

Review of the Exhibition Catalogue *Women See Woman*, Published by Thomas Y. Crowell Co. 1976

WOMEN SEE WOMAN

edited by Cheryl Wiesenfeld, Yvonne Kalmus, Conia Katchian, Rikki Ripp, Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1976, \$12.50

BY NANCY STEVENS

Women See Woman is an interesting, collaborative effort of work by eighty photographers, carefully selected by five editors. The project was first conceived in the summer of

1973, and many meetings later, including some fifty editing sessions, the book reached its final form. Editor Sonia Katchian wanted to find an alternative to the major photography magazine annuals that represented women as "wet-lipped, long-stemmed fantasies . . . or erotic

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landscapes in the 'Dune Breast' tradition." The project developed into one of the better books of photographs by contemporary women photographers. The publication of such a book by and of women is in itself an important occasion. Photography is a medium that has been open to exploration by women since its very invention. Women have always photographed; they have not always published their work.

The book can be divided into three sections. In the first part, the photographers transmit a vision of women that is not necessarily sympathetic. Women are seen as found objects at the mercy of their surroundings: circus performers, dolled up bleached blondes in secretarial positions and contestants in a beauty contest, for example. Stylistically, some of the photographs bear a striking resemblance to work by male photographers such as Garry Winogrand, Charles Harbutt and Ralph Gibson. Because of the context in which these photographs are placed, however, they may be read as a statement of women's oppression, indicating a feminist awareness on the part of the editors.

The second section opens with the question "What Am I?" This is answered by the statement "I am very much alone," facing Helen McMullen's photograph of a head in profile framed by a doorway. These images have traveled a great distance from the first series. Here the convention of women as objects of scorn or objects of desire is forthrightly rejected in favor of images that portray moodiness, complicated personalities, and above all, unique and often isolated individuals. This sensibility is extended with images that see women as social beings and productive workers. The final sequence of photos in this section show women in moments of joyous realization of their potential, intellectually, emotionally, sexually and finally, collectively in political struggle.

With the final section, the photographs lean towards explorations of the visual medium through the use of women as artists' models and as a point of departure. The weakest aspect of these photos is their excessive self-involvement, such

as in the self-portrait by Eileen Friedenreich. Their strength lies in their willingness to experiment with the medium. The most striking examples of this characteristic can be seen in the contributions of Naomi Savage, Eileen K. Berger and Nina Howell Starr.

Eden-like innocence, as seen in Chris Enos' photograph of a young nude woman flinging herself in ecstasy before the camera among the exotic foliage of some earthly garden. The caption reads, "'We've got to get ourselves back to the garden.' Not paradise, but a new beginning. A



Joan Lifton, 1972.

The images in *Women See Woman* ease themselves back and forward between statements about women today and between solid, interesting, and sensitively rendered photographs. Some fall into neither category; the outstanding few lay claim to both. One of the problems in an anthology of this nature is its tendency towards unrelieved seriousness, a quality often mistakenly identified with honesty in one's work. It comes as a great relief when a photographer demonstrates a quick sense of humor, even at the risk of making a comment that does not proclaim a feminist sensibility. Joan Lifton's group portrait of six women huddled under a beach umbrella comments on older women at leisure. These women have created a protective shelter for themselves, running the risk of appearing ridiculous to the passerby; they carry on their activity heedless of other concerns. This image—simple, ordinary and funny—tells me more about women today than a circa 1970's celebration of

celebration of possibility." It is not very convincing. The Lifton photograph, more in the spirit of the inquisitive photojournalist alert to the people around her, tells me more. It neither idealizes the subject nor postures as superior to the experience.

The book contains many fine images by talented photographers that speak directly from their experiences as women. Joanne Leonard's photograph shows a young girl wearing what one imagines to be her mother's bathing suit. She is touching the molded protrusions that cover her own flat breasts. This is a joyous image of a little girl's expectation of the promise of womanhood. It strikes a good balance across from Jill Krementz's newswoman, visibly proud of her work and status. Eva Rubinstein and Wendy Snyder Macneil contribute thoughtful photographs, as do Barbara Jaffee, Ruth Orkin, M. K. Siquin, Susan Houghtaling and Jill Freedman, to name only a few.