



Judith Joy Ross

new work

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

September 16 – November 28, 1993

Photographs by Judith Joy Ross

Roger Fry, that most intense and pure of formalist art critics, was greatly moved by Rembrandt's portrait of his son Titus gazing up from his books, absorbed by his own thoughts as he sat at his battered schoolboy's desk. Fry wrote, "Realism [here] ... becomes the vehicle of a strangely exalted spiritual state, the medium through which we share Rembrandt's deep contemplative mood."¹ Though Fry seems to have aspired to find the work to be a pure and vigorous struggle to resolve form—space, color, effects of light, the surface quality of the paint itself—in accounting for the impact of Rembrandt's painting, it was the emotional, or what he called the "spiritual" component of Rembrandt's subject that Fry found essential. Fry was responding to Rembrandt's understanding of realism as something more than mere transcription, for the artist foresees in the child the adult Titus would become and strives to understand his spirit.

Photography, which in freeing the medium of painting from the burden of manual representation or transcription may be said to have given rise to modern art, has assumed the challenge of description as one of its most potent qualities. In fact, photography has become especially relevant to artists today because of the ease with which it makes references to the actual world and thus confronts the real world's issues.

The work of Judith Joy Ross challenges us to look hard and understand the full and complex character of her subjects. There is a hope that the history of a personality, and indeed the consciousness of a group, can be perceived in the delineation of face and demeanor, an aspiration of the "science" of physiognomy of the nineteenth century in which it was believed that character could be read by the contours of one's face and head. Ross would like photography to reveal the truth.

It is revealing to compare Ross with Diane Arbus, the photographer whose work hers most resembles. Arbus essentially devoted her career to portraiture, as has Ross. Arbus admired the tabloid press photography of Weegee; Ross uses an 8 x 10-inch view camera, the contemplative instrument of Walker Evans. While Arbus conveyed the emotional state of her subjects by sometimes using a flash, Ross uses a shallow-focused lens and printing-out paper to achieve a sensitive and penetrating psychological complexity. Though the blotches and blurs of the background are subtle, meaningful, and deliberate components of the pictures of both artists, they seem more evocative in Ross'. With Arbus, we sense that she modifies, even judges, her subjects, and that she has sought them out or manipulated them for the expression of her own psychological condition. Ross' work is not so inner-directed. Rather, it comprises more a record of people affected by history, society, and their own personal makeup, and how that history is revealed, or marked, in their appearance before her. One might say that her concern is to record the trajectory of experience, from its beginnings in childhood to maturity; her photographs are, perhaps, a visual equivalent to William Blake's poetic *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*.

The series *Eurana Park* (1982) was made in a small, rural eastern Pennsylvania town near where Ross' family summered. At Eurana Park she found herself drawn to the "goodness and honesty" of the children, to their ability to be free, vulnerable, and open to pleasure,

and it was a revelation to her. The photographs comprise a kind of narrative, from the early cloudy and rather romantic pictures of slightly lumpy little girls in bathing suits delightedly sucking popsicles to a light-filled ascension into a more palpable and clear, but grayer, less romantic awakening in the last, where one child stands over another like a hovering angel.

The pictures seem deceptively without style, resembling family snapshots or plain-spoken records of something like summer camp life. In fact, they are very sensitive, personal views, seemingly of a bunch of working class kids hanging around a public swimming pool in the summertime, but made as a way of learning about the freshness and essential goodness of the world. Ross discloses the subjects' personalities by the way they hold their bodies and return the photographer's stare. She says that, in choosing subjects, she initially avoided "children who had forgotten they were children," preferring instead those enacting a narrative of childhood irrevocably coming in touch with the world outside. In a picture of a girl who is about twelve, she discovers a transitional moment in the awkward body, the beautiful, straight-falling hair, and the earnest shyness in the glance behind eye-glasses that are a little too big and much too plain. This girl is certainly less open than the Pacman-popsicle kids, and the series is augmented and modified later by other, more equivocal images of larger and older children and adults, for instance, the strained young man holding out a grass rake. The last photograph in the series Ross describes as a picture "at the gate of Brigadoon," and sees the hovering children as innocent guardians of their childhood. Her later portraits of children, made in Easton, Pennsylvania, in 1988 are not narrative. Several of them were enlarged to be shown in public spaces, reminding the casual viewer in the local YWCA, where they were displayed, of the value of childhood and the need for nurturing. They represent vital, though small, individuals: the little black girl, arms akimbo, ready, strong, prepared; the tentative-looking boy in a Hawaiian print shirt with the vision of a friend hovering beside him; or the three little girls in bathing suits, the very girlish twin sisters, holding their hands awkwardly in front of them as they stand beside their slightly older sister who is posing in beautiful contrapposto, more confident as she emerges into womanhood. This scene of transformation before our eyes is played out under a leafy proscenium, with a watchful young man in the distance.

After the pictures of children at Eurana Park, Ross wanted to confront adults, to deal with "the issue of pain" and injustice, and to explore, in making pictures, an understanding of life that would comprise the complexity of experience. Surely there exists no more telling record of the psychic cost of the Vietnam War on the American public than the one she has composed. Her hope was to represent the diversity of people touched by the event of the



Untitled, 1982,
from the
Eurana Park
Series

¹ Roger Fry, *Transformations* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1926), pp. 40–41.

war. These photographs are not judgmental, but they provoke us to try to read the character of their subjects, however elusive this effort might be. There is the earnest patriot; the long-necked and strangely remote youth; the sad, reflective black man; the former sergeant who saw too much; the gentle biker with the bad complexion and the skull on his shirt; the gold-star mother in white gloves and cap; the young officers; the sisters, wives, girlfriends, and children. This series examines the survivors, plain people, and these depictions are non-demonstrative, uninflected, and very compelling. She made the pictures hoping that they would "change the world," or at least serve as a cautionary tale, but at the same time was fully aware that this could never happen.

The series Ross made of the U.S. Congress is yet another form of representing history. Ross made the photographs of members of Congress in an attempt to prove their commonality with the rest of us, that they are as ordinary—and exceptional—as we all are.



Untitled, 1983–84, from *Portraits at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C.*

prove to be disarmingly various. Edward Kennedy, for instance, has a massive frame, and a disconcerting, tiny sliver of an arm, and his face reveals a certain uneasy duality; Senator William Roth of Delaware, a Republican, is a little weary but good-natured and appealingly frumpy; Strom Thurmond, posed with a sea of space around his head, appears vacant but only a little menacing (Ross found him to be a "really impressive individual"); Pat Schroeder looks benign but also withdrawn. Most of all, what this group of pictures reveals is that the men and women we have elected to public office are predictably and fatally human. The most idealistic and most vulnerable subjects are the aides; they are also the youngest. One of the more appealing pictures is of Helen Delich Bentley, then a freshman Republican Congresswoman from Maryland, a no-nonsense, grandmotherly woman who also, thankfully, looks a little scared.

These people are authority figures as we have come to know them through their polished images on TV, and we are meant to regard them with a mixture of awe and fascination. The pictures show them as complex, yet not extraordinary, humans. In making them, Ross had a lingering hope that those who shared her liberal democratic inclinations would be revealed as good people, while the others would not, an approach she is grateful to the photographs for correcting. She researched the backgrounds, voting records, and personalities of everyone she photographed and picked specific people for different reasons, wanting to include a range of political, physical, and psychological types. And, when we scrutinize the representatives, senators, and aides she photographed, they



Congresswoman
Pat Schroeder, Democrat,
Colorado, 1987, from
*Portraits of the United
States Congress*

When the Persian Gulf War broke out, Ross walked down the hill from her home in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to photograph members of the National Guard. She had wanted to discover an unacknowledged community in her hometown, and had an idea about making a series of portraits of people in uniform—police officers, firemen, etc.—but the Gulf War suddenly focused her ideas, and she found not just soldiers in camouflage, but a National Guard unit on red alert. In these young people she discovered a sense of fear but also excitement. These are ordinary folks, people who need to make their mortgage payments, and Ross finds comfort in their fear, their realism, and, in some, their gentleness and plainness. Again, it is the condition into which they are cast, both as members of a group and as individual personalities in a historical moment and place, that interests Ross.

Clearly, this is a photographer who is fascinated with both vulnerability and power. The gradual growth of awareness, the loss of the freedom of childhood, is of almost primal importance to her. But power, the antithesis of vulnerability, is her other central concern: the power of some to change the lives and personalities of others, and the human effects of it on those who are empowered and those who are reasonably powerless. The counterpoint of an individual to the group, and the relationship between experience and fate are also enormously interesting to Ross. There is a sense of purity, even of essential goodness or delicacy in the people she photographs, an awareness of experience as whole and complex. The realist medium of photography, which coexists with—and is often mistaken for—scientific record-keeping in its descriptive capacity, has enabled Judith Joy Ross to reveal not the "spiritual state" Roger Fry found in Rembrandt's portrait of his son, but the more compelling and current psychological state of pain and vulnerability which she finds in all of her contemporaries.

Sandra S. Phillips
Curator of Photography

JUDITH JOY ROSS

Born in Hazelton, Pennsylvania, 1946
Lives and works in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

EDUCATION

1986

B.S., Moore College of Art, Philadelphia

1970

M.S., Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology

PHOTOGRAPHIC SERIES

1982

Eurana Park, Weatherly, Pennsylvania

1983-84

Portraits at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C.

1986-87

Portraits of the United States Congress

1988

Easton Portraits

1990

Gulf War (3623rd National Guard Unit on Red Alert)

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

1985

Eurana Park, Weatherly, Pennsylvania, Allentown Art Museum, Allentown, Pennsylvania

1987

Portraits of the United States Congress 1986-87, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia

1990

Eurana Park, Weatherly, Pennsylvania, Laurence Miller Gallery, New York

1991

Judith Joy Ross/A Survey, James Danziger Gallery, New York

1993

Portraits at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., James Danziger Gallery, New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1985

• *New Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, New York*

• *The Sensuous Image, Paul Cava Gallery, Philadelphia*

• *Swimmers, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York*

1987

• *Recent Acquisitions, The Museum of*

Modern Art, New York

• *Twelve Photographers Look at Us, Philadelphia Museum of Art*

1988

• *Rethinking American Myths, Laurence Miller Gallery, New York*

• *Real Faces, Whitney Museum of American Art at Phillip Morris, New York*

1990

• *Photography Until Now, The Museum of Modern Art, New York*

• *The Indomitable Spirit, Photographers and Friends United Against AIDS, International Center of Photography, Midtown, New York*

1992

• *More Than One Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, New York*

• *Representatives: Women Photographers from the Permanent Collection, Center for Creative Photography, Tucson*

• *Charles Pratt Memorial Award Exhibition, Center for Creative Photography, Tucson*

• *Intentions and Techniques: Photographs from the Lehigh University Collection, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*

1993

• *Photographs from the Collection of Carlton Willers, University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City*

• *Observing Traditions: Contemporary Photographs, 1975-1993, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa*

• *Magicians of Light: Photographs from the Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa*
The Body in Nature, James Danziger Gallery, New York

• *Photographs from the Real World, The Lillehammer Art Museum, Lillehammer, Norway*

FELLOWSHIPS AND GRANTS

1985

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (Taken 1986-87)

1986

National Endowment for the Arts Grant (Taken 1987-88)

1988

City of Easton/Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Grant

1992

Charles Pratt Memorial Award

1993

Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Grant

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All photographs in the exhibition are courtesy James Danziger Gallery, New York.

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Untitled, 1989, from
Easton Portraits

n e w w o r k

A series of recent work by younger and established artists.