

MOTHER/PHOTOGRAPHERS

by

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 15, 1981, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies.

ABSTRACT

The thesis work consists of: 1) A visual statement of 30-40 black and white photographs produced in 1980-1981 and presented in an exhibit at the Creative Photography Gallery, April 3-29, 1981. The statement consists of portraits of my family members and self-portraits. 2) A portfolio of ten black and white prints from the exhibit to be left in the Creative Photography Laboratory Archives. 3) A written documentation of my investigation and study of the particular genre of Mother/Photographers who have used their families as subject matter. 4) A slide/lecture on the subject of Mother/Photographers presented in conjunction with a panel discussion on Nurturance and Ambition , April 22, 1981 at the Creative Photography Laboratory.

For further reference, a complete set of slides presented in the slide/lecture on Mother/Photographers is available at the Creative Photography Laboratory Archives.

Thesis Supervisor: Starr Ockenga  
Title: Associate Professor of Photography

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INTRODUCTION

Our stereotypes about artists are based largely upon legend-like characters. Movies about Van Gogh and Michelangelo, French novels, photographs of Picasso: each of these have served to conjure up in us an image of a romantic figure working and struggling in his garret, spattered with paint or clay, and supporting a mistress. To substitute the image of a woman in his place is difficult. Occasionally, we do it. Isadora Duncan, Virginia Wolff, Anais Nin, larger than life, but hardly ordinary, have all earned their place in our collective imagination. However, to impose the image of a woman changing diapers on our ideal is asking too much.

Unfortunately, our society perpetuates the stereotype of an artistic personality as being primarily male. An overwhelming percentage of our art work is produced by males. Most critics are men. This leaves women in the netherlands trying to forge their way into the forefront of our creative establishment.

Being the mother of four children, as well as an artist, has made me feel like I'm on precarious ground. There are many women like me. Besides the obstacles of societal and cultural biases, the demands of motherhood provide another barrier to achievement. The lack of personal time and space makes it difficult to work for extended periods. We are always responsible for someone besides ourselves: strength of

egos are diminished.

Nonetheless, the act of having children, while being restrictive in some senses, can be not only personally fulfilling, but also a source of artistic inspiration. I have chosen to work with photography as the medium and my family as my subject matter. Photography has offered me, as a mother, a unique media where creative time can be measured in the fraction of a second. The camera seems ideally suited to meet the demands of my life-style, which rarely includes time of uninterrupted peace and quiet. And since I spend so much time mothering, my subject matter is always close at hand.

As the result of my situation and my choice of subject matter, I have become interested in photographers who were or are mothers. In this study I will concentrate on the visual statements many of these women made about their families and themselves, how they have documented their children and environments, and how they translated the experience of their own motherhood into an artistic vision. In addition I plan to link my own photographic work with a selection of mother/photographers. Rather than an exhaustive historical perspective, I have concerned myself with those women whose work and/or lives have served as an inspiration for me. In several cases they have strongly influenced the growth of my work. The photographers I have documented may or may not have been in situations directly parallel to mine, but there are aspects about each to which I can personally relate.

This paper is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter I am concerned with historical figures in photography. The second chapter focuses on contemporary women whose photographic work I have come to know through personal correspondence. The third chapter is a synopsis of a symposium I organized at the M.I.T. Creative Photography Laboratory dealing with the issues of "Nurturance and Ambition." Lastly, I deal with the evolution of my own career as a photographer.

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CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL FIGURES

Portraiture is one of the most compelling aspects of photography for me. The camera is uniquely suited to duplicate the detail and the personality of a subject, quickly and accurately. Although the range of photography has broadened considerably since its inception, the portrait remains one of its principal concerns and the major focus of these selected historical figures. For myself, as well as for the women I have chosen to document in this chapter, the portrait has served to capture some essential aspects not only of the subject's life, but, more universally, of our own lives as well.

Besides their substantial emphasis upon portraiture, these women interest me particularly, because, like myself, their strongest work was done at home (with the exception of Dorothea Lange). The focus of their photographs has often been family and friends. Nell Dorr and Imogene Cunningham, and to an extent Julia Margaret Cameron, used their homes not only as a source for their images, but as the place for their studios as well. Dorr and Cunningham also did commercial portraiture work there as a means of self-support making their personal work possible.

1. Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879)

One of the earliest women to become involved with the art of photography was Julia Margaret Cameron. Born in India,

Cameron returned to England for her schooling and subsequently made her home there. She married a prominent jurist she had met in India, and bore six children with him; she adopted or cared for several more.

Cameron's early married life consisted of the overseeing of her large, prominent family. She was constantly in the company of the artists, poets, and thinkers of Victorian England, as they visited her estate frequently. It was not until she was forty-eight that Cameron began photographing. Her daughter gave her a camera with the hope that it might amuse Cameron during one of her frequent depressions. Her interest became fanatical. She had the glazed chicken-house of her estate converted into a sitting room and the coal-hole made into a darkroom. Anyone who appeared at the estate was quickly induced into sitting for a portrait.

Helmut Gernsheim, in his biography of Cameron, rates her as one of the finest portraitists of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the literary and artistic style of the Victorian era, Cameron's portraits are extremely lyrical. Her ambition was to capture the spirit of the subject as opposed to merely the likeness. In a manner, her subject almost transcends his/her physicality and becomes an ideal.

In her portrait of her husband (Fig. 1) all of these characteristics are present. Her dramatic image of him compels us to relate to him. His eyes are afire, and seem to penetrate the viewer with their gaze. A force seems to flow



through his body.

Although we tend to think of Cameron's work primarily as the documentation of the great men of her day, Tennyson, Spencer, Darwin, she has also produced a great number of plates of her children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and friends. The power of these portraits doesn't diminish with the subjects' relative anonymity. In some ways they are more compelling for me because they elicit involvement without any preconceived notions of the greatness of the sitters.

In one photograph (Fig. 2), her youngest son is posed as a sailor boy. He stands, straw hat in one hand, boson's whistle in the other, fully dressed in a sailor shirt and tie. His figure is carefully arranged on the plate and he stares off to the side of the lens. Even though the subject is just her own child, the power of drama of her other portraits of famous figures is retained. As with all her work she maintains the quality of intimacy.

## 2. Chansonetta Stanley Emmons (1858-1937)

Chansonetta Stanley Emmons was born and raised in rural Maine. She was academically trained, attending a teacher's college and also studying painting in various places in New England. Eventually Emmons moved to Boston to teach and paint. There she met and married a proper young Bostonian, and at the rather late age of thirty-four bore her only child, Dorothy.<sup>2</sup>

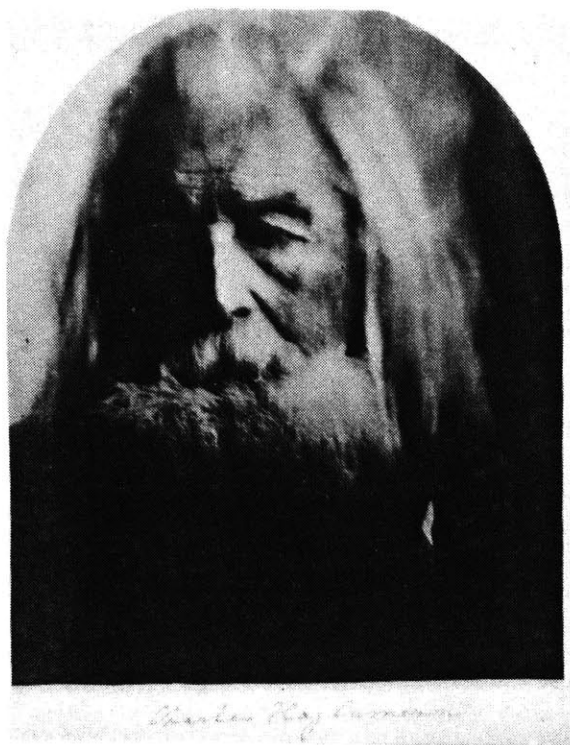


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

JULIA MARGARET CAMERON

Emmon's collected her earliest photos into albums; one series documents a family trip to the Carolinas, another her family life in Dorchester. The Dorchester album records members of her family, her daughter's friends, friends of hers. The photographs are usually set within the context of some room, and they are composed to include as much information about those rooms as possible. Although there is always a person present, the photographs are not really portraits in the true sense of the word. The people appear almost inanimate, as if they were props, similar to those drawn from an early edition of a ladies' magazine.

One photograph of her daughter in her bedroom (Fig. 3) exemplifies the care with which Emmons prepared each of her settings. Dorothy, dressed immaculately, is standing amidst her doll collection. The room is spotless, each toy perfectly in its place. The lighting creates the unmistakable aura of a happy child at play. Due to the technical restrictions of slow emulsions and cameras, the image is posed, static, and yet it is alluring, rich with information about the era.

The death of Emmons' husband, when she was forty, catapulted her into a new lifestyle.<sup>3</sup> Although her wealthy brothers helped support her, Emmons had to work at odd handicrafts to maintain her relatively bourgeois existence. Her husband's death also precipitated Emmons' return to New England. She began to summer in Maine and in New Hampshire,

spending time with relatives. It was on these visits that she began to document the rural way of life that in New England was being quickly eroded by modern times.

With the change in her life Emmons seemed driven back into her past. It was nostalgia which caused her return to New England, and also an instinctive conviction to return to what she had known.

Having lived in New Hampshire for five years myself, and in the same area where Emmons summered for several years, I feel a strong identification with these photographs. Although the times have changed, the crusty old Yankee personages endure. The stern visages of Aunt Hannah and Aunt Abigail (Fig. 4) are seen today, even though the surroundings are different. Emmons has captured something vital about life in New England, the essential character of its people evident in her portrait work.

Emmon's photographs are inspirational to me. Emmons was drawn to her roots, and her images speak of that deep connection to her past. In a way her images suggest and attract me to my own past. They propel me into another time of my life, a time which I have partly forgotten, but which endures within me. Perhaps even more importantly, Emmons return to New England may be viewed as a quest to understand the core of her own life.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

CHANSONETTA STANLEY EMMONS

## 3. Julia Christiansen Hoffman (1856-1934)

Julia Hoffman was born in Utah. She studied painting in Salt Lake City and subsequently moved to Oregon. There she married a young engineer in 1883 and settled into an upper middle class life. She devoted herself to her family, while using her leisure time to pursue creative interests. A painter, sculptor, metal worker, and weaver, Hoffman took up photography just after the birth of her second child, Margery.<sup>4</sup>

All of Hoffman's photographs were taken between the years 1888 and 1904, the time during which her children were born and raised. Her first image is of her infant daughter, and that theme of family life and home environment continued to be the primary concern of her work. The photographs of her children are considerably more graceful and spontaneous than ordinary snapshots. In one (Fig. 5) her daughter Margery stands against a plain wall dressed in her fashionable Sunday coat, replete with a fur collar. The photograph captures the moment exquisitely, evoking in myself the memory of my childhood. It is a moment that we all have felt, a time in which we felt both child-like and grown-up.

I am particularly impressed by the strength and beauty of Hoffman's portraits. The tonalities are reminiscent of some of Steiglitz's work, an East coast contemporary of hers. There is a density present in the atmosphere, as if the air

of the photos had taken on weight. Unlike Cameron's work, the personality of the subject is of utmost importance. Personality is never submerged beneath any ideal, metaphor, or allegory. The subjects are presented with all respect to their particularity. In a self-portrait (Fig. 6), Hoffman emerges from a dark background, a fine lace collar about her neck. The soft light illuminates detail, particularly the lace. Most importantly for me however, Hoffman shows her face poignantly, honestly, without a trace of flattery or romanticism. Her pensive countenance is candidly severe, and it isn't surprising to find out that this photograph was taken the same year that her husband died.

Considering the strength of Hoffman's work, it is surprising to find out that she is never mentioned in photographic literature. This has to do with the fact that she never considered herself an artist, nor a professional. Her work was never exhibited until recently. Her work grew out of a strong belief that "everyone is creative if given the opportunity ... and that leisure time should be used with intelligence to develop creative abilities."<sup>5</sup> Hoffman's ambition was completely circumscribed by her home life. This was characteristic of women of her time. (My grandmother, born twenty-five years later than Hoffman, was raised in this tradition.) Nevertheless, her work is an extremely poignant record of her family's growth, viewed with wisdom, grace and humor.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

JULIA HOFFMAN



#### 4. Imogene Cunningham (1883-1979)

Raised in Seattle, Washington, Cunningham left America to study photochemistry in Germany. When she returned, she married an etcher, Roi Partridge, in 1915. With him she bore three sons, including a set of twins.<sup>6</sup> Cunningham was the first major woman photographer with whose work I became acquainted. She served as an immediate source of inspiration, proving that it was possible to do creative work at a time when I was only fantasizing about it.

Cunningham's work, perhaps simply because of her longevity, spans several different styles. Her first images were particularly romantic, produced in very soft focus. Visions of free earth-spirits romping in the woods were a prominent theme. The allegorical titles she placed upon these photographs exaggerated what were already poetical images. She made a whole series, using her newly wedded husband as a model. Unlike Hoffman, Cunningham emphasized the spirit in these. The fact that this was her husband is extraneous to the real message of romanticization of nature.

The later images of her naked young sons evolves somewhat from her initial work (Fig. 7). They pose lyrically, as in the earlier photos, but the focus is not quite so soft. There is a movement towards a more realistic, naturalistic image, a style which grew stronger for her over the years.

In the 1920's, Cunningham produced several portraits of her mother and father in which her transition to realism is

obvious (Fig. 8). I am particularly fond of these for their candor and humor. In this one her father, very much a patriarchal farmer, is dressed in his overalls, holding the family cow by a rope. Her mother has a blurred expression since she moved her head during the shooting. A milk pail is in her hand. The spontaneity and realism of this photo is particularly refreshing in relation to the early romanticized portraits.

It is interesting to note that the evolution of Cunningham's work towards a more realistic style occurs during the years her children were growing up. The evolution of her style was in accord with the changing nature of photography. She was affiliated with the f-64 Group with its preference for sharp, realistic depiction. Although it is impossible to be sure, perhaps the all too real nature of everyday life also served to temper the romance in her work. Perhaps, too, the intimacy of motherhood made Cunningham aware of the specific of individuality as opposed to the metaphorical.

Nevertheless, Cunningham's work retains an aura of romanticism even when design, as in her plant series, becomes her prime emphasis. This aura never increases to the point where it intrudes upon the images themselves, but lingers more as the atmosphere which surrounds each image.

Perhaps even more than her work, Cunningham's life has been an example for me. She has been proof that belief in one's self and the pursuit of a goal can lead to fulfillment.

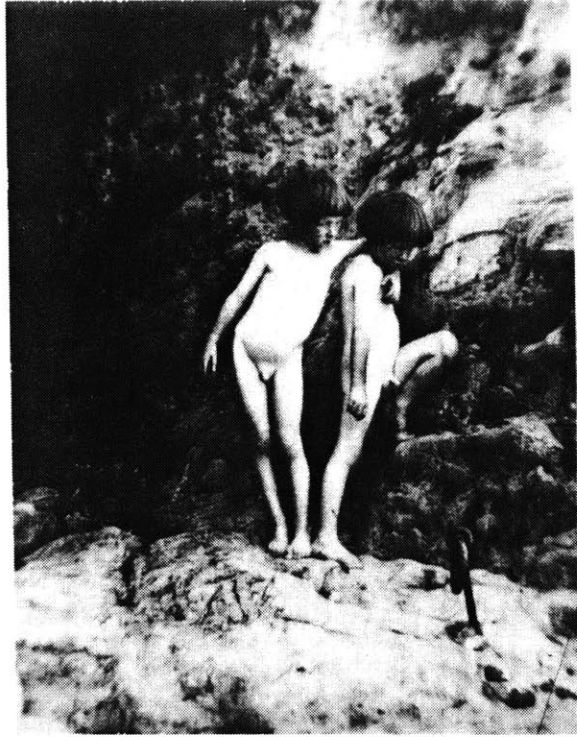


Fig. 7

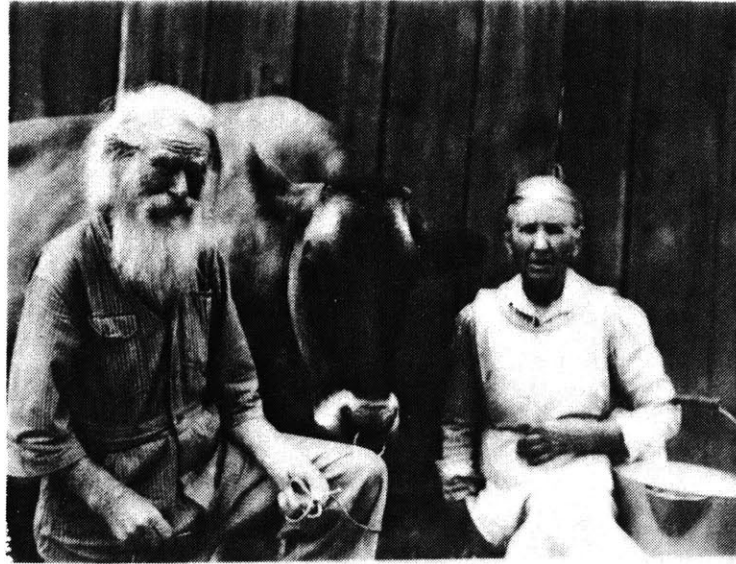


Fig. 8

IMOGENE CUNNINGHAM

In her life, Cunningham managed to balance the two things that were most important to her: her personal life and her career. This is not to say that her life was without difficulty. Her divorce from her husband resulted directly from the demands of her ambition. Yet Cunningham survived financially and flourished artistically.

5. Nell Dorr (1895 - )

Nell Dorr was born in Ohio. She learned photography at an early age from her father by helping with his commercial portrait studio. After her marriage she moved to Florida where she began photographing her three daughters.<sup>7</sup>

These photographs resulted in a book, In a Blue Moon, where her simple Florida life is transformed into a fantasy world through the use of soft focus and the exotic flora of the region. Interestingly, these photographs are similar to the work Cunningham had been doing ten years earlier.

The Stock Market Crash precipitated a dramatic change in Dorr's work. She turned to portraits, not out of artistic choice, but out of financial necessity. By opening a portrait studio in her house, Dorr managed to keep her family financially solvent.<sup>8</sup> The realistic demands of portrait photography affected her private work, reducing her preoccupation with the fantastic.

For me, Dorr's strongest work is from a book entitled, Mother and Child. The pictures were made during World War II,

When Dorr and her three daughters (with six grandchildren) moved to New Hampshire while waiting for their husbands to return from the army. When I first saw this book in a small New Hampshire town library, I rejected it as sentimental. Still engulfed in diapers, nursing, and keeping track of my own children, I was rather cynical of the idealized vision of motherliness that Dorr portrayed. It took me a while to accept her images as honest portrayals of the mother and child relationship. Through time I came to understand them and to appreciate the idea that motherly love is worthy of idealized visual representation.

One photograph from the book is a madonna-like image of one of Dorr's daughters holding her infant (Fig. 9). The young woman clothed in white, is gently kissing the naked infant under his chin. The size of the baby is in marked contrast to its mother's hands. Very rarely have I ever seen a mother-child image that so accurately represents the fragility and vulnerability of the infant. At the same time it captures the mother's role as protector and provider and powerfully conveys the sense of touch between the two.

Another photograph from the same series shows a baby peeking out from under a quilt (Fig. 10). The moment is a small, quiet one, yet one that appeals to the mother in me and evokes my sympathy. This moment has occurred in my own life. In this manner, these photographs go beyond a specific

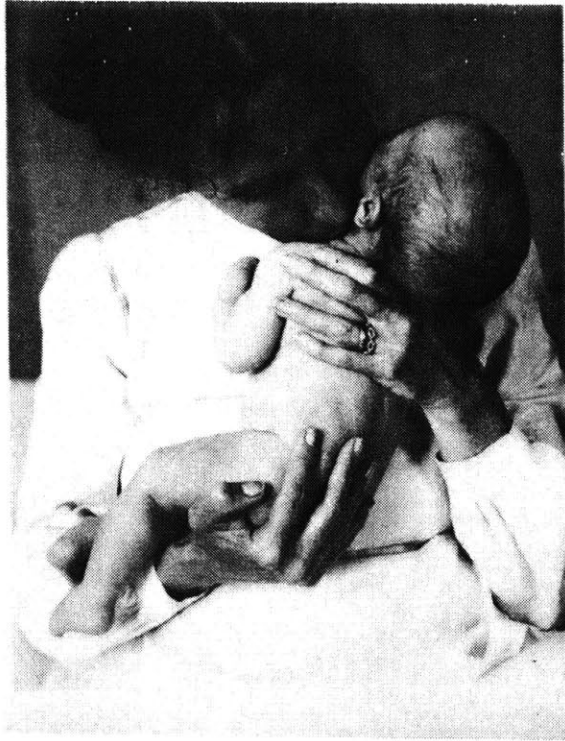


Fig. 9

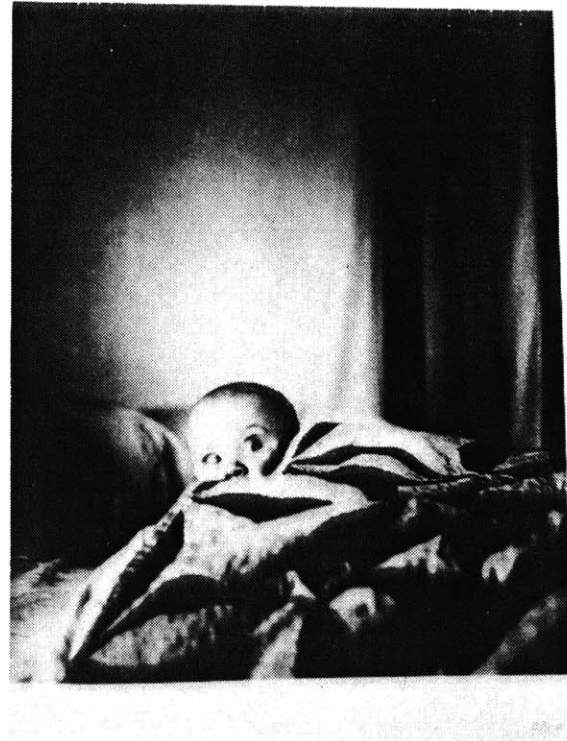


Fig. 10

NELL DORR

statement about Dorr's daughter and grandchild. There is something universal about the images, something that touches upon our collective being. We respond to them as universal ideas, as the title suggests, Mother and Child, yet the subjects also retain their integrity as individuals.

#### 6. Dorothea Lange (1895-1965)

Dorothea Lange's life was considerably different from any of the other photographers I have researched in this section. She possessed a particularly adventurous nature and travelled extensively before she was married. She was resourceful and ambitious, and when she was married in 1919, Lanage was already running a successful portrait studio in San Francisco.<sup>9</sup> Her ambition often caused Lange to place her career ahead of her husband and children. Her work was extremely important to her and though it caused problems, she learned to accept the deficiencies her ambition created. She described the problems she had for herself and all women, "The woman's role is immensely more complicated. There are not very many first class women producers, not many ... They produce in other ways. Where they do both, there is conflict."<sup>10</sup> It is clear from her history that Lange tried to do both.

The work for which Lange is most noted are the photographs she took for the Farm Security Administration in the 30's and 40's. The images she produced are some of the most

recognized of our century. In these, Lange documented the plight of the poverty stricken Okies and Dust Bowlers of the American midwest. Lange's camera sought out the essential human dignity of these people, even in their poverty. It is in the juxtaposition of both poverty and dignity that makes the social statement of her photographs so powerful.

Stylistically, the photographs are set within a minimal background. In the image, "Back" (Fig. 11), we see only two men conversing against a blank sky. The emptiness of the image helps to capture something of the wind-swept Midwest. Lange's eye for gesture is apparent. The two men are poised suggestively against each other in vital interaction. She was a master at depicting body language.

Lange's more personal work was collected posthumously by Margaretta Mitchell in a book titled To A Cabin. These are all personal photographs, mostly of her children and grandchildren taken at her Pacific coast cabin. Although thematically quite different from her F.S.A. work, the power of Lange's style, is still apparent. In one photo of her daughter and granddaughter (Fig. 12), Lange once again directs her lens at the disclosive nature of body language. Once again the two subjects are set dramatically against the sky. But instead of the taut feeling we get from the earlier shot, this one is strikingly more relaxed.

In all these later images, Lange sought to capture the



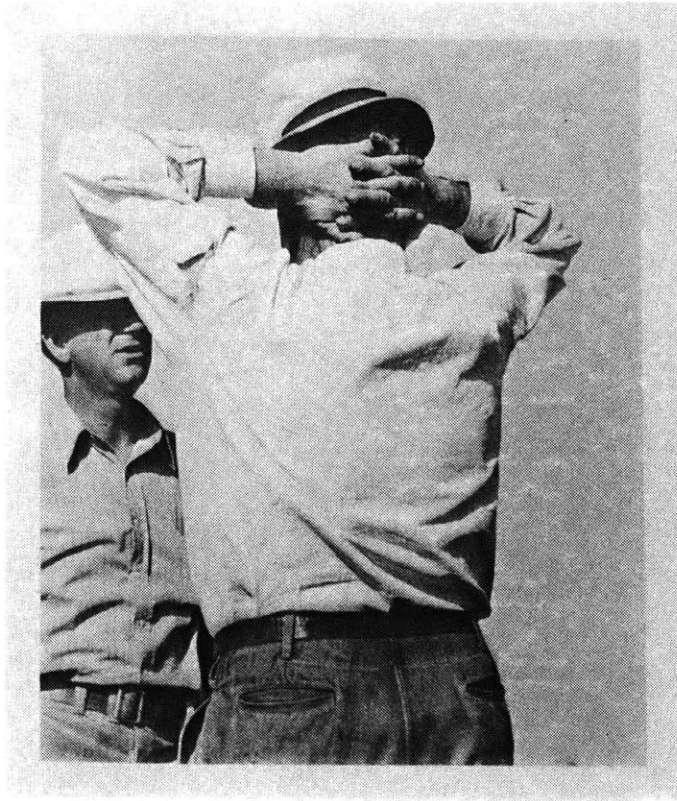


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

DOROTHEA LANGE

sense of freedom she felt being near the ocean gave to those people she knew best.<sup>11</sup> Although her ambition had propelled her throughout the world, it is evident from these photographs that the moments she spent with her family were extremely important to her, a source of regeneration which she apparently needed, and with which I can identify.

7. Barbara Morgan (1900 - )

Barbara Morgan was raised in California. She studied painting at UCLA. She married at the age of twenty-five and continued painting while teaching design and art classes at UCLA. After several years, she and her husband moved to New York City, where she had a painting and lithography studio.<sup>12</sup>

The birth of her children precipitated a great change in Morgan's life. She wrote, "I realized that when I painted, I lost track of everything else. Something could happen to our children if I were totally involved with my painting. I knew that I must be a mother first, and therefore couldn't have time to paint."<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, Morgan switched from painting to photography, feeling it more suited to the demands of motherhood.

The complexities of being a mother and an artist absorbed Morgan. She developed a three channel system which divided up her responsibilities according to self-chosen priorities. Channel I was her family, Channel II her creative work, and Channel III, everything else.<sup>14</sup> In a manner that

markedly contrasts with Lange's career, Morgan consistently refused to leave her children in the care of others.

As an outgrowth of spending so much time with her children, both boys appear frequently in her photographic work. In "Lloyd's Head" (Fig. 13), her son's head is silhouetted against a white background. The photo is a strong study of shape, light, and texture, recalling her background in design. Administering to her children's world also placed Morgan in various summer camps. She photographed extensively there. With these photographs she hoped to counterbalance the effects of World War II by presenting the positive side of humanity as expressed in youth. In another photo (Fig. 14), Morgan photographs her son in pajamas jumping with a dancer. It is obvious that her son just happened to be present in her studio at the time this dancer was being photographed.

In all these photographs, Morgan makes use of her children in a manner that is free of resentment. It is encouraging to know that Morgan reconciled herself with the fact that she was a mother and that she needed to narrow her own ambition in response to the demands of motherhood.



Fig. 13

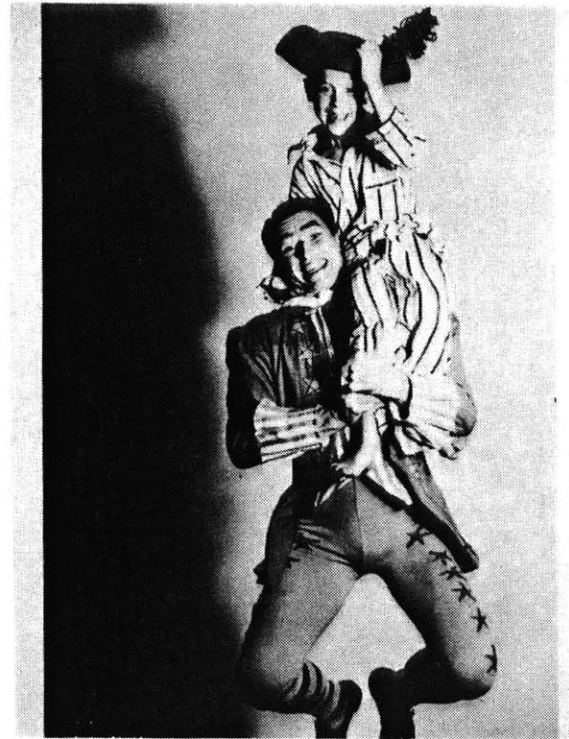


Fig. 14

BARBARA MORGAN

CHAPTER II  
CONTEMPORARY MOTHER PHOTOGRAPHERS

Family and self are major resources in the work of many contemporary mother photographers. Although the themes remain consistent, it is impressive to examine the unique and various manners in which the same subject matter is translated into photographic imagery.

Unfortunately, the extremely private nature of this work is a disadvantage when public acceptance is sought. Gallery directors and publishers tend to ignore this type of work, labelling it as 'personal' as opposed to 'public' work. A woman photographer quotes a gallery director's response to her work as, "All mothers take snapshots of their children" and "No one wants to buy a picture of a baby's fanny. Besides, they all look alike."<sup>1</sup>

Although reluctance to take the work seriously characterizes the public's opinion, the difficulty of the woman artist achieving success is more complex. The major problem, I believe lies in the consciousness of women. It is not that we are innately incapable of great art, but rather that we have internalized the social constraints and allowed them to become barriers to our success. The obstacles to our achievement lie not only outside ourselves in the biases of our society, but within us.

Germaine Greer, in her book, The Obstacle Race, argues that women artists have not achieved greatness in the fine arts due to this reason. She writes, "For all artists, the problem is one of finding one's own authenticity, of speaking in a language that is essentially one's own, but of one's self-image is dictated by one's relation to others and all one's activities and other-directed, it is simply not possible to find one's own voice."<sup>2</sup>

What impresses me most about the women whose work I have chosen to document in this section, is the fact that they work at all. Any work of theirs is evidence of a struggle to cast off "internalized psychological barriers."<sup>3</sup> I respond to their work appreciatively and celebrate its very existence. As one mother photographer wrote me, her work is "not good art, not bad art ... but necessary art."<sup>4</sup> The work in this study is important because it attempts to formulate a necessary and, perhaps, new vision of the world. One major reason I have chosen to document it, is so that others may become acquainted with it and participate in its tradition.

The statements and photographs documented in this section were received in response to a request for submission I placed in various photography and women's journals. I received many more responses than I can deal with here. I will confine my choices to those women whose work and statements were particularly influential or empathetic to me.

Most often the subject matter of these mother photographers is self and family. The impetus behind their work is the exploration of feelings; the memories of dreams, fantasies, or childhood; and the documentation of the family in its environment. A strong psychological undercurrent runs through all the photographs. The works either grow out of self-reflection or out of a concern with human relationships. These are the major concerns of my work as well.

As a way of ordering this section, I have divided the photographers into three broad categories based upon their approach to the photographic process; the single silver print and the straight forward approach, mixed media, and the family album or journal.

### Section I

The first group of photographers accept and use a direct approach to the medium. The product is a silver print characterized by a straight-forward use of the camera. The portrait and self-portrait are primary subject matter for this imagery. Although contained within a single frame, the message may be amplified and reiterated in different ways within a body of work. The relationship between the photographer and her subject matter is perhaps a key to this work. In most cases, this relationship is implied by the title of the work or is evident in the feeling of intimacy generated by the work.

## 1. Lauren Shaw

Lauren Shaw, of Massachusetts, has been photographing and teaching for ten years. Last year she had her first child, a son, and since then has been busy integrating the responsibilities of child care into her schedule. For the time being, she indicates work has taken a less dominant role in her life. She has found that the addition of a child has necessitated a fallow period for her own work. Shaw states this without any resentment, seeing this period as a time during which she expands other important aspects, like the care of her child, of her life.

Her most recent photographs of family members which are taken from an extremely close intimate point of view, are almost topographical portraits. The series began after her marriage and ended shortly after the birth of her son. We might conclude that the concept of family was beginning to emerge in Shaw's psyche at the same time as it was physically coming to fruition.

The first image taken in this series was a self-portrait. As in the entire series, each texture and contour of the face is finely delineated. The clarity of the image, coupled with the close examination of such facial parts as her father-in-law's ear or her husband's eye and brow (Fig. 15), evoke an intimacy suggesting close family bonds. We know every detail about them in a manner which would be un-



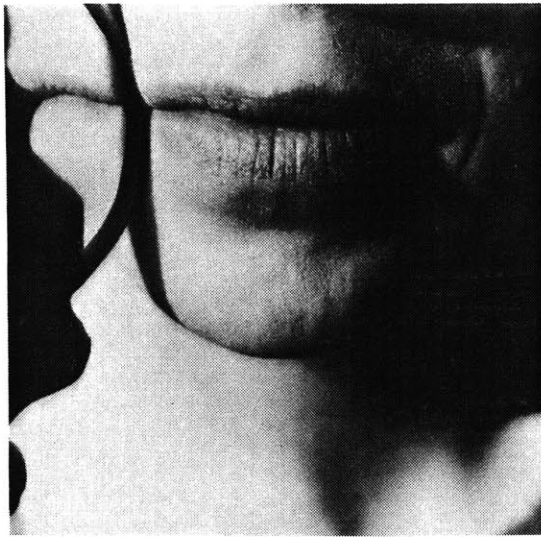


Fig. 15

LAUREN SHAW



Fig. 16

CYNTHIA GANO-LEWIS

thinkable with a stranger, or even an acquaintance. Shaw is particularly pleased with this work in that it focuses her own world rather than upon the outside world. She has found subject matter that draws directly from her personal life.

## 2 Cynthia Gano-Lewis

Cynthia Gano-Lewis began photographing seriously in 1975 after the birth of her second son. Trained in music and theater, she, like many other mother photographers, chose photography because mothering did not leave her enough time in the day to pursue her earlier creative endeavors. Photography has met the demands of her creative aspirations without jeopardizing the stability of her home life.

Gano-Lewis finds her images to be reflections of her feelings towards her children and documents of the "ephemeral experience of their childhood."<sup>5</sup> She wrote, "I photograph from personal experience and emotion and I recognize my role as a mother to be a major part of that experience."<sup>6</sup> In one photograph of her children (Fig. 16) she evokes a quiet and dark mood. The image is particularly soft and womb-like. Rather than any specific subject matter, it is this feeling which is of the utmost importance in her work. Her images are permeated with the rhythms and counterpoints of light.

## 3. Olive Pierce

Olive Pierce was born in Chicago in 1925. She began photographing in Poland, where she was working as a medical

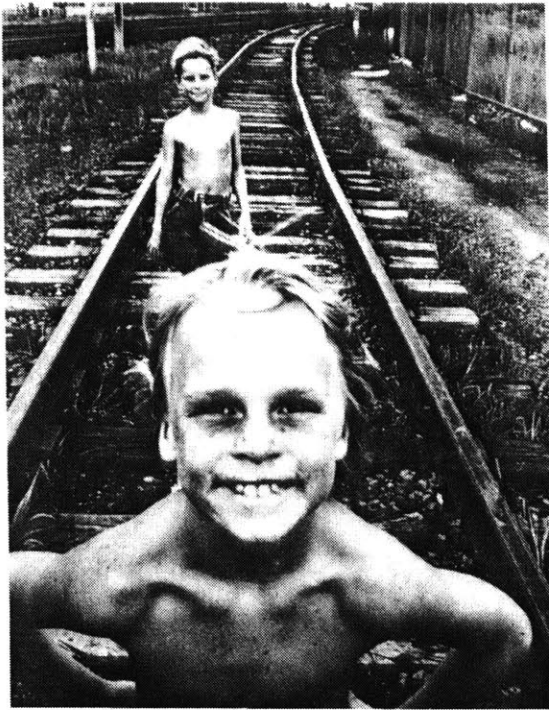


Fig. 17

OLIVE PIERCE

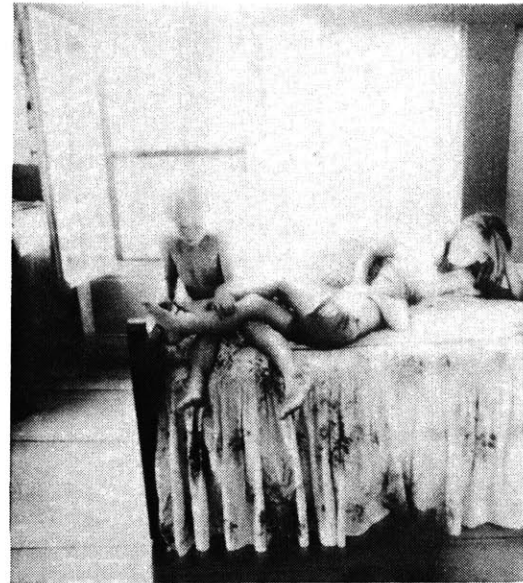


Fig. 18

STARR OCKENGA

secretary just after World War II. Her work is primarily concerned with child portraiture, initially of her own children. She says, "The experience of motherhood has been absolutely central to my work. My children were my first subject matter. More than that, they tapped into the deep underground springs of my own childhood."<sup>7</sup> This is not uncommon among mother photographers and women photographers in general. The portrait serves not only to capture something essential about the subject, but about the artist's past as well. Our art is often self-reflective, concerned with understanding our relationship to other things and people, and serves to reveal our own history to us.

In her photograph of two bare chested boys walking along the railroad tracks (Fig. 17) Pierce poignantly captures the boys within a play environment. Pierce has a fine sense for capturing the children she photographs within the context of an environment which seems particularly comfortable to them. Railroad tracks, old automobiles, trees ... these are the places she finds children, preferring to photographing them there than in a place she would choose. Pierce's sensitivity to children and teenagers through parenting and teaching over many years has given her work authenticity.

##### 5. Starr Ockenga

Starr Ockenga's work has always been based in the por-

trait genre. Before returning to graduate school she worked primarily as a commercial portrait photographer. Ockenga's interest seems to be capturing her subjects within the context of their own environment. In one photograph of her sister and two nephews (Fig. 18), the atmosphere is particularly compelling. The figures lie about in the mother's bedroom. Sun streams dramatically through the window. The relationship between mother and children is suggested by the postures of the subjects bodies. They are loosely entwined, touching yet not grasping, joined together on the mother's bed. In a manner the photograph goes beyond the particular; it is almost symbolic. Yet it never loses its accessibility; the subjects remain human, individual. The open window at the back of the room offers a scope beyond the maternal relationship. It opens up to the outside world, where the children will venture when they leave their mother's apron strings.

In her most recent work Ockenga has simplified her portraits. The environment is minimalized, honed down to a mere white background. In these she seeks to evoke a sense of relationship using only the subtle interchange of body language.

#### 6. Tamarra Kaida

Tamarra Kaida has based her body of work on the study of adolescence and, in particular, its effects on her own son and his friends. Her style is one of blending personal

feelings about growing up with a documentary approach to photographing teenagers; her method suggests the importance of role-play in the development of adult consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

Kaida draws directly from her own experience. She sees the relationships of her family as typifying some large social grouping. In one image (Fig. 19), a male adolescent sits on his bed, dwarfed by huge posters of Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe, W.C. Field, and Marlon Brando. His anonymity contrasts markedly with that of the stars who surround him. The visual comparison with the stars makes him seem even more adolescent, and perhaps suggests his vulnerability as he enters the adult world.

#### 7. Rennie Schmerl

Rennie Schmerl's interest in photography began when her twin daughters were three, and her youngest child was one and a half. She says that photography has been "a stimulating yet calming pastime in the midst of my hectic domestic life."<sup>9</sup> The portraits she has done of her children document their physical and attitudinal growth. The pictures are of a specific person at a specific time; the twins with lost teeth, three naked girls with fake tattoos, a birthday party. Schmerl dramatizes the specificity of each photograph by minimalizing the environment and by using flash. We can see only the essential information and the revelation of a characteristic pose. One photograph which I particularly appre-

ciate is a rather mysterious image of a young girl in a long nightgown, leaning against a bare tree. Her eyes are closed; we can only guess why she is out side in the dark, (Fig. 20). She seems very tired; it is easy to recall a similar feeling from our own childhood.

### 8 Vaughn Sills

Vaughn Sills, mother of two sons, who has worked with portraiture for many years, makes self-portraits and portraits of her relatives and close women friends. The work that affected me most was done with families other than her own. By presenting a number of images taken of different family members within the same home environment, a complex set of relationships begins to emerge. A psychological investigation is revealed by the extended portrait. In one group of photographs, Sills describes a family in Georgia; in another, a family on the Island of Saint Martin. Both groups live in conditions that, by middle-class standards, seem very poor. The family in Georgia consists of a woman, her children, a man, and several dogs. We can sense the relationship of the mother and children, but the man remains an ambiguous character. The interiors tell us as much about the personality of this woman as her face does. In Fig. 21 she poses in front of her porch; her two children lean against the wall. She appears to be a very strong person but she keeps her distance. She is not one to run to for protection.



Fig. 19

TAMARRA KAIDA



Fig. 20

RENNIE SCHMERL

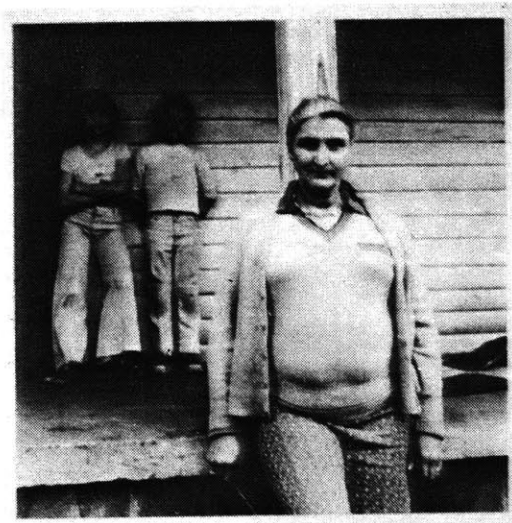


Fig. 21

VAUGHN SILLS



SECTION 2

The second group of mother/photographers primarily use memories, dreams and fantasies as the inspiration to trigger their work. The photographs transcend what is generally considered to be straight photography. They use hand-coloring, combined images, unorthodox printing techniques, and unusual presentation to capture the effects of the surreal. Nevertheless, their subject matter remains themselves and their families.

## 1. Joyce Tenneson

Joyce Tenneson works largely in the autobiographical mode, using "her face and body, her family and friends, things around her she has collected and made, her sense of self"<sup>10</sup> as the impetus behind her work. Her most recent work has been done on Arches printmaking paper with a hand-applied silver emulsion. The large 16" x 20" images are delicate, translucent and ephemeral. Although the photographic imagery is essentially straightforward self-portraits, portraits of friends and her son, and artifacts from her personal environment, the quality of the printmaking gives one the impression of half-remembered dreams. It is interesting to compare one of her images "Baby and Curtain" (Fig. 22) with an earlier photograph of Nell Dorr's called "Mother and Child" to understand how Tenneson makes use of technique as an expressive device in her photographs. In both photographs

the photographers concern themselves with a recurring theme, the vulnerability of the infant. Furthermore, both images use similar subject matter. The newborn is held in what we suppose are the mother's hands. Here the similarities end. Dorr's theme is conveyed principally through the power of the image and the relationship between the mother and child. Although vulnerable, the child is still well protected. For Tenneson, the fragility of the child is only partially expressed through explicit imagery. The diaphonous quality of the print conveys the fragility of the child as much as the dangling position of the baby's body suggests vulnerability. Only the strength of the hands protect the child from the void beneath.

## 2. Louise Adams

Louise Adams has one son and two daughters. A mother at the age of eighteen, she constantly sought her own identity apart from that of her children. She recently finished graduate study at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Adams combines other media with photography in an attempt to fix particular moments in her life. The resulting objects are clay and fibre frames which act as reliquaries for treasured moments. She writes, "It occurs to me that to collect these images and to line my nest with them is to seek a security from the chronology of our lives."<sup>11</sup> The objects themselves are meant to be touched. Their tactile qualities



Fig. 22

JOYCE TENNESON

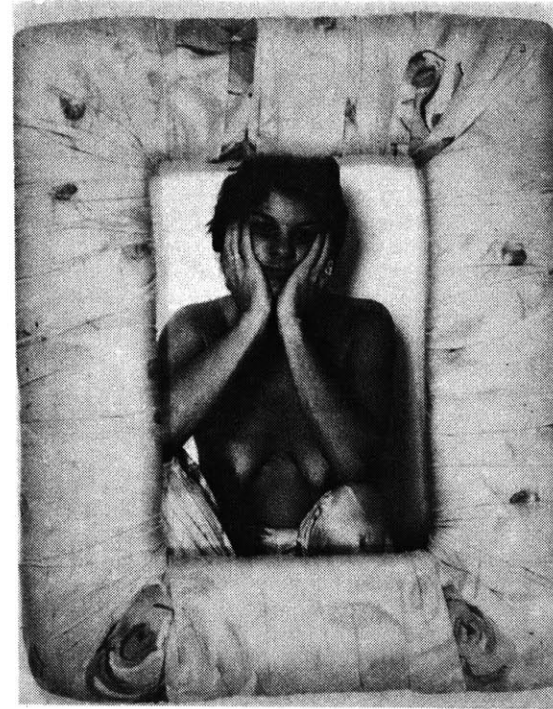


Fig. 23

LOUISE ADAMS

resonate with the imagery of the photographs, giving one the illusion of greater tangibility, and to a certain extent, an intimacy that the straight image cannot provide.

The self-portrait in Fig. 23 was taken shortly after she left her children to study for a year in Rhode Island. The image is framed by the fabric which was taken from the actual pajamas in the photograph. The sadness and tiredness in her face are softened by the pastel colors of the fabric.

### 3. Dianne Ferris

Dianne Ferris wrote that since the mid-1960's her work has shifted from painting to printmaking and finally to photography. Her son was born in 1979 and she reports, "I've found that I have worked more than ever before in the past two years - contrary to the forecasts of friends. His vital presence has had a positive and prolific effect."<sup>12</sup>

Ferris' work includes combined images, some of which are hand-colored; mysterious, surreal still-lives; and images that border on being snapshots of family travel. Describing the work she sent, Ferris stated, "Many of these things I have not shown, have held back as too personal ..."<sup>13</sup>

Her ambivalence about her personal work is not uncommon among women artists. Many women produce work aimed at acceptance by the predominantly male critical world. The work they exhibit is different from their more private work, which is treated as if it has only personal importance. At

times the public work is antithetical to their private work.<sup>14</sup>

Her photograph, entitled "Rainbow Ring" (Fig. 24) makes use of multiple printing techniques and a bit of hand coloring to "express a deep sense of the child in the world ...". By combining snapshots, she has produced a surreal image that resonates within us to evoke a deeper feeling. The juxtaposition of the child with a dolphin transfers a sense of untamed nature to the seaside snapshot of a child with a sand pail.

Since many mother photographers use personal imagery, it is particularly difficult for them to escape the "too personal" label. Nevertheless, it is important work, and should be shown. Through studying it we gain the sense of critical perspective which is currently almost lacking.

#### 4. Mary Anne Lynch

Mary Anne Lynch views the arrival of her second child as the catalyst in her career. "Soon after the arrival of my second child, and being twice mothered, I felt my life changing drastically. Shortly thereafter, so, too, did my photography begin to change. The emphasis in my work began to shift from the world outside, and how I felt about that world, to myself as an individual and my state of mind. The content of this new work became my internal questionings, expressed in photographic imagery."<sup>15</sup>

Lynch acknowledges that the process of making introspective images has helped her accept the responsibilities of being a mother. Her work has served to expose and vent the stored anger and hostility that the abrupt change in her lifestyle initiated. "As I realized, fought, and struggled to accept the responsibilities that came with motherhood, my photographic work came to be the outlet through which I expressed the heart of my anxieties ... Inside, I had lost control. I was in constant turmoil it seemed, fired by the panic that I might never feel whole again."<sup>16</sup>

The thrust of Lynch's statement is embodied in a photograph of hers entitled, "Somnambulist, 1975." (Fig. 25). A centralized self-image is surrounded by dissolving, fragmented images. She has characterized the caged, prisoner-like feeling which often accompanies motherhood. This feeling transferred into her art releases her resentment and anger rather than consuming her.

#### 5. Bea Nettles

Bea Nettles has actively pursued a career in photography since receiving an MFA degree from the University of Illinois in 1970. Since then she has taught and exhibited her work extensively throughout the country.

The birth of Nettles' first child, Rachel, in 1978, contributed to a body of work which has its roots in her own happy childhood in Florida. By using Kwik-print materials,



Fig. 24

DIANNE FERRIS



Fig. 26

BEA NETTLES

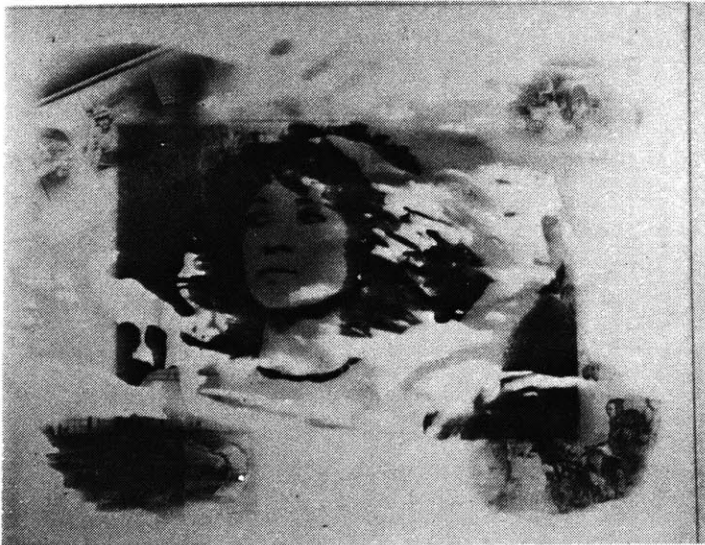


Fig. 25

MARY ANNE LYNCH

Nettles can combine images and add color, enhancing the dream-like effect of her imagery. The sequencing of her book, Flamingo in the Dark, presents the story of her childhood, marriage, pregnancy, and the birth and incorporation of her daughter into her life through images rather than words. In the introduction to that book, Nettles writes, "Witnessing this new life unfold has enriched my life and been a great source of inspiration and will be for years to come."<sup>17</sup>

Nettles' use of self-portraits are a central theme in her work. She links the story line together by becoming a recognizable character in her images. Furthermore, the use of family album snapshots connects the viewer to a specific time and place, enhancing the autobiographical theme.

In "Three Bluebirds" (Fig. 26), the opalesque, pregnant figure of Nettles dreams of bluebirds. The photograph conveys the fulfillment of pregnancy, infusing her dreams with the peace and contentment of her bodily state. Her self-portrait, however, transcends her own individuality. She gains mythic stature by not only being herself, but also our archetypal Earth-mother.

### Section 3

Family albums have been associated with photography since its invention. From the Victorian era to the present, snapshots and portraits have been collected into books as a practical way of preserving and viewing family history.



Generally, these pictures have not been regarded as serious artistic endeavors, since they are considered so personal that they hold little interest for the general public. Recently, however, snapshots have come to the attention and scrutiny of the critical eye. As this kind of photography has been rescued from attic trunks and appreciated for its personal revelations, a different way of photographic seeing has been discerned. The hand-held camera with its inherent flexibility and spontaneity contribute to a snapshot aesthetic which is less formal than work done with the camera on the tripod.

Besides the visual license of the snapshot to make trees grow from heads, to have the horizon tilt at an absurd angle, and to have parts of bodies dangle from the edge of the frame, the compelling aspect of these photographs lies in their honesty and humor.

In the past, the work by Chansonetta Stanley Emmons and Julia Hoffman gave us an intimate glimpse into a families' life. More recently, Judy Gelles and Elsa Dorfman (see Chapter 3) have added titles and diary entries to their images as a way of disclosing the facts of their daily existence.

The compilation of these photographs into albums or journals reveals the unique character of the photographer and her attitudes about the people in her life.

1. Barbara Dettman

Barbara Dettman stopped taking photographs when her son entered graduate school in photography. Although her interest in photography was never professional, her son, recognizing the potential of his mother's documentation of his own childhood, had the negatives reprinted.<sup>18</sup>

I have included her work because Dettman represents to me a large number of women who while not being professional photographers, have, perhaps inadvertently, created fine work. They like Julia Hoffman, have recorded their family's growth, travel, and missing teeth. However, photographs, such as the one of Dettman's son near the historical cannons (Fig. 28) do more than record personal memory. They document a whole period, in this, the fifties in America by recalling our childhoods for my generation.

2. Joan Tobey Downing

Joan Downing was a graduate student at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York, when she bore her first son. She writes that her work had lacked a specific focus until after she had had the baby. Since then she has been primarily photographing her family, capturing the small moments of their life.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than merely creating a traditional family album, Downing's work represents a visual diary of their family's daily routine. Nevertheless, she has retained the spontaneity

of the snapshot in her images. Her perspective is strictly personal. The image of the back of the baby's head (Fig. 29) is a point of view only a mother could have.

Downing writes that being a mother and a photographer was at first very trying. She depicts herself as "constantly exhausted during the time, trying to be both a mother and a photographer ... ", but "having a child and having all those strong feelings, both positive and negative, towards that child really gave me some fertile ground to work out of."<sup>20</sup> It is obvious that Downing feels her work to be of more than personal interest. I find, by identification of experience, the photographs to be compelling. They are reminiscent of my child-rearing days. Downing's incorporation of this perspective into photography attempts to validate the experience of motherhood. To deny it as possible subject matter for making art is to deny mothers of respect.

### 3. Judy Gelles

Judy Gelles works in an autobiographical vein. She combines written material with snap-shot images. There may be one or many negatives printed on the same sheet of paper with hand-written journal entries added afterward. The content of the message amplifies the photo in the way that a narrator gives background material for a story. In a matter of a few photos the family history unfolds: David, now six, has had a runny nose since he was seven months old; Jason,

now three, took a long time to toilet train.

I am particularly sympathetic to one photograph of Gelles in bed nursing the younger child (Fig. 30). The father is in the room trying to dress the older boy. The writing says "Another sleepless night ..."

Gelles is not presenting any idealized, romantic vision of motherhood. Neither is she expressing self-pity. Her photographs simply present the facts of parenting, some of which are unpleasant. I respect Gelles' willingness to expose this side of motherhood with such honesty. Her feelings are feelings most mothers have had.

Fig. 28

BARBARA DETTMAN

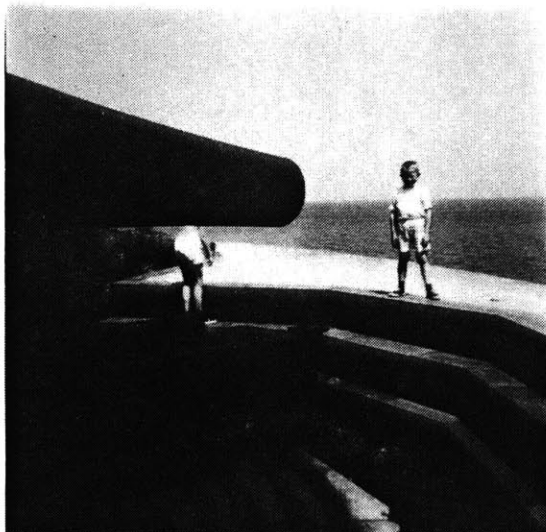


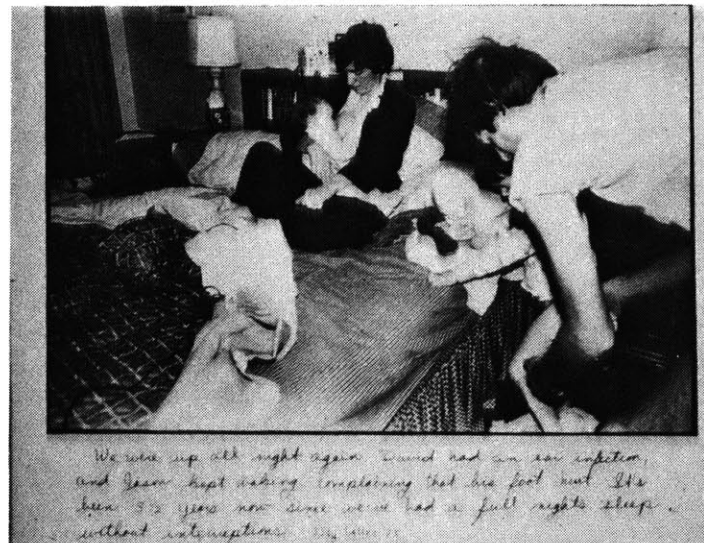
Fig. 29

JOAN TOBEY DOWNING



Fig. 30

JUDY GELLES



## CHAPTER III

## PANEL DISCUSSION ON "NURTURANCE AND AMBITION"

Elsa Dorfman, Irene Shwachman, Olivia Parker and Melissa Shook, all mother/photographers from the Boston areas, were invited to a symposium entitled "Nurturance and Ambition". The purpose of the discussion was twofold. First, each woman was asked to show approximately twenty slides of her own work as a way of introducing herself to the audience. During her presentation, she was encouraged to elaborate on her work and to discuss her own life, particularly with respect to the effects family has had on her career and the work itself. The second part of the discussion was to be an open discussion about the conflict between career and family, at which time the audience could participate in the dialogue and to ask questions.

I chose these women for their wide range of experiences both careers and motherhood. One woman became a mother at the age of 40 after 20 years of independent work. Another, the only single parent on the panel, has been both mother and photographer since the birth of her daughter 15 years ago. The third woman began photographing as a homebound mother of two young children within a traditional marriage. The fourth mother plunged into a career in photography at the age of 36 when her three children were a bit more independent. The

combination of her interest in art history and encouragement from Stiechen at the Museum of Modern Art led her into freelance work, teaching and curating.

I hoped to find out what motivated each to continue the difficult task of combining motherhood and an artistic career.

Elsa Dorfman began photographing as part of her job related duties in a publishing firm. Her work, which she began in 1968, has been consistently autobiographical. In Elsa's Housebook: A Woman's Photojournal, she reminisces about the acquaintances and family members in the photographs, many of whom are poets, artists, and students. All of the photographs were taken at home. As readers, we seem to be listening to Dorfman reminisce. The photographs serve as touchstones to trigger her memory. The writing amplifies the images, offering the reader and viewer a more complete vantage than either the image or sketches could do by themselves. The narrative title, such as "Bobbe laughing at me and my camera, November 23, 1975", has become an integral part of Dorfman's image ... another bit of information to feed the viewer.

Dorfman's recent images represent two aspects of her work; one series is a calendar of family portraits (Fig. 31), another series was taken while visiting her grandmother at a nursing home. Dorfman acknowledges her family pictures of late as a "way of dealing with the stresses and even the re-



Fig. 31

ELSA DORFMAN

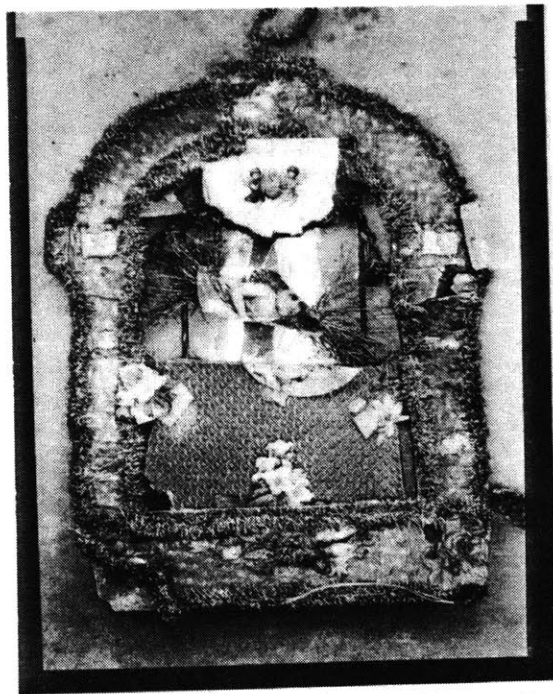


Fig. 32

OLIVIA PARKER



sentment of being where I am."<sup>1</sup> Her photographs become a way of recording and establishing the rhythms of the household - who comes and goes, what furniture gets moved. "One thing that I've discovered about photography is that it emphasizes how life changes, how nothing is sure."<sup>2</sup>

Olivia Parker was married shortly after she graduated from college in 1963. Her first child was born when she was twenty-five, her second two years later. Initially she was involved in painting, and only began photographic work when a friend moved and stored equipment at her house. At that time, Parker's youngest child was one and a half.

Parker feels that her work comes out of the traditional situation of being at home and also needing to be involved in creative work. The key issue is voiced again -- that both family and meaningful work are important aspects of living. She claims that the early years of learning both the craft and art of photography were most difficult for her. At first, she felt hemmed in with her family, but eventually came to realize that the freedom from having to earn her own living was an asset to her artistic development. Initially her husband considered her work an avocation. More recently, however, he has become supportive of her work. His support apparently grew as Parker herself began to gain credibility as an artist, earning peer respect as well as money. Many other women have voiced experiences of a similar nature.

Often the husband's career demands time these women would have preferred to spend on their own.

Parker's photographs are primarily large format still-lives. (Fig. 32) She often takes toys, chalk and objects from her children's rooms and incorporates them into her constructions. She seldom photographs her children; family is something that surrounds her work but only rarely appears in it.

Irene Shwachman began photographing in 1951 when she was thirty-six years old. At that time she was a mother of three children, leading what she described as a "hectic" life. Photography, for her, was only made possible by the fact that it offered a flexibility of schedule. "When you are at home, trapped, you could work odd hours."<sup>3</sup> Later in her career she managed to further reduce the conflict between family responsibilities and her career by building her darkroom next to the kitchen. She could then maximize her time by doing two jobs at once.

Shwachman addressed the issue of husbands as another responsibility for an aspiring mothers/photographers. She stated that she had to struggle (not only) with the children at home, but also with her husband's expectations of support and help in building his academic career. Her family life was also responsible for her decision to restrict the jobs she would take and where she might photograph. "I had to

limit myself to places I could reach in one day and get home to at night. And that was very distressing to me ... I accepted the restriction of living at home and working New England within a radius of one hundred miles." Swachman relates that in discussing this problem with Dorothea Lange, Lange's response was that she never gave a second thought to accepting a distant assignment. She simply told the neighbors she was leaving and they took care of the children.<sup>4</sup>

Shwachman's work in the fifties was primarily the documentary tradition of Walker Evans and Eugene Atget. In 1959 she began to photograph the West End section of Boston which was in the process of being demolished. Her husband had grown up there, and she was particularly documenting it for him. Eventually, this project grew to be the "Boston Document", a collection of prints now housed in the Boston Athenaeum. She continued this documentation for nine years.

Another project grew more directly from her own life and experience. Using old family photographs from her childhood, Shwachman assembled a personal documentary which focused on the life-style of her Russian Jewish heritage in Harlem, titled "We Grew Up In Manhattan." She made copy negatives of the selected photographs and printed them on Kodalith paper using special techniques in order to achieve many colored tonalities. In her most recent work she is combining words with images and with Kodalith transparencies.



Fig. 33

IRENE SHWACHMAN



Fig. 34

MELISSA SHOOK

Melissa Shook began photographing in response to a personal tragedy. At the age of twelve her mother died, leaving her traumatized, and devoid of memory prior to that date. In a sense, all her work has been an attempt to replace what she lost.

The principal thrust of Shook's photography has been the portraits she has done of her daughter, Krissy. (Fig. 34) These are set in various contexts, sometimes with friends and family. The portraits of Krissy are really "about how she saved my life in a fundamental way. I defined a lot of my deeper feelings through that person. I don't think that is noble to do. One shouldn't have children in order to do that."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Shook has done it and the sense of identification is undeniable, especially since a certain aspect of the series ended when her daughter was also twelve.

In a sense, however, Shook has protected her relationship with her daughter by avoiding excessive public scrutiny. This body of work has not been widely exhibited, Shook considering it more in terms of her own personal growth than as public work. She says that she presently always asks her daughter for permission to photograph her, and considers it a gift when she complies. She views her duties as a mother as a primary responsibility.

As well as the on-going study of her daughter, Shook took daily portraits of herself over the span of several

years. Recently, with increased self-confidence resulting from her introspective work, she has started various other projects outside herself. These include the photographing of a charismatic healing group, a woman jazz singer, and a group of deaf people.

In a lecture titled, "Women and Work: Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire," Dr. Irene Stiver of McLean Hospital Belmont, Massachusetts, discussed the conflicts women face as they enter the work force. She said that whether we consider ourselves to have a professional career or to have 'just a job', the conflict between our own set of values and the expectations of work is a major problem in achieving our goals.<sup>7</sup> Assuming the nurturance of our families is an integral part of our value system, it is interesting to see how mother/photographers have dealt with their ambition within that framework.

An artists, women have chosen different criteria to evaluate their success. Financial success is not the main reward, and recognition, although it implies a degree of success, is surprisingly not as powerful a source of motivation as one would think. Only one of the panelists acknowledged recognition as being important to her; the others claimed that personal fulfillment was their prime impetus for working. I believe this emphasis on fulfillment as the primary motivational factor is common among women.

Women have difficulty in acknowledging personal ambition and their need for success. They tend to repress those aspects of their personalities; women are not supposed to be ambitious; it is not feminine to achieve. Retaining these stereotyped notions keeps women in what Dr. Stiver calls a "state of self-conscious stress."<sup>8</sup>

Olivia Parker addressed this topic during the discussion. She feels that the biggest obstacle to her career has been her own internal set of expectations. Coming from a family of four children, she fully expected to have four children herself. Eventually she accepted photography as an alternative priority. She stated, "Getting past the business of what your expectations are for yourself, and expectations tend to be low for women, is the hard part."<sup>9</sup> Society's expectations of women have been engrained in us. Women defer their own feelings of ambition by helping to advance their husbands and because of the demands of child care. It is only through a struggle that they come to realize their own potential.

The topic of nurturance was also discussed. There was a strong consensus among the panelists that being a good mother is a priority. They accepted this commitment in spite of the difficulties it causes. Irene Shwachman again referred to the one hundred mile travel radius she imposed upon herself in accepting jobs as an example. Anything greater than

that would have hindered her ability as a mother.

Elsa Dorfman spoke of her resentment at being the housekeeper of the family. Nevertheless, yet she accepts the role. In terms of career, women tend to do for others before they take care of themselves. Yet, each of the panelists, while recognizing the choices and the resulting sacrifices accept the role of mother as an essential and fulfilling part of their lives.

The important fact about these women, and many more women like them, is that they have been able to balance their responsibilities as mothers with their creative needs. It is perhaps natural that these two primary drives have become interwoven, and many of these women use the families that they care for as subject matter in their work.



CHAPTER IV  
PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT

A great deal of the way I respond to visual stimuli has been shaped by male influences. Ever since my early childhood art history lessons, the majority of art work I have seen and been influenced by has been produced by men. During my first visit to the Chicago Institute of Art, I remember being duly impressed by Picasso's Blue Period paintings and by the Impressionists. I grew to appreciate Matisse's vibrant colors and simple line, Van Gogh's passionate brushwork and emotional revelation, Rembrandt's lighting and compassion for the human being, and Hans Hofman's abstractions. I even drew and painted in styles similar to theirs.

However, as a person and an aspiring artist, my role-models in real life have been chiefly women. My grandmother was a strong matriarchal figure. She had learned to paint china tea sets as part of her genteel education at the close of the 19th century. She and my aunt constantly made beautiful, practical furnishings for the house and themselves and us grandchildren. They crocheted tablecloths, appliqued quilts, hooked rugs, sewed all their own clothing. They outfitted everyone in the family with pajamas and sweaters for Christmas, a tradition that still continues. My mother

learned these skills also, but had more interest in music. Once she married and had five children, however, most of her creative energy was directed into washing, ironing and shopping. I fully expected to follow in the traditional role of wife and mother, but I also wanted to make beautiful things - to be an artist.

I knew two artists when I was a young girl. The first was a nun, an acquaintance of my mother, who taught art in a convent high school. The second was a young woman who taught a neighborhood children's art class, painted portraits and cared for her husband and baby. Both these women were my teachers; their influence on me was strong. It does not seem strange, then, for me to seek out and to identify with a tradition of strong women.

Besides an early interest in drawing and painting, I was intrigued by exotic photographs in National Geographic and by the camera ads in the back of the magazine. After buying a brownie camera on vacation one summer, I took a few rolls of snapshots but lacked the resources to use as much film as I would have liked. Many years later, as an art student in college, I purchased a second-hand Rolleicord for use in the photography class we were required to take. During college, I worked at photography related jobs to pay tuition and to buy paint.

Shortly after graduation, I married and had my first

child, Laura. During the next nine years Johanna, Erik, and Dylan were born. While the children were small, I took snapshots and acquired more equipment. Selling paintings and prints paid for darkroom equipment and a different camera. At night, my studio became a darkroom. As the requests from friends for portraits of their children came, I earned enough money to buy supplies.

Juggling the complex web of relationships that evolve in a large family requires considerable emotional effort. As the babies came, and as my husband's work required several moves, my time to work became more fragmented and my ability to focus my remaining energy waned. (My artistic work replenished only some of the expended energy.) Physically and psychologically, I was exhausted.

Rather than continue working in a vacuum as I had been doing in New Hampshire, I decided to sit in on a workshop in photography that a friend was taking. I needed criticism, support, and instruction. Being in the class gave me the courage to keep working through a difficult period. At the same time, I was separating from my husband of ten years. I suddenly felt, at thirty-two, that I needed to be more autonomous, less dependent financially. It would be difficult to explain logically the urgent need I felt to control my life and to contact a different world than baby-sitting coops. The reality that I knew no way to earn a living hit with a

tremendous impact. The emotional traumas for both myself and my husband were intense. I spent time crying, time not wanting to move, time wanting to be comforted by a mother.

I began to see photographs, not merely as representations of reality, but as reflections of the psyche. Symbols became important. Pictures of people took a back seat to the act of projecting a meaning into a texture (Fig. 35), a pattern, a spatial relationship, a shaft of light. I ultimately produced two portfolios of paired images which were autobiographical. It was evident but mostly to me and not to anyone else. As much as I still like some of those images, the series ultimately failed to do what I intended.

When I started graduate school last year, I experienced a severe depression. I have been depressed before for a variety of reasons - post partum blues, cabin fever, life crises. This time I was not fully prepared for the losses I faced or the emotional changes I underwent as I changed my life completely ... from country to city, from housewife to full-time student and breadwinner, from extended family to single parent of four. In November, I began a series of self-portraits, this time taking a straight-on approach instead of using obliquely cast shadows as metaphorical stand-ins. I wanted to face what I couldn't believe I saw in the mirror. (Fig. 36). I didn't print that roll for awhile.

I tried in vain to continue the type of shooting I was

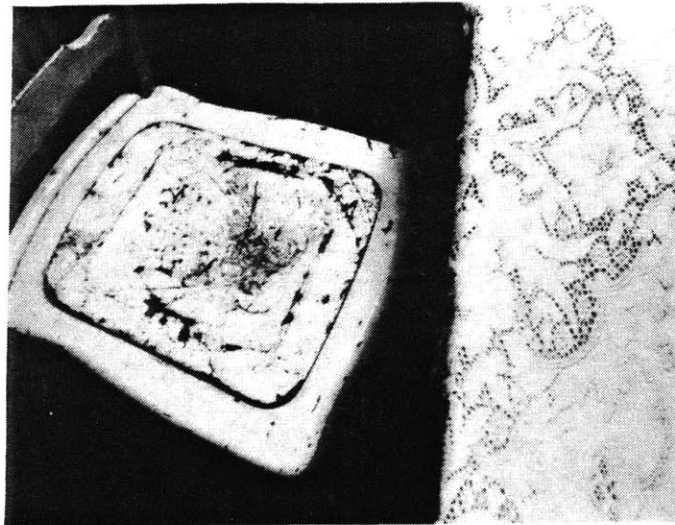


Fig. 35

CHAIR DUBLIN, 1978



Fig. 36

SELF-PORTRAIT 1979

used to. We went to the beach; I took pictures (Fig. 37). I walked to school; I took pictures (Fig. 38). I stopped looking through the viewfinder; I got blurred streaks. (Fig. 39). In my head I felt the same way. Everything was a blur. I was exhausted.

With little time to "go out and shoot" a photographic project, I began recording the chaotic and rambunctious life that greeted me when I came home each evening. (Fig. 40 and 41). The images took several forms before the tripod portraits of self and children emerged as the strongest statement.

By mid-spring 1980, I had dabbled in several directions, used new techniques and experimented in combined images from the past and from present negatives. The time to explore each avenue was not there. I needed a simple, direct manner of working. A conversation with Robert Frank, our visiting artist, remained with me. He had looked at my first self-portrait and said, "You know the pain. Keep at it."

Enough of the grieving and sorrow had passed and I began to feel more sure of myself, more in control. I felt I was becoming stronger. My photographs began to reflect the change. A close male friend returned from South America. I made more self-portraits. At the end of the second semester, I looked through the formal portraits. There was enough for a small series which I presented for a final review. I pin-

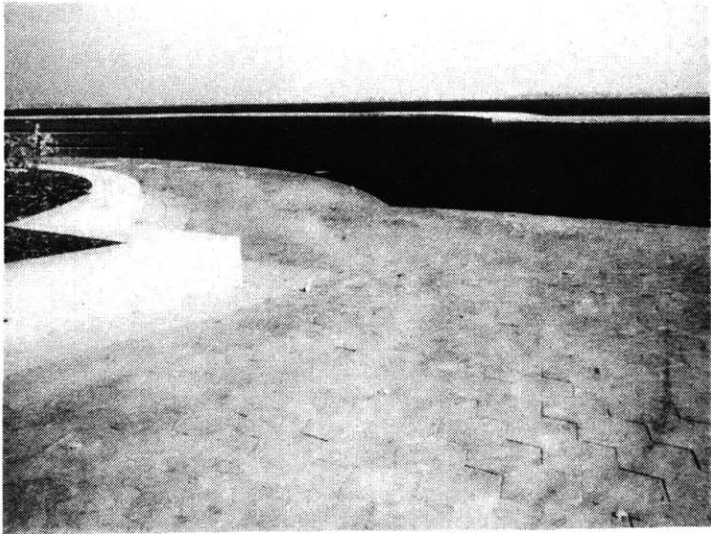


Fig. 37 HULL 1979

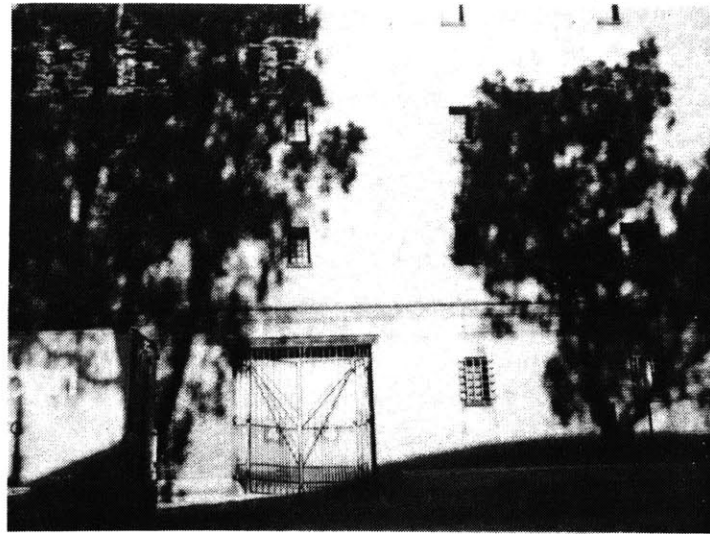


Fig. 38 CAMBRIDGE 1979



Fig. 39  
CONCORD 1979



Fig. 40  
HALLOWEEN 1979



Fig. 41  
JOHANNA 1980



ned together one row of twelve closely hung portraits of Laura, Johanna, Erik, Dylan, Rob, and myself.

For the rest of the summer, I worked in a similar fashion (Fig. 42 and 43). I used my old Rolleicord on a tripod, and approach I had never tried except in self-portraits. The low light level in the house required long exposures to provide any depth of field, a fact which accounts for the formality of the poses and also for the movement of some of the figures.

The times of feeling good became more frequent. There was time to breathe, time to work. My friend found a job in Cambridge and moved in with us - another period of adjustment for six people. My work continued to be what I wanted it to be. Technical problems began to be solved. It was as if once I stopped trying so hard to produce a meaningful image, the meaningful images appeared. Robert Frank's exhortation to all of us to "stop thinking about it. Just do it," reverberated in my mind.

Once the volume of my work was sufficient, and I took the time to study and reflect on it, several categories emerged. There are self-portraits, single portraits, and group portraits. (Fig. 44). In some, the environment is important; in others, the person dominates the image. In several cases, multiple frames are used to form a series where characters come and go or movement focuses attention on one person



Fig. 42

LAURA AND SELF 1980



Fig. 43

JOHANNA AND SELF 1980



Fig. 44

ERIK, LAURA, DYLAN, JOHANNA 1980



Fig. 45

DYLAN, LAURA, ERIK, JOHANNA 1980

(Fig. 45) In this set of images, the central figure, Erik, is surrounded by his siblings, as they prepare to leave for vacation.

The self-portraits describe my physical appearance at a specific time. They express my emotional state, as well. From the initial self-portrait, standing half-naked and vulnerable in the doorway, there is a progression - from revelation and admission of pain (Fig. 46) to a heavily clothed, wrapped stage (Fig. 47) and finally to recovery to a more rested, open attitude (Fig. 48). The time of feeling exhausted and overwhelmed is past for the moment. The figure softens and light plays a healing role. I realize that when I take a self-portrait, I am giving voice to something I have difficulty expressing in any other manner. I can present something in a photograph which I cannot risk saying out loud. The self-portraits deal with the painful process I was living. In some ways, they revealed my own self to me.

The portraits of the children come from a different motivation. I realize that I have always taken photographs of my children. However, instead of intending these new photographs for the family album, I began making large prints for the wall. The cumulative effect of a whole series of these formal portraits gives more of the sense of interaction that goes on in the family than does a single image. (Fig. 49, 50, 51, 52) The relationship between gestures, facial expres-



Fig. 46  
ROB AND SELF 1980



Fig. 47  
SELF-PORTRAIT 1980



Fig. 48  
SELF-PORTRAIT 1981



Fig. 49

LAURA 1980

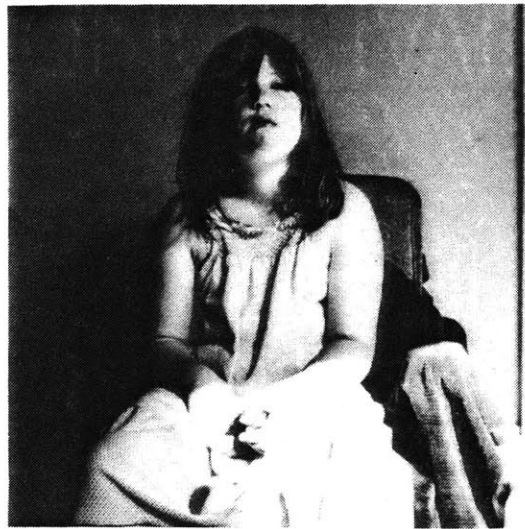


Fig. 50

JOHANNA 1980



Fig. 51

ERIK 1980

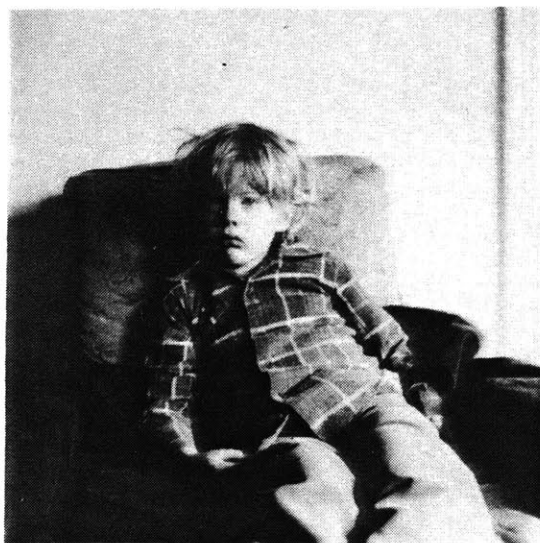


Fig. 52

DYLAN 1980

sions, movement, and the environment provides information whereby the viewer may enter the realm of 'family'. The portraits of the children remind me of the constant flux of life around me - how unique each child is - how they change, yet remain the same.

As a mother, I have found that photography fills my needs for an artistic technique compatible with my lifestyle. As an artist, photography fills my need to respond to my experience of the world, to define it with detail and emotion. The medium can draw a complete world in an instant, can give me more detail that I frequently am able to see in normal circumstances. Once fixed on paper, I can absorb as much as I need or want. How I reveal myself in a photograph can become projective or interpretive of how I reveal myself at other times, to other people.



## CONCLUSION

Photography is one area women, and particularly women with children, have made inroads into the traditionally male-dominated art world. The explanation for this is partly practical; photographic work can be done at home; the time schedules are flexible; and the nature of the photographic medium does not require substantial blocks of time. But more importantly, perhaps, are the inspirational aspects of womanhood and the nurturing of a family, especially for those women who come to terms with demands from the home and their own artistic needs.

In an article entitled "Some Thoughts About Women's Photographs", Sandra Matthews concisely reflects upon several reasons why women have been so successful in this particular medium, while other areas of the arts have remained relatively closed. An important point, she says, is that photography was not taken seriously as a fine art and therefore it was easier for women to be recognized. They were not threatening coveted territory. She adds that women have consistently photographed from their own situation as well. This has been a source of strength in their work.

"Women photographers have succeeded working in a non-threatening manner and stayed away from an overtly aggressive side of the medium. They have used the camera as a tool more for internal than external examination, concentrating on the subtleties of human feeling, the intricacies of form and self-reflection. Photographs made

by men and women often have overlapping concerns, but women have created a body of work addressing a set of challenges very particular to the female situation."<sup>1</sup>

Women photographers have sought their own voices as artists. They have looked within their own world, reflected upon it, and created art in response to it. For the mother/photographer, that world includes her family. Family and self remain the principal concerns for these women and they have begun to draw meaning and expression from them.

Germaine Greer concluded her study of women painters with this statement:

"There is then no female Leonardo, no female Titian, no female Poussin, but the reason does not lie in the fact that women have wombs, that they can have babies, that their brains are smaller, that they lack vigour, that they are not sensual. The reason is simple that you cannot make great artists out of egos that have been damaged, with wills that are defective, with libidos that have been driven out of reach and energy diverted into neurotic channels. Western art is in large measure neurotic, for the concept of personality which it demonstrates is in many anti-social, even psychotic, but the neurosis of the artist is of a very different kind from the carefully cultured self-destructiveness of women. In our time we have seen both are and women changing in ways that, if we do not lose them, will bring both closer together."<sup>2</sup>

We mother/photographers are now finally recognizing the importance of our experiences and are able to translate them into our art. When these experiences include a family that too, can be integrated into image making. Our roles and our ambition are not necessarily opposed. This paper acknow-

ledges many of the women photographers who have reconciled their lives and their need to make art. The products of their work are strong, personal statements. They give us a privileged view into the intimate lives of families and into the hearts and minds of these women.

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3. Interview with Olivia Parker, April, 1981.
4. Interview With Irene Swachman, April, 1981.
5. Ibid.
6. Interview with Melissa Shook, April, 1981.
7. Lecture by Dr. Irene Stiver, "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire," Jan., 1981, M.I.T.
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#### CONCLUSION

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