

DIANE ARBUS REVISITED

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Diane Arbus (1923-1971) was a gifted portrait photographer who achieved fame and some notoriety from her images of people who were emotionally or physically aggrieved. Her subjects included awkward adolescents, tattooed roughnecks, sex orgies, and persons she called “freaks” in a matter-of-fact way without deprecation. She lived and worked in New York City, venturing to the toughest neighborhoods. Perhaps her most famous image is of a giant (a man about 8 feet tall) stooping beside his parents little more than half his height. The very tall man looks a bit frightening, and all have a startled, almost pained expression on their faces.

In her time, Arbus was controversial and disliked by many critics. After her death—sadly, she took her own life—her work was figuratively placed on the shelf, as if an interesting curiosity of the past. In October 2003, her photography resurfaced with a bang. An extensive exhibition, **Diane Arbus Revelations**, opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; it will visit several US and European cities in 2004. Random House has published a voluminous collection of these images under the same title. A second show featuring her work, **Diane Arbus: Family Albums**, opened in December and will run through March in Boston and New York City; a book is also available. The *New York Times* and *Aperture* magazines devoted cover issues to Arbus as well. A volley of reviews has followed. As a result, Diane Arbus and her work have become all the rage in the world of art critique.

An Ethical Perspective

Behind the buzz of the retrospectives is a question: Was Arbus judged too harshly in the past? The discussion centers on the motivation and merits of her focus on people from whom most of us would avert our gaze—either they would be unpleasant to see, or we would not want to embarrass them by our staring. An issue of ethics is involved. While no one I’ve read has put it this starkly, the root question could be expressed as:

Is it wrong to seek out and photograph people at their worst, when the apparent motives are a compulsion to capture images of the down-and-out, and in the process make a name for oneself and earn a living or profit?

Arbus's Skills: Penetrating Portraiture and Access

Straightaway, Arbus deserves at least two honorable mentions. First, she was a skilled portraitist. Using natural light, Arbus had an intuitive flair for drawing out and illustrating the character of her subjects through the classical portraiture technique of subtle differential shading of the sides of the face. And her images unfailingly show great detail, often in difficult lighting situations and for the most part without graininess.

Second, and crucial to what she achieved, Arbus worked wonders in gaining *access*. Access is among the least mentioned or discussed aspects of photography, but it is vital to the success of most photographers. The majority of beautiful images require the photographer to identify and locate the subjects, and “be there” fully sanctioned. This is especially true (and occasionally downright risky) in people photography. Of course, an established reputation or clientele make it easier in some circumstances, but it’s a long haul.

It was in attaining access that Arbus demonstrated amazing skills. Her photographs of people who would not normally want to be photographed were not candid or taken on the fly or sly with telephoto lenses. Arbus sought out and persuaded her subjects to pose.

Commentaries

The new exhibitions and books about Diane Arbus and her photography have stimulated a number of reviews that touch on the ethical question of taking photographs of the embarrassed, the downtrodden, the variants. . .

In **Behind the Cruelly Probing Lens** (*Financial Times*, 12/13/03), Richard McClure writes: “Whereas once (Arbus) stood accused of voyeurism and prurient curiosity, she is now painted as a kindred spirit to the misfits and outsiders she commonly depicted. Far from seeming exploitive or demeaning, her pictures have come to be read as metaphors for her own suffering; a cumulative self-portrait of a troubled mind.”

Following this, without directly faulting Arbus, McClure proceeds to debunk, by way of examples, the notion that she harbored inherent good will or empathy for her subjects. He writes of her disappointment, while visiting London in search of photo opportunities, at not finding suitable subjects, and quotes her complaint: “Nobody seems miserable, drunk, crippled, mad or desperate. I finally found a few vulgar things in the suburbs, but nothing sordid yet.”

McClure’s clincher concerns Arbus’s famous image of the giant stooping over his parents. His manner appears not quite human; all look nearly shell-shocked. McClure informs us that the San Francisco exhibit includes a contact sheet with other images of that shooting session. All the images show parents and child at ease and demonstrating a natural fondness and affection for each other. Arbus did not publish these, selecting

instead the one image that appears to have been a fluke—as can occur when people are frozen in motion—that shows the subjects at their worst.

In **Good Pictures** (*New York Review of Books*, January 15, 2004), Janet Malcolm provides a more detailed, in-depth biographical study. After all the quotes, reminiscences and opinions are digested, it appears that Malcolm considers Arbus an exceptional photographer who produced memorable images. And that whatever her character and motivation—on which the record, by my reading, is indicated as mixed—Arbus’s photography served a purpose in society as well as her own mind, if only to get people to look at a dimension of reality normally avoided.

Malcolm emphasizes that Arbus usually took her portraits against as plain a background as possible—a demanding but ultimately rewarding technique. She stresses that Arbus did not photograph her subjects without their permission.

Yet Malcolm initially quotes Jed Perl, writing in the *New Republic*, who described Arbus as “one of those devious bohemians who celebrate other people’s eccentricities and are all the while aggrandizing their own narcissistically pessimistic view of the world.” This view is not directly contradicted, but is tempered by quotes and reminiscences that suggest Arbus *may have* had good intent despite a cynicism about life. Arbus is herself quoted in a style that could best be described as bohemian (and at worst, early adolescent):

“Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. . . There’s a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they’ll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.”

In the cover story, **In Communion With the Outsider—What Diane Arbus Was Shooting For** (*New York Times Magazine*, September 14, 2003), Arthur Lebow ventures to speculate on her mental state. On the basis of extensive interviews with Arbus’s contemporaries as well as her writings, he concludes that Arbus enjoyed and was not depressed by her photography of the down-and-out. She would be concerned, however, about not having captured subjects truthfully (i.e., not portraying them as they were). Lebow also suggests that Arbus’s suicide was related to events in her personal life rather than her photography. Interestingly, the previously unpublished images accompanying the article are of people from the mainstream—albeit anxious or embarrassed at the moment—rather than from the margins of society. It turns out that Arbus photographed more of conventional New York society than had been realized.

In a review, **Looking Again Through Dark, Avid Lens of Diane Arbus** (*Washington Times*, January 4, 2004), Alexander Eliot provides a highly informative and down-to-earth commentary with minimal abstraction. Eliot initially focuses on the images—not the photographer—in the **Diane Arbus Revelations** book. He observes that taken as a whole, the photographs comprise a finely crafted, eloquent story of the human condition, or at least an important but rarely viewed side of it. Eliot writes, “To the dull

or hasty glance, her photographic ‘preserves’ often appear ugly or shocking, or both at once. Yet they are indeed beautiful. . .*as a variegated cast of brave souls. . .*” (italics added).

With regard to Arbus’s situation, Eliot is quite to the point:

“She was a true artist in the highest sense. In order to pursue her destiny, Diane required a little money, and a little fame—but that’s the only reason she sought them. And her few successes, in the practical sense, were more or less obliterated by successive riptides of defeat. Most of the magazine editors for whom she worked exploited Diane, paying rock-bottom fees, and even declining to reimburse her painfully modest expenses. As a fragile, female free-lancer who was totally unequipped for, and unaccustomed to, the rude, rough-and-tumble of professional existence, she suffered severe, humiliating attrition throughout the last, best years of her career. Something soon upset the delicate balance that made Diane’s intimate and yet cruel art worth living to create. What was it? That’s not for me to guess. . .”

As to her motivation, Eliot quotes Arbus: “I truly believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them.”

Thank you, Mr. Eliot.

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