

Review of the Exhibition *Breadth of Vision: Portfolios of Women Photographers*,
Fashion Institute of Technology Galleries

Features Image from the *Portrait of a Family Series*

SHOWS SEEN continued from page 31 and advertising photography, and he has stated that the private work has been a refuge from all that, "a place to go, because I think the advertising world is like this golden garbage disposal unit, [where] they hurl you in, they spit you out, they use you up . . ." And one can appreciate Avedon's need to get away from that fickle, glitter world with its emphasis on surface beauty or visual shock to sell products, and to find another more personal, more meaningful, direction—one that would allow him a fuller artistic expression.

Ironically, however, in allowing himself the freedom to discover a new direction, Avedon stays with the same old studio approach, placing his portrait subjects against a white seamless backdrop, using his lights to emphasize facial contours and texture, and working with medium- and large-format cameras for sharpness and detail. The only apparent departure from this otherwise standard studio approach seems to be in the way the shooting sessions are conducted.

In his commercial work, Avedon must, by necessity, be in control of the situation. He must create the mood, give directions, rearrange, and do everything in his power to make the picture as striking and beautiful as possible. He must have an idea. Not so, it would seem, with the portrait subjects, most of whom appear to have been afforded far less attention and consideration. Here he seems to be relinquishing all possible involvement, simply depositing his subjects in the foreign environment of the studio and leaving them alone, without instructions or help and unsure of what is supposed to happen, to stare blankly at the camera, to fidget, to frown, to feel uncomfortable—presumably in the belief that something visually and/or psychologically significant will just occur in this atmosphere of its own accord.

But given that the photographs are generally void of visual or psychological interest, and that more often than not they become mere records of the subjects' reactions—or nonreactions—to an unpleasant ordeal, one cannot help raising questions

not only about Avedon's ability to discriminate between his achievements and failures, but also about whether his true motivation for doing the portraits springs from anything deeper and more genuinely artistic than just the need to get away somehow from that "garbage disposal" oppressiveness of the fashion and advertising scene and to find another "place to go," a shelter in a storm. In the light of the fact that Avedon is considered one of the more important photographers of our time, and that the portraits have been held up as the best examples of his artistic abilities, these questions deserve consideration.

—Richard Busch

Breadth of Vision: Portfolios of Women Photographers, Fashion Institute of Technology Galleries, New York City (Sept. 19-Oct. 15); *Photoworks*, Midtown Y Gallery, New York City (Sept. 16-Oct. 12); *Women Photographers of New York*, Camera Club of New York, New York City (Sept. 17-Oct. 14).

Along with the general women's movement came the development of women's photography groups and shows. This has its good point (it encourages women with inferiority complexes to photograph), but also its bad point. Segregating women does just that. Whether for good or evil, self-segregation puts one in neat little holes.

Take the shows mentioned above. The *Women Photographers of New York* had little reason for mounting a show. It was done mostly, I suppose, because they've had a show practically every month for some time and didn't want to let up. After all, it is (or was) the Year of the Woman. No matter to them that they had nothing worth looking at. Their photographs weren't noteworthy simply because they are women. If anything, the amateurism evident in the Camera Club show harmed them more than it helped. Even good individual photographs couldn't be recognized fully, because whoever hung the show didn't identify the photographers.

Breadth of Vision was an exhibit of about 100 black-and-white prints, silk-

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Barbara Jaffe, from "Breadth of Vision"



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SHOWS SEEN continued from page 120 screens, Xeroxes, color prints, and color slides. It was the result of a competition to show the best work by female photographers. But why the label? Women harmed their cause. For example, the judges, four women prominent in the photography world (Marjorie Neikrug, gallery owner; and Barbara Morgan, Liliane De Cock, and Anne Tucker, photographers), took up an entire corner of the gallery to exhibit their own photographs. Anne Tucker's work wasn't even worth looking at. One man said to me afterwards, "Why are they acting just like a bunch of old women?" In a world where it is so easy to stereotype, women shouldn't give ample reason to allow others to do so.

The show had one other fault. The color slides were shown in a well-lit room

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where it was almost impossible to see them at all.

Photoworks was a good effort. Not intent on overshowing, the group as a whole had some interesting photographers.

Jacque Gaess' animals from a zoo and Suzanne Opton's anachronistic people in New England and views from a moving car window were the most interesting. Suzanne Opton has a gift for finding the strangest people, and photographing them so you really believe you know them. She's destined for stardom.

The *Breadth* show featured many knowns and unknowns. Knowns were Amy Stromsten, who did the rubber soles and dustpan images I wrote of in my *Photoflow* review several months back; Eva Rubinstein; Jill Krementz; Ruth Orkin; Karen Tweedy-Holmes; but no mention of Jill Freedman, who should certainly be represented in such a show.

Almost-knowns were Barbara Jaffe, who presented some of the most grabbing images of black people against white backgrounds, their bodies a bold statement about their existences.

Notable among the unknowns was Cynthia F. Johnson, who recorded the decadence of the country with her pictures of a rural mailbox tangled in weeds and an old pickup truck caught in the underbrush.

Patt Blue and Mary Ellen Andrews copied Diane Arbus. Lynn Sloan-Theodore's photographs of folds of cloth, of rock, and corners of room, reminded me of Edward Weston. And Barbara Wisber imitated Walker Evans.

But even with that, quite a bit got passed along. Sarah Lewis' male wrestlers conveyed all the power and muscle of the people. Nina Howell Starr's coffee cup with open eye added some humor. Lona O'Connor's photography of the economic demonstrations during the Nixon era brought back some grim memories.

—Alice S. Williams