

Diane Arbus's Family Values

By RICHARD B. WOODWARD, *The New York Times*, October 5, 2003

In a 1968 letter to an editor at a London magazine, Diane Arbus described with manic glee a woman she had just met in Westchester County whose portrait she was eager to take.

"She is about 35 with terribly blond hair and enormously eyelashed and booted and probably married to a dress manufacturer or restaurateur and I said I wanted to photograph her with husband and children so she suggested I wait till warm weather so I can do it around the pool! Last weekend wasn't warm weather, but the next day may be. They are a fascinating family. I think all families are creepy in a way."

It is a testament to Arbus's power as a photographer that we can imagine the print of this woman and her family without seeing it; a few strokes of the pen are enough for us to recognize her as an Arbus subject. By the late 60's the photographer herself could recognize one at a glance. She didn't need to meet the woman's husband to know that the whole family offered prime material for her often savage art.

The creepiness of family ties, so uncertain and yet so binding, was a theme throughout her career, and is the connecting tissue for a provocative show here at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. "Family Albums" (also the title of the catalog from Yale University Press) is based on a book Arbus whimsically proposed three years before her death in 1971 but never developed, namely that her photographs as a whole might be said to make up an enormous and unusual family album — in her words, "a Noah's ark" of humanity.

Two curators, Anthony W. Lee and John Pultz, have amassed more than 50 portraits she made on assignment, in this case primarily for *Esquire* magazine, and organized them in categories: Fathers, Mothers, Families, Partners and Children.

While not nearly as comprehensive as the Arbus retrospective that opens later this month at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, "Family Albums," which runs through Dec. 7, does include one offering that the larger show does not: the complete record — in contact sheets, proof prints and final prints — of a previously undocumented portrait commission.

For scholars of Arbus, stymied since her suicide by her estate's iron grip on her work, the 322 unknown images are a gold mine. Never before has it been possible to examine her photographic strategies in such detail. The show features lots of fresh material (like the letter quoted above), and what it lacks in size it makes up for in latitude, having been organized without the oversight of the Arbus children.

The portrait commission on display was purely a money-making venture. An actor and theater producer, Konrad Matthaer, wanted Arbus, like himself a rising star in select artistic circles, to photograph him, his wife, their three children and some relatives for what he called a record of a family being together. (It was his wife, an alumna of Mount Holyoke, who brought the pictures to the attention of the museum.)



Matthaer Collection of Commissioned Family Photography

The exhibition "Family Albums" at Mount Holyoke College includes this contact sheet, part of a complete record of a portrait session Diane Arbus shot with a New York City family in 1968.

According to Mr. Lee's catalog essay, the pictures were made at the Matthaeis' New York town house on Dec. 27 and 28, 1968. Each portrait session lasted four to five hours. From the contact sheets, it appears that Arbus concentrated first on Konrad Jr., 3, the only son and apparently the family darling. He is pictured by himself, with his father and other relatives, in a full 48 frames, an effort that fails to yield what Arbus was after. A proof print, apparently selected by her as the most promising of the lot, shows the boy beaming sweetly atop his hobby horse.

Arbus moves on. She tries impromptu shots of the family seated at the dining room table and of Mr. Matthaiei and his brother singing at the piano, then switches to formal portraits where everyone is seated on a couch behind a glass coffee table. One of her common strategies was to show people in their bedrooms. But four images of Mr. and Mrs. Matthaiei seated there don't seem to have pleased her. She focuses on the Christmas tree, a subject she had photographed with memorable results in a Long Island home in 1963. Again, no dice.

Stories abound of Arbus as a predator, swooping down on strangers and probing faces close-up for signs of weakness or despair. There is none of that behavior on display here. Mostly she keeps a polite middle distance from the Matthaeis. Although Mr. Lee argues that Arbus was a controlling presence, telling the children to hold poses for long periods in one room after the other, only in a couple of frames — one of the teenage daughters posed with leg bent against an open door — do the subjects look uncomfortably coached.

"I work from awkwardness," Arbus once said. The teenage Matthaiei girls, visibly ill at ease in their no longer childish bodies and no doubt eager to change out of their holiday dresses and flee their parents, seem to hold Arbus's deepest sympathy. She must have felt a connection to their cosseted New York world, so similar to the one that she and her brother, the poet Howard Nemerov, had grown up in — and hated.

Arbus notes the wealth on display — the Monet and the Renoir on the walls, the silk damask chairs — with care, as though the plush surroundings could set off her pampered subjects' character. In the best picture from the sessions, the 11-year-old Marcella stares out, grim-faced beneath her bangs, locked in a frontal stance as if she were an Egyptian queen posing for her funeral portrait.

The portrait session is only one part of the show, however, and the rest of "Family Albums" never gels. The attempt by the curators to link Arbus's portraits of Mae West, Tokyo Rose, the atheist Madalyn Murray and the stripper Blaze Starr as "Mothers" sounds inspired in theory. But on the wall, the concept goes nowhere. Grouping under the rubric "Partners" a nude couple, Marcel and Alexina Duchamp, a pair of senior citizens at a masked ball and Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus, "Partners" manages to demean all equally.

And yet the falseness of the categories highlights the true themes of Arbus's photographs: the bravery and fierce individualism that people are able to sustain, despite the wretchedness of their lives. She didn't lump her subjects together, but let them stand nakedly alone. Families are creepy, in Arbus's view, because they offer such an arbitrary sense of belonging. Children don't choose their parents, but the accident of consanguinity forges bizarre, everlasting bonds. Many of her classic images — the New Jersey twins in matching dresses and head bands, or the Jewish giant with his cowering mother and father in their Bronx apartment — inspire wonder (and nervous laughter) at the genetic lottery. Her portraits seem to ask the devastating question: can anyone ever find solace in community given the crushing isolation of being?

Arbus seems to have approached more than a few of her subjects in a spirit of mockery and then grown empathetic or curious as she worked with them. Arbus did go on to shoot the Westchester woman she describes so excitedly in 1968. Unlike the letter, the portrait — of the woman, along with her family — is not included in the Mount Holyoke show. It does appear in the San Francisco show, however, and reveals husband and wife sunbathing on the lawn, their distracted son in the background. If there was a swimming pool, Arbus has eliminated it from the frame to present a comic idyll of suburban leisure. Even so, the satire is far gentler than the tone her letter to her editor suggested. The reality is that the woman in her bathing suit is attractive, the scene more nuanced than cartoonish, facts her camera can't deny.

Like August Sander, Arbus photographed as though her subjects might one day be exhibits in a human zoo, and the Mount Holyoke show contributes a few more endangered species. Sadly, she never figured out where she belonged. Instead of boarding Noah's ark with her menagerie of freaks, she decided to stay behind with the rest of the drowned world. Nonetheless, the specimens she collected are precious and, like Arbus herself, one of a kind.

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