carriers: Native Photographic Messages," *Views, The Journal of Photography in New England*, vol. 13-4/14-1 (Winter, 1993), p. 3.
16. Lipton, p. 29.
17. Harlan, p. 7.
18. Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings, New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: Pantheon, 1990, p. 7.

For the Love of the Show

Indian Circus by Mary Ellen Mark

Foreword by John Irving

Chronicle Books, 1993

107 pages, \$40

Holly Hildebrand

Twenty-five years ago, a hippo in a pink tutu helped seduce the eye of Mary Ellen Mark. During her first trip to India, when she and a friend went to the circus, she fell in love, not only with the country, but with its big tops. Still in thrall two decades later to the "beauty and innocence" of the circus, she took, in 1989 and 1990, most of the seventy-two photographs that form the core of this book.

These are not photographs about performances, however; they are photographs about people, animals, and the families created while working endlessly and relentlessly to preserve the "magic fantasy" of an institution. In touching detail, Mark shows us young girls dutifully practicing their acrobatic routines, contorting their bodies into incredible shapes; later, exhausted, one, still in full makeup, sleeps on a pallet with her lipstick, powder and comb within reach.

In his foreword, novelist John Irving, who was with Mark when she took some of these photographs, points out the "atavistic and compassionate life" of the Indian circus. For the child acrobats, he notes, the circus, despite its tough routine of performance, practice, rest, and more practice, is a humane alternative, an escape from begging, starvation or prostitution.

Indeed, in one of the many moving interviews that Mark collected in her preface, *Pinky*, a ten-year-old girl who is one of India's most famous contortionists, describes what her circus life means to her, "Only when I came to the circus, that's the life I remember. Before that I don't remember. Even when I'm old I'll be in the circus. Circus life is good. If I had not come here, it would not be good at all. Here nobody hits me. When I'm big, I'll become a superstar in the circus. Then I'll travel all over. Everywhere in the world. Everywhere."

The Indian circus is also a place for what many would think of as the grotesque. Several of Mark's photographs focus on dwarves, but through her eyes we see not freaks but touching human beings. In the first of the book photograph, the dwarf-clown *Usman* joyfully carries his normal-sized infant son down a dusty road at the Jumbo Circus in Bombay. Stretched out on a cot, behind netting, we see the face of exhaustion on another dwarf. Like the children with no place in the outside world, the dwarves find acceptance in the circus. The photo of *Usman*, in clown makeup, standing next to two performers dressed in John Wayne-type gear, while a study in contrasts, is also a portrait of acceptance.

Even the animals become more than beasts in the extended family of the Indian circus. In one amazing photograph taken in 1974, Mark shows us *Raja*, the star chimpanzee of the Gemini Circus, pushing the baby carriage of a two-year-old girl, the daughter of a trainer. "Chimpanzees are notoriously dangerous," Mark says of the photograph. "I could see that this must be a very special animal for someone to trust it with a baby."

That trust is pervasive; in the photograph that has been chosen for the dust jacket, the elephant *Shyama* wraps his trunk around the neck of his trainer, *Ram Prakash Singh*, in the Great Golden Circus at Ahmedabad. What's fascinating, besides the inherent danger, is the looks in the eyes of man and beast; *Shyama* stares slyly at the camera, while his master's gaze is a strange mixture of wild-eyed calm. "Animals are not innocent," says an assistant trainer in Mark's preface. "The more you look after them, the more treacherous they are, but the four-legged things are still better than the two-legged things."

Such a sentiment could be the theme for



Mary Ellen Mark, *Usman with His Son*, Jumbo Circus, Bombay, 1992

many of Mark's photographs. In a 1989 photograph at the Great Royal Circus, *Arjun* and his chimpanzee *Mina* sit side by side, their arms around each other, a pose closer than some in ordinary family albums. But the risk of attack is always there, and Mark experienced it herself when she entered the cage to take the photograph of wild animal trainer *Pratap Singh*, with his lion, *Tex*, who was far from being in a good mood that day.

Mark writes that the Indian circuses were "reminiscent of a purity of days gone by, an innocence impossible to find in Western culture." She documents this poignantly, in photographs ranging from one of a boy peeking sheepishly into the shack-like room of a neighbor girl, to an old man tenderly holding two of his performing dogs while another one expertly poses, to girls dressed in glittering costumes so in contrast to their dusty, impoverished surroundings. But Mark's project was rife with difficulties; owners feared they would be portrayed negatively, and the circuses, which are highly competitive, often kept their schedules secret until the last moment. Yet because the Indian circus may be a dying art—the number of big tops decreased from fifty-two in the 1960s to half

Mary Ellen Mark, *Acrobat Sleeping*, Famous Circus, Calcutta, 1989



that number today—Mark finally received the cooperation, albeit sometimes limited, of circus owners who thought her photographs might help them survive. She then followed and documented eighteen itinerant circuses.

The photographs impress because they are about people. People, in the widest of spectrums, have always been Mark's subject—



Mary Ellen Mark, *Shavanas Begum with her Three-year-old Daughter, Parveen*, Gemini Circus, Perintalmanna, 1989

from junkies, to the infirm, to Mother Teresa, to white supremacists. These circus photographs portray people of hope—yet we sense that for some of these performers the circus will not offer enough. Pratap Singh, who trains both acrobats and wild animals, explained it like this to Mark: "We've kept them (child acrobats) so tenderly, but when it comes time to leave, they turn their faces and they just go. What happens in my heart then is like the biggest mountain when they put the dynamite to break it. That's what it feels like, and then they just leave."

Holly Hildebrand is a freelance writer and former newspaper photo editor.

Pixel Vision

The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era
By William J. Mitchell
MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992
224 pages, \$39.95

Mark Frohman

On the first page of William J. Mitchell's study of the impact of digital technology on contemporary thought and practice, three short paragraphs ("snapshots") traverse the history of image-making, taking us from Pliny the Elder's mythic account of the origin of painting to Henry Fox Talbot's chemical fixing of a shadow in 1839 to scientist Russell A. Kirsch processing patterns of light and shade for the first time into digital information in the mid-1950s.

Painter Paul Delaroche's familiar proclamation, "From this day on, painting is dead," upon seeing the first Daguerreotypes that appeared in Paris simultaneous with Talbot's invention is quoted as an exclamation point to this decisive pictorial rupture (or is it perfection?) of Western modes of visual representation. Although no such statement of grand importance accompanies the discovery of Kirsch and his colleagues at the National Bureau of Standards, one can sense Mitchell beginning to mouth photography's own epitaph. He continues mouthing, if not quite articulating it, throughout the book; but more on that later.

It is interesting to consider that while photography's radicality was seen to toss painting into obsolescence due to its assumed verisimilitude, digital-imaging processes are not claimed to register the real more accurately, but, if anything, to traffic in the unreal; in fact, digital imagery bypasses the question—or more profoundly, does away with the distinction between fact and fiction altogether.

One would think that given the history of evolving representational strategies (even within painting and drawing), we would have expected this. Yet the future is difficult to foresee, and photography has done a fine job in shaping the appearance of the world to our conception of it—and vice versa. Besides, in the case of digital technology, what is possible today was barely conceivable a few months ago. It is not surprising then that the intellectual and artistic communities have been slow in acknowledging digital-imagery as the enormous paradigm shift that it is; while teenagers across the country have embraced it. Some of this, no doubt, has to do with its basis in computer technology—the humanities being generally intimidated by things scientific. Yet it also, I suspect, is related to the fact that we were just getting used to the way that photography functions, and dysfunctions, in the light of post-structuralist theories of meaning and representation without something as radical as digital imagery clouding up the waters again.

The Reconfigured Eye sets us up to delve headlong into such issues, following the ground broken by Fred Ritchin's *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* (Aperture, 1991) which took a more ethically-oriented and focused approach than Mitchell's (Ritchin was concerned primarily with photojournalism). Mitchell's book, developed from seminars and design studios taught at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, is structured in ten chapters, then divided into smaller sections focusing on specific technological processes or ideas about the meaning, use, and history of images. For example, under the chapter "Intention and Artifice" are passages on "Claims to Credibility," "Originals and Copies," "Mutation and Closure," and "Image Ethics Redefined," to name just a few.

Issues of objectivity and truth, and the ends to which photography has been employed in their services, are raised thoughtfully, incorporating philosophical issues and historical examples. Mitchell has a working grasp, if not a



From *The Reconfigured Eye*, the effects of lightening, darkening and contrast enhancement, 1992

global knowledge, of visual history and photographic traditions. Although he is familiar with contemporary theories concerning the ways that a photographic image can be made to serve different meanings in various contexts, he gives the impression of being surprisingly free of any particular position or ideology on the matter.

any thesis he pursues gets lost among all his channel-changing. The questions raised and points made are on target, but Mitchell quickly drops them to move on just when we are beginning to be persuaded. In this regard, Mitchell's book has at least a structural resemblance to that most seminal of works on Modernism and photography, Walter



From *The Reconfigured Eye*, caricatures produced by displacement mapping, 1992

He assumes the reader is as familiar with all the ideas as he is, dropping the names of theorists often without the slightest elaboration, but his writing is not weighted by jargon. The style has a casual matter-of-factness that makes it, for the most part, accessible to an unspecialized reader. The reader-friendly structure of dividing the book into small fragments, as though a handbook, allows us to skip around or read it selectively (random access being a primary feature of digital recording). And you might as well; although he begins with almost monumental scope,

Benjamin's 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

Many of the chapters end with stunningly provocative statements: "A world-wide network of digital imaging systems is swiftly, silently constituting itself as the decentered subject's reconfigured eye" or "We have indeed learned to fix shadows but not to secure their meanings or to stabilize their truth values; they still flicker on the walls of Plato's Cave" which, for all their dramatic delivery, require the reader to follow up the line of thought on their own. Consciously or not, *The Reconfigured Eye* reflects the world view promoted by its very subject: its individual parts are as relativized and fragmented as the multitude of pixels that make up the digital image's illusion of wholeness.

Mitchell covers a lot of territory: the ways in which both artists and scientists have contributed to the development of visual conventions; the adaptation of the techniques of drawing, painting and photography to computer software, which has simplified difficult and time-consuming processes to the push of a button or a roll of the mouse; the growing image banks accessible to anyone with a

modem; and countless other thought-bytes. However, between such observations, several chapters are solely concerned with explaining the many different capabilities of current graphics software in terms that seem too technical and specific for the book's premise. Why such detail is necessary to get his point across is left without explanation and gives *The Reconfigured Eye* the quality of two very different books: one, a critical history of image-making, the other, a beginner's guide to computer graphics.

The one idea that does recur throughout is that aspect of the new digital image process that most forcefully distinguishes it from chemically-based photography. Throughout the 70s and 80s, when photography came under greater critical scrutiny than it ever had before, theorists consistently remarked on the one quality of photography that could be claimed as an essential identifying feature—Mitchell even has a section titled after it—"The Adherence of the Referent." In semiotic analysis, the "referent" is simply that which is referred to, that which a certain representation means to depict. For our purposes, the referent is whatever the photographer aims his camera towards.

In their various writings throughout the 70s, critics Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Rosalind Krauss all came to the conclusion that photography is a "pointer," an index to the referent, in the way footprints point to a human presence or smoke indicates a fire. Photographs in the modern era have served as proof that something existed in a certain spot at a certain time. In a section entitled "The Missing Witness" Mitchell states: "The traditional photographer's essential message is always, as John Berger trenchantly reminded us, 'I have decided that seeing this is worth recording.'" With digital imaging, a referent is no longer necessary, nor is the photographer who previously served as witness and bearer of the image's origin in the objective world. People can be added, or removed, to events they never witnessed, in places they've never been, with people they've never met, all without leaving one's computer workstation. Images can be multiplied from a single source, as in *Newsday's* October 27, 1989, cover showing eighteen Grumman F-14 fighter jets taking off in formation when there was really only one. Photographs of the rings of Saturn and the mountainous terrain of Venus have been shown to the public even though no human has ever actually gazed upon their real surfaces; the photographs were simulated from digital radar data collected in space.

It's true that there have always been photographic manipulations, but the processes are difficult, and even the best results can usually be detected. With digital imagery, they can't. It is a world of simulation that digital imagery most convincingly creates, and simulation that is Mitchell's field of exploration. "This condition demands, with increasing urgency, a fundamental critical reappraisal of the uses to which we put graphic artifacts, the values we therefore assign to them, and the ethical principles that guide our transactions with them," the author insists. He's right, but this statement coming at the end of the book, indicates that Mitchell is not going to be the one to give it to us.

The Reconfigured Eye is not as important a book as we would like it to be (it's no *On Photography* for the computer generation); it may not leave us with many conclusions, yet does offer a whole host of questions un glossed by either optimistic future-looking or apocalyptic dread. What it does best is give an account, almost an inventory, of the myriad complex ways humans have developed for representing not only the world but, in this day and age, simply representing.

Mark Frohman is a freelance writer based in Houston.

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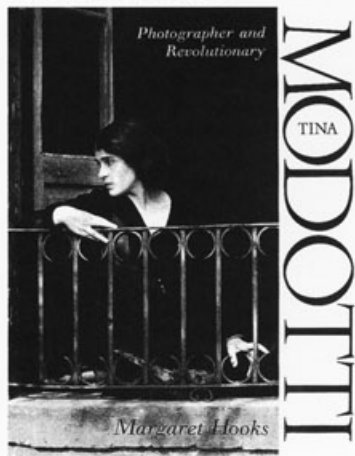
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PARTING SHOTS



The cameras were trained on the "Eye of her Generation" rather than the reverse at January's press luncheon and exhibition tour of "Annie Leibovitz: Photographs 1970-1990" at the MFAH. The woman whose work has been dubbed by local press as symbolic of the last twenty years of portrait photography seemed, at times, uncomfortable with the role reversal but warmed to the overwhelmingly positive reception of the Houston media. Photograph courtesy of Marty C. Baldyga.

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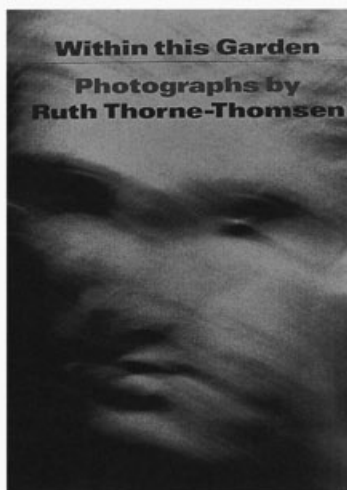
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Compiled by Juan Garcia

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

continued from page 3

I spoke with Marion on a few occasions about what might have been. There was really no place for her to turn. She could have gone back to newspaper photography. How about *Life* magazine? Marion would have quit the first time a *Life* editor sent her out to do a "Life goes to a watermelon feast" (complete with "darkies"). With Marion's political beliefs, she would have been out of place with that conservative rag. It didn't occur to these FSA folks to move into a cabin and follow the art muse as did Edward Weston. The society put no value on fine art in any event. No! She did the best she could, as did the other FSA photographers.

These people were not the victims of their spouses. They were victims of an indifferent America which placed no value on the art impulse and shunned the truth like some virulent brew. They were ahead of their times. If they worked today, they would all be doing coffee-table books, like so many of the young photographers who tread in their footsteps. And the big museums would be giving them mammoth shows. They could hit the lecture circuit and beguile the well-heeled with tales of life in the under-classes.

No, Paul, your book was fine in many ways, but you were suckered into a feminist trap when you lay the blame for Marion's life after FSA on Lee Wolcott. They liked to fight over little things like what to put in the chili, but when it came to photography, he was her biggest fan.

Jack Welpott
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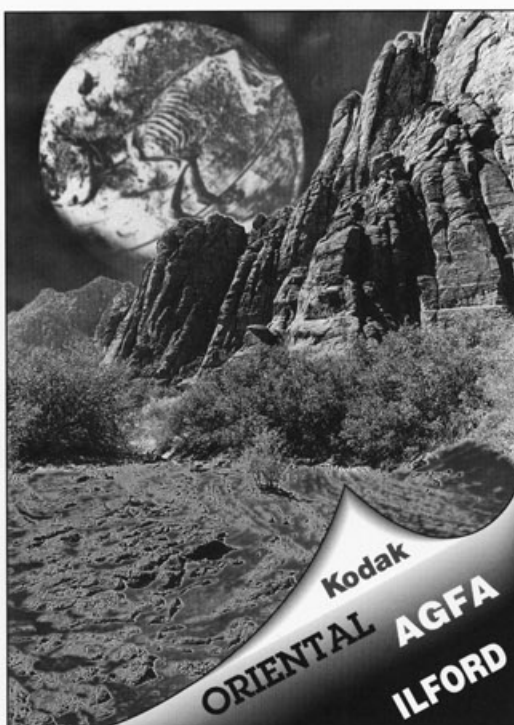
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