

Corpus of Meaning: Figures Through the Lens of Female Photographers

Museum of Fine Arts, St Petersburg, Florida USA

June 14-September 7 2003

Is there a distinctly female approach to photographing the body? If so, then what is it? In the 19th century, female photographers were believed to be better portraitists because they supposedly avoided the mechanical approach taken by male photographers. Another stereotype was that female photographers had an intuitive ability to arrange a studio and put sitters at ease, as well as a talent for arranging hair and garments. This exhibition invites you to make your own inferences about the gendered approach to photography.

In this gallery is a selection of prints of bodies, living and sculpted, male and female, drawn mainly from the Museum's collection. Most are straight photographs, meaning they are not abstracted or collaged. What do these images tell us about how women photographers portray the body? Photographs such as Graciela Iturbide's *Our Lady of the Iguanas* or Dorothea Lange's *Tenant Farmer, North Carolina* may show a distinctly female approach to photographing subjects through elements such as the perspective used or the subjects themselves. Both images are taken from below, forcing the viewer to look up at the subject. Iturbide has focused her camera on the indigenous religious and matriarchal traditions in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. She may have been allowed such an intimate look at those traditions because she is also a woman. Lange traveled around the country in the 1930s, photographing those most affected by the Depression for the Works Project Administration. Her subjects are imbued with a quiet dignity. It is almost too simple to see that aspect of her work as stemming from her gender.

Many of the people in Diane Arbus's photographs have been called "freaks," social outcasts whom Arbus photographed with a "creepy intimacy." These images are constructed by Arbus and her subject, using dress, make-up, and other forms of body decoration as the means of identification as well as the means of disguise. With this idea of disguise goes Polixeni Papapetrou's photograph, *Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Xie Kitchin as a China Man on Tea Boxes*. Papapetrou photographs her daughter in various costumes, and sometimes in masks, as a

metaphor of transformation, which the artist states “allowed her to act paradoxically, to cross boundaries, but to remain herself.” Papapetrou’s pieces are co-created by her daughter, who is the “empowered subject rather than a passive object.” Chinese photographer Xin Danwen used the performance artist Ma Luiming as her subject. Luiming’s performance persona is a nude, transgender creation, whom Xin photographs in a documentary manner.

Beyond disguise is the element of abstraction, as in Lotte Jacobi’s *Praying Hands*, a photogram in which light is used to create the image. The viewer must decide whether the objects in the image are actual hands or objects that have been moved and abstracted with the light to imitate hands. Sandra Haber’s *Untitled (Faces and Hands)* and Ruth Bernhard’s *Knees and Arm* and *Dollhead*, are all fragments of bodies, both real and constructed. These fragments are photographed so as to create patterns, or to focus the attention on one particular aspect of a body.

The photographs of sculptures pose an interesting question: are they photographs of bodies or abstractions of bodies that have been photographed? In Mariana Yampolsky’s *Statue of a Saint with a Candelabra*, the sculpture is framed by the candelabra, a reference to the religious nature of the image. Because it has been photographed in such a manner that the viewer is looking up at the sculpture, it is given an aspect of preciousness. The sculpture in Claire Flanders’s photograph *La Maison de Madeline Castaing, France (The House of Madeline Castaing, France)* is also photographed from below, but rather than inducing a feeling of reverence, it evokes sadness in the viewer, due to the decay of the sculpture and the ivy that covers it. Lee Miller’s photograph, *Isamu Noguchi, the Japanese Sculptor, in His Studio*, combines both sculpture and portraiture as Noguchi is posed behind one of his sculptures.

LIST OF WORKS

DIANE ARBUS

(American, 1923-1971)

GIRL IN A SHINY DRESS, 1967

Gelatin silver print

Museum Purchase with funds provided by William and Carol A. Upham 1992.002

RUTH BERNHARD

(American, b. Germany, 1905)

KNEES AND ARM, 1976

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Carol A. Upham 1997.47

RUTH BERNHARD

(American, b. Germany, 1905)

DOLLHEAD, 1936

Gelatin silver print

NEA and FACF photography purchase grant 1977.14

IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM

(American, 1883-1976)

EDWARD WESTON AND MARGUERITE MATHER, 1923

Gelatin silver print

NEA and FACF photography purchase grant 1972.81

JUDY DATER

(American, b. 1941)

IMOGEN AND TWINKA IN YOSEMITE, 1974

Gelatin silver print

Museum Purchase 1987.73

CLAIRE FLANDERS

(American, b. Belgium, 1937-2003)

LA MAISON DE MADELINE CASTAING, FRANCE (THE HOUSE OF MADELINE CASTAING, FRANCE), n.d.

Gelatin silver print

Gift of William K. Zewadski 2001.25.15

SANDRA HABER

(American, b. 1956)

UNTITLED (FACES AND HANDS), 1987

C-print

Gift of Carol A. Upham 1997.38

GRACIELA ITURBIDE

(Mexican, b. 1944)

NUUESTRA SEÑORA DE LAS IGUANAS (OUR LADY OF THE IGUANAS), 1979

Gelatin silver print

Museum Purchase 2002.26

LOTTE JACOBI

(American, b. Germany, 1896-1990)

PRAYING HANDS, c. 1946

Gelatin silver print

NEA and FAF photograph purchase grant 1977.75

GERTRUDE KÄSEBIER

(American, 1852-1934)

UNTITLED (PORTRAIT OF A MAN IN AN OVERCOAT), early 1900s

Platinum and gum bichromate print

Gift of Miss Mina Turner 1974.10

DORTHEA LANGE

(American, 1895-1965)

TENANT FARMER, NORTH CAROLINA, 1939

Gelatin silver print

Gift of The Stuart Society of the Museum of Fine Arts 1991.1

POLIXENI PAPAPETROU

(Australian, b. 1960)

OLYMPIA AS LEWIS CARROLL'S XIE KITCHIN AS A CHINA MAN ON TEA BOXES, 2002

C-print

Museum Purchase 2002.27

MARIAN POST WOLCOTT

(American, 1910-1990)

UNEMPLOYED COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER CARRYING HOME A CAN OF KEROSENE, 1930s

Gelatin silver print

NEA photograph purchase grant

1981.95

MARTHA STRAWN

(American, b. 1945)

UNTITLED (GOAT, DOOR, BAREFOOT GIRL), 1977

Gelatin silver print

NEA photograph purchase grant 1981.84

MARIANA YAMPOLSKY

(Mexican, b. America, 1925-2002)

STATUE OF A SAINT WITH A CANDELABRA, n.d.

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Doctor Doris Heyden 1977.88

NELLY (Elly Seraïdari)

Greek, b. Turkey, 1899-1998

THE RUSSIAN DANCER NIKOLSKA AT THE PARTHENON, 1929

Gelatin silver print

Collection of William Knight Zewadski

LEE MILLER

English, b. America, 1907-1977

ISAMU NOGUCHI, THE JAPANESE SCULPTOR, IN HIS STUDIO, 1946 (printed later)

Gelatin silver print

Collection of William Knight Zewadski

XIN DANWEN

Chinese, b. 1967

MA LIUMING'S LUNCH, 1994

Gelatin silver print

Collection of William Knight Zewadski

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