Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Diane Arbus photographs at MOCA

Elisa Leonelli · Thursday, August 16th, 2018



Identical Twins, Roselle, N.J. 1967

A photography exhibit currently at MOCA (Museum of Contemporary Art) features a selection of prints by Diane Arbus from the museum's permanent collection.



Triplets in their bedroom, N.J. © Diane Arbus 1963

I had been aware of her work since the 70s, had bought the 1972 book of her photographs, but it wasn't until the LACMA retrospective in 2004, *Diane Arbus Revelations*, that I was able to get inside the mind of this woman, driven by her compulsion to photograph freaks and outsiders and get into a complicit relationship with her subjects. On display were not only 200 photographs, but her cameras, her darkroom and her notebooks, where she wrote down her thoughts. I read a Diane Arbus biography by Patricia Bosworth, written in 1984 and republished in 2004, and I adored the delicious 2006 movie *Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus* by Steven Shainberg, where Nicole Kidman plays Diane, and Robert Downey a furry freak neighbor that she is intrigued by. In 2016 more details about her life were revealed in a new biography by Arthur Lubow, *Diane Arbus: Portrait of a Photographer*, and her early work 1956 to 1962 was shown at the Met Breuer (Metropolitan Museum of Art), *Diane Arbus: in the beginning*.



Two girls in matching bathing suits, Coney Island NY © Diane Arbus 1967

Diane Nemerov was born in 1923 from a wealthy Jewish family on New York's Upper East Side, the Russeks, who were originally furriers, then opened a department store on Fifth Avenue. She fell in love with Allan Arbus at 13 and married him at 18. After the war, they opened a photography studio specializing in fashion; they had two daughters, Doon, born in 1945, and Amy, born in 1954. In 1959, when her husband fell in love with a young actress, Diane moved out with her children, formed friendships with Marvin Israel, art director of *Harper's Bazaar*, and with photographer Richard Avedon. They encouraged her to pursue her passion, to photograph the unusual people that fascinated her, first with a 35mm Nikon then with a 120mm twin lens Rolleiflex. John Sarkowski, photography director at MOMA (Museum of Modern Art), included her work in a 1967 exhibit *New Documents* also featuring Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander. In late 1972, after Diane's 1971 suicide at age 48, he devoted a one-woman show to her photographs.



Nudist lady with swan sunglasses, Pa © Diane Arbus 1965

In the 1972 book *Diane Arbus, an Aperture Monograph*, with photo selections made by daughter Doon and friend Marvin Israel, Arbus is quoted as saying: "Freaks I photographed a lot, it had a terrific kind of excitement for me. There's a quality of legends about freaks…. Nudist camps is a terrific subject for me. It's like walking into an hallucination…. It's a little embarrassing to me, but I really believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them."



A prostitute playing billiards, Montmartre © 1932 Brassai

I was familiar with another photographer featured in the MOCA exhibit, Brassaï. My friend Tom Consilvio, who was Garry Winogrand's printer and owner of Silver Lab, had gifted me his 1976 book *The Secret Paris of the 30s*, where he writes: "I was inspired to become a photographer by my desire to translate all the things that enchanted me in the nocturnal Paris I was experiencing… My fascination with the underworld was inspired by the infatuation with outcasts… outlaws living

outside the conventions.”In 1999 I went to see a survey of his career at the Getty, *Brassai: The Eye of Paris*, I discovered he had befriended and photographed other artists, such as American writer Henry Miller and Spanish painter Pablo Picasso.

I did not know the color work of the third photographer, Nan Goldin, from her 2014 book *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.

Ruth Norman, Unarius (c) Elisa Leonelli 1978

I feel a kinship with Arbus, because for several years of my life my daily focus was to find visually exciting subjects to photograph. For instance, in 1978 I documented the religious sect Unarius and its leader Ruth Norman, in 1981 I photographed a beauty pageant at a nudist camp in California. See my photo essays by clicking these links, Unarius and Ms. Nude in the Elisa Leonelli, Photojournalist Collection at Claremont Colleges Digital Library. Although my style was quite different than Arbus’, having switched in 1977 from B&W negatives to the bright colors of Kodachrome slide film, my attitude was also of complicity with my subjects. They proudly posed for me in the way they wished to be seen. When you photograph people, it is always a collaboration.

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