EXHIBITION REVIEW

graphs without speculating about their backstories, and that speculation leads to narratives both heartbreaking (abandoned baby pictures) and utterly banal (a proliferation of snapshots of young lovers, sometimes defaced—predictable evidence of predictable romances gone sour). This mixture of the exceptional and the ordinary, however, is precisely what makes this work both engaging and important to the history of domestic photography. And with its proliferation of analog photo processes, it is also the perfect ending note to a show about digital images. Like all of the photographs in the exhibit, the snapshots of T.H.T.K. are an insistent and poignant reminder of photography’s material persistence, even in moments when we may wish it otherwise.

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Diane Arbus: In the Beginning
MET BREUER, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
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A black-and-white photograph of a woman in a pillbox hat and fur coat reflects an unmistakable era: the raised eyebrow, slightly parted dark-glossed lips—an insouciant look my mother and her childhood friends and we baby boomers practiced in our mirrors, imitating mid-twentieth-century movie stars. Yet this photo, one of more than a hundred in a recent exhibition of Diane Arbus’s early work (1956–62) at the Met Breuer, is light-years from the silver screen. The exhibition, curated by Jeff L. Rosenheim, included stunning, previously unknown photographs depicting anguish and audacity. An old woman with gaping mouth and gnarled fingers is bound under sheets in a hospital bed; harsh light bleaches the scene to a cadaverous white. A “female impersonator” defiantly raises her chin at the camera, smooth chest vulnerable in a silk robe. Adults, fatigue or perhaps terror marking their faces, awkwardly carry sleeping children. Arbus eschewed sentimentality or a facile aestheticism: marginalized and ordinary people are rendered extraordinary by complex revealed emotion.

I grew up with the iconic photographs reproduced in Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph (1972), from the first large exhibit of her work at the Venice Biennale in 1972. Some of those photographs, part of a rare folio collection (A Box of Ten Photographs, 1970), were mounted in an adjacent gallery at the Met Breuer’s exhibition, as were works by Garry Winogrand, Helen Levitt, and others who influenced or were contemporary with Arbus. As a child, I was mesmerized by the heavy-faced, towering man (A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y., 1970) and the twin girls in dark dresses (Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey, 1967). I also felt guilty because children were not supposed to stare at people who looked sad and odd. Entering adulthood, though, I merely distained the photographs as sensationalist.

I was wrong, both as a child and young adult, and it was the Met exhibition’s design, by Brian Butterfield, that revived and transformed my appreciation of Arbus’s work. The well-known folio photos were large, framed, and conventionally hung on four walls in the separate gallery, with even, bright lighting. By contrast, the early works, the focus of the exhibit, were small prints without glass or frame, warmly lit, and mounted on narrow, free-floating, fabric-covered panels that stretched between the ceiling and floor. The tan-colored panels were hung in long rows within the gallery space itself, taking up the entire room.

Unlike the conventional plan for a retrospective, with photographs arranged chronologically in groups along walls and accompanied by wall text, this exhibit presented photographs individually at eye level, with only the barest labeling and with deliberate disregard for chronology. Except for a brief overview at the entrance, there was no historical or aesthetic commentary.

The rows’ narrowness allowed efficient viewing of the small photographs, but it also forced viewers close to the pictures, as if examining ourselves in a front hall mirror. At most, two or three visitors could view each photograph before passing a slim empty space to the next picture. This design encouraged an encounter...
with each photograph as if in a private viewing stall, provoking both interest and discomfort.

This kinesthetic as well as visual experience helped me reevaluate my assumptions about Arbus. What may appear sensational or morbid is instead an unvarnished reflection of our unique, mundane, transcendent, and absurd masks, and our nakedness. Seeing these images close up, with nothing but Arbus’s characteristically objective titles, I felt her profound compassion.

The systematic arrangement of the panels enhanced the experience of intimacy and pathos. Peering at photographs, viewers were mostly hidden behind the column-like panels. They tended to walk along the parallel rows as if next to solid gallery walls, but the space between panels permitted wandering, too. Moreover, the rows were staggered so that looking at an angle through them, I watched a flow of people appearing and disappearing among the panels, creating a hall-of-mirrors effect, akin to the human carnival of Arbus’s subjects and their settings.

Visitors thus became part of the exhibit in a way that echoed its meaning. The arrangement as a whole created an appealing abstract form, and the people milling about, in patterns choreographed by the exhibition’s layout, were figure and ground in a kinetic sculpture. The warm lighting, designed by Laura Mruczkowski, created an illusion of depth on the thin panels, rendering an architectural quality to the installation and increasing the sense of being inside the exhibit rather than viewing its surface. The flow of people through the gallery also provided a conceptual, in addition to aesthetic and kinesthetic, dimension; hiding and seeking among the photographs, visitors embodied and observed the conflicting wish to be shielded and to be known, as individuals in a wandering stream of humanity. Indeed, without interpretive labels and temporal sequences, some viewers were disoriented, asking aloud if they had already walked a row. Perhaps we were meant to blur the present and the past, the viewer and the viewed. Our faces could be among those in the photographs; these are not zeitgeist snapshots but timeless portraits.

Of course, not all viewers would identify with the exhibit. Some passed quickly, noting a recognizable clothing style (“I remember wearing those gloves!”); others laughed at a child’s expression. I don’t blame anyone for being nervous in the face of all this honesty. Despite body-piercing customs in the United States today, Arbus’s “human pincushion” made me flinch. But who is without the prick of self-disgust, a scowl, a secret, or loneliness? Despite our unease, these stark reflections may yield a flush of empathy.

The exhibition’s design also magnified Arbus’s artistic choices and involvement with those in front of her lens. She did little to change the light, or a facial expression. Some images contain a crisp, full range of contrast; others show a blurred figure, lending a naturalism to the character. Some settings—a city park, a cluttered rooming house bed, a dressing room mirror—fill the frame, becoming part of the story. Couples lack a warm embrace, but Arbus framed their images in ways that seem to enfold them in acceptance, and potentially grotesque figures are sheltered in her compassionate gaze.

My childhood obsession with the Arbus photos developed, in part, because I probably sensed in them a reflection of my own frailty—a trait that we all possess. Viewing her early work at the Met Breuer, however, I no longer felt morbid fascination (or disdain) but, rather, tenderness. And it was the deceptively simple, yet careful, design that encouraged such an experience. If future exhibitions at the Met Breuer are as thoughtful and profound, we have much to look forward to.¹

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NOTE ¹ The exhibition will be at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, January 21–April 30, 2017.