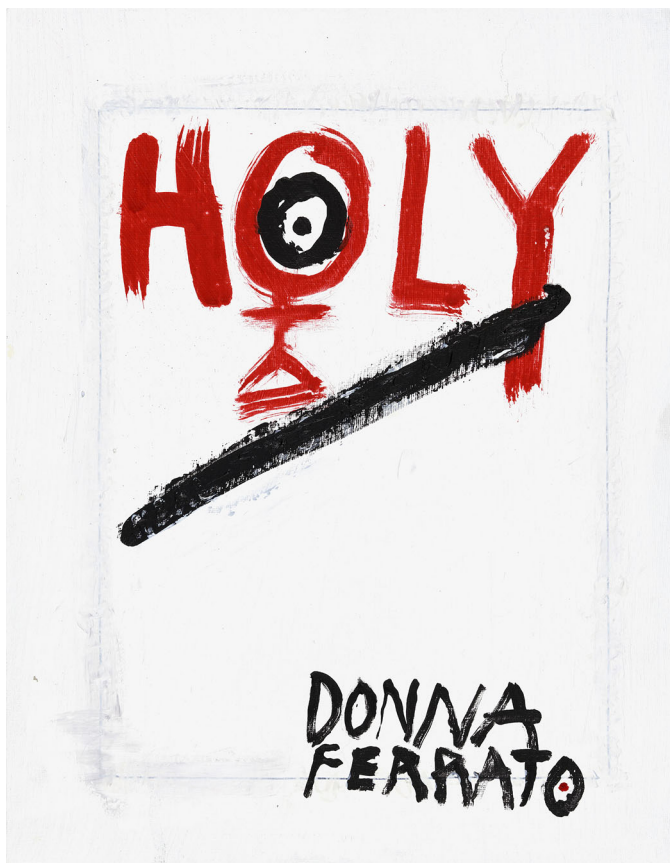


SUZANNE E. SZUCS

Book Review: Holy

Holy by Donna Ferrato. powerHouse Books, 2020. 176 pp./ \$49.95 (hb).



During a most difficult year, as we have battled a deadly pandemic while pushing back against the forces of bigotry and patriarchal oppression, photographer Donna Ferrato shows us, with the release of her compilation monograph *Holy*, what it means to embrace diversity and to find community in the unlikeliest of places. With *Holy*, she seeks to shift the Catholic paradigm from a male-dominated trinity to one centered on woman: “the

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mother, the daughter, and the others who believe in women” (10). From her nearly five-decade career, Ferrato brings together a collection of photographs that focus on women, choosing to organize the images not in any chronological order, or by subject matter, but rather into compositional or emotional relationship, intersecting across time and content. What results is an energetic reimagining of her body of work, which happens to be full of bodies.

A smudged but bright white cover is emblazoned with a red and black graphic that collapses several gender symbols together. This pictorially represents her thesis—woman/daughter/other—with the symbol for woman ending in a closed triangle that could either suggest all genders, the perching of woman on the archetypal triangle, the womb, or all of these things. Her composite symbol grows out of the “O” in the title word, *Holy*, in bright red, punctuated by a black circle with a dot. This is the symbol for the sun, origin, creation—but looks here very much like a breast. The rawness of the cover sets us up for the graphic nature of the images inside, which are printed in stark, rich black and white. The page edges are fire-engine red. This is more vibrant than menstrual blood, so it also encapsulates passion while serving to stimulate the viewer, as luminous red physiologically makes the heart race, heightening physical sensation.

Ferrato is a documentary photographer who has spent her career prioritizing women. There are hints of second-wave feminism in her emphasis on the body as the essential nature of woman, but she strives toward intersectionality—although her interpretation of it remains corporeal. Her desire, rather, is to unleash the feminine, wherever it resides. What she has little room for is a dominating patriarchy. Her third point on the trinity, “other,” is broad enough for a person of any gender to inhabit, offering more inclusion to the triad than the Catholic opposition; however, it also points out the greatest limitation of the text. As relayed by contributing essayist Claudia Glenn Dowling, Ferrato says,

I want women to stand up for their rights and not be submissive to the patriarchy, the man, the priest, the president. . . . The father and the son and the . . . we can't even be in the trinity! Where's the mother? Women are holy. We have the power to create life. (19)

Tired of a patriarchal hierarchy, Ferrato sets up a matriarchal hierarchy instead.

Ferrato continues to use visceral mark-making throughout the text to impose an emotional rawness on the viewer that mirrors her imagemaking. Captions written by hand on each photograph, and titles written in marker that punctuate each of the chapters of the Trinity—“Mother,” “Daughter,” “Other”—are reproduced on the printed pages. Ferrato’s handwriting is scratchy and visually compelling, and the information she includes brings desired context to the disparate photographs. However, the captions are inconsistently effective. When etched on the photograph they can feel like interruptions to the image, and when in white on a dark photo, they can be too difficult to read. This is typically done when a photo is a full bleed, so it is understandable that marking the photograph itself is necessary (and it reminds the viewer that it is not precious), but the handwritten captions are much more satisfying when they share a page with the image rather than write over it. An appendix of captions is also reproduced at the end of the



IMAGE 2. *Netsa and admirers, NYC, 1980* by Donna Ferrato.

monograph. This functions like an index combined with notes, and is a welcome addition to the text.

Ferrato's overall goal is to illustrate the totality of women's lives. She writes, "my mission is to cut out the noise and listen to women" (10). Her photographs emphasize a specific demographic of women, however. Whereas there is room in her images to cover a broad cross section of individuals, in particular race and gender identity, her lens has been focused on women who break with societal norms. Her work has often captured women caught in the cycle of domestic or systemic abuse, on the one hand, and those willfully participating in transgressive subcultures on the other. Her images range from depicting a woman being punched by her partner to the other extreme of "loving hands" being placed on a body during a group healing workshop (114). Peppered in between are portraits and images clearly made on assignment that fit the category of female empowerment, such as a mother (*Millie Bianco, New Orleans, LA, 1999*) holding a picture of her domestic abuse victim daughter, printed next to a portrait of Minnie Evans, who eschewed chemo-therapy (and abortion) when her child was in the womb (*Minnie Evans with Daughter Bri, Bruce, MS, 1993*). Evans opted instead for the amputation of her arm.

Self-portraits and familial images are included, adding to the personal nature of the photographic narrative. One has the impression that, unlike some documentary aesthetics that choose to inhabit a cool outsider's perspective, Ferrato is at least on the edge, if not wholly immersed in her subjects. Here she is nude, reflected in a mirror, photographing a swinger's convention (*Donna Ferrato, RD, Marilena, LA, CA, 2000*), or sitting just to the left of a man enjoying his strip-o-gram (*Netsa and admirers, NYC, 1980*). Although impeccably composed and still full of energy, it is almost a disappointment when

Ferrato's photos occasionally move further away from her subjects. Her real strength is the way in which she uses intimate point of view or slight blur to bring us into the action and closer to her subjects.

Ferrato's decision to disregard chronology and instead cross-pollinate images and stories can be somewhat disjunctive, but on repeat viewings the "puzzle," as she calls it, solidifies and her choices do "amplify meaning" (10). It is a profoundly difficult thing to whittle down forty-three years of work into one volume, and one can imagine the hundreds of arrangements that she must have gone through. Some work extremely well, while others are difficult to reconcile. The two-page spread of the Sioux sisters (*Sioux Sisters, Pine Ridge Reservation, SD, 2004*) across from the Nobile sisters (*Megan, Kaitlin and Maeve Nobile, NYC, 1981*) is particularly pleasing, while a portrait of a distraught mother in Soweto (*Heartbroken Mother, Soweto, South Africa, 1998*), whose daughter had been raped, is a difficult lead-in to an image of a sex-worker in New York City (*Lisa, Hunts Point, NY, 1992*). Ferrato's tie-in is that they are both mothers, but we need the captions to bring us this connection, whereas the "sisters" images connect to one another visually. Ferrato's best sequences combine both content and composition, relying less on the context applied through her text, which sometimes veers into the dogmatic.

Ferrato wants to create equivalency: to put sex-work and sex-play on the same level as activism and childbirth. That's fine; however, it is her categories that become problematic. Ferrato's desire is to counteract the Catholic patriarchal trinity with her own matriarchally inspired one. As a result, she essentializes womanhood to traditional roles, while adding on "other" to everyone who might fall outside of those roles. She makes the



IMAGE 3. *Heartbroken Mother, Soweto, South Africa, 1998* by Donna Ferrato.

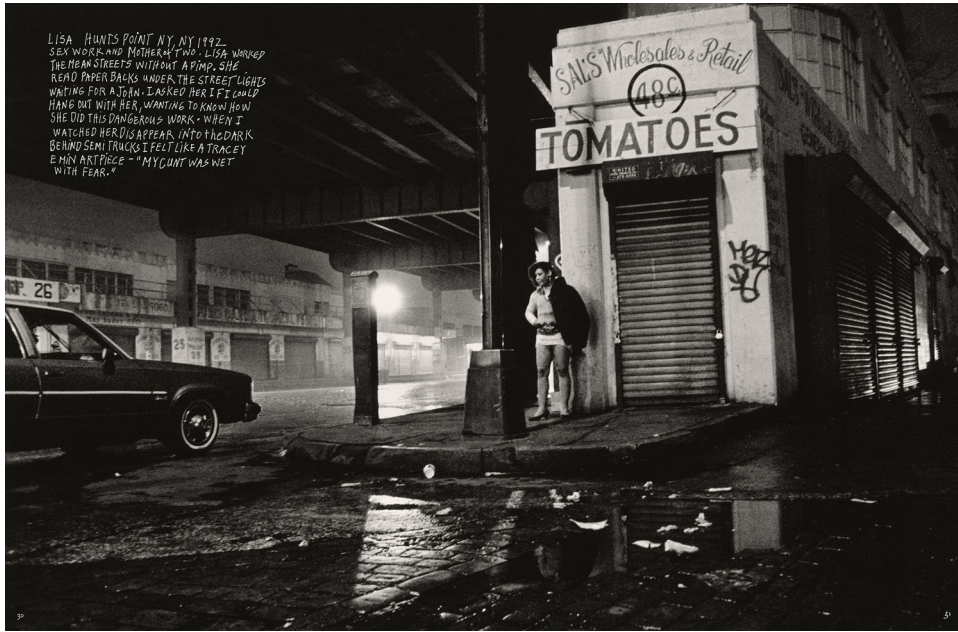


IMAGE 4. *Lisa, Hunts Point, NY, 1992* by Donna Ferrato.

same error that angers her about the male-dominated trinity. Although she advocates for trans and non-binary rights, they are lumped into the “other” category. What about women who choose not to be mothers? The issue of abortion is presented, but not a *non-mother* identity, one that isn’t defined by the procreative aspect of a woman’s body. Her dedication, “water/breastmilk, Mother nature’s gifts” (12), points us in the direction of her prioritization and bypasses intersectional feminism by placing motherhood at the top of the hierarchy.

Holy is a beautiful and welcome monograph of images filled with power and passion that help remind us, during a pandemic year when women’s issues have been markedly set back, of the importance of elevating these concerns. While it traps itself to some degree in its structured premise by presenting an essentializing version of womanhood, it is nevertheless a well-conceived compilation of photographs by a documentarian who has made a career of venturing close to her subjects, emphasizing the lives of women and focusing her lens on discrimination, domestic abuse, sex cultures, and activism. As a visual object, the book is lovingly presented and a pleasure to explore, growing in depth with multiple viewings. ■

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