

ROBERT BERGMAN: PORTRAITS, 1986–1995



Seeing Robert Bergman's one-person show at the National Gallery of Art brought to mind a novel I started to write twenty years ago. The plot: an untrained, unsung street photographer is discovered by a savvy New York dealer and becomes the toast of the art world. Critics love him, curators and collectors fawn over him, and he seems a sure bet for the next Biennial until . . . no, wait, that's not my plot, it's John Waters's, from his 1998 movie *Pecker*, about the eponymous Baltimore lensman who momentarily makes it big in Chelsea.

Bergman's story is no less remarkable or unlikely than Pecker's. Granted, Pecker is a young kid and Bergman has been around for years (he is now in his mid-sixties), but both spring onto the art-world stage like Athena from the head of Zeus. According to National Gallery curator Sarah Greenough and various press accounts, Bergman has been on the scene

since the 1960s and has been taking color photographs since 1985. The thirty street portraits that comprised the National Gallery's show (a similar selection appeared simultaneously at P.S. 1 in Queens) were taken between 1986 and 1995. It seems a tad curious, then, that scarcely anyone had heard of Bergman before this show, much less seen one of his pictures.

Perhaps the photography world is larger than we think, or perhaps there's still room for genius to emerge at a late age. Both are comforting thoughts. Nevertheless, there's a temptation to dismiss Bergman's pictures as latter-day Bowery Bum photography. Most of his ink-jet-produced, moderately sized prints show us the faces of people he encountered on the streets of major cities in the Midwest and eastern United States. They are posed portraits: the subjects gaze down or away into the distance, or else stare confrontationally at the camera. For the most part, the people appear to be downtrodden or at least on the outs with conventional society; more than a few seem afflicted with a wasting disease.

Unfortunately it is impossible to verify any of the questions a viewer might have about these people, since Bergman calls each image "Untitled" and provides it with only a date. No name, no location, no facts except those given by the lens—presumably Bergman wants his subjects to be open to whatever preconceptions and prejudices his viewers may project onto them. In the context of the gallery, though, this denial of extrapictorial detail seems less a social statement than an aesthetic position: we are forced back on Bergman's compositions, his use of color, the consistency of his choices of framing, even his decision about which subjects to shoot.

In this regard, Bergman shows that he is a tad more sophisticated than Pecker. There is nothing radical about his compositions, but his harmonic handling of color and his choices about how to fill the frame show that he is attuned to the legacies of his contemporaries William Eggleston and Nan Goldin. Overall the color scheme is mostly autumnal in hue, with occasional flashes of brightwork; most striking on this score is a portrait of a gaunt, freckled woman of indeterminate age who is struck by a pink light that turns her red hair to flame. Her left clavicle sticks out from the scooped neckline of her red dress, an angry rebuke of whatever glamour the camera might bring to the table.

Similar smart details are in several of the pictures, notably one of a man in a black leather jacket who eyes the camera while taking a drag on a cigarette. He looks unyieldingly hostile,



but then you notice that the same hand that holds the cigarette is cosseting a pigeon feather. Like most of the show's subjects, this man is photographed outdoors, against a building, close-up enough to eliminate most of his surroundings. Bergman's fallback position is the head-and-shoulders portrait, which makes the inclusion of two non-portraits—one of a pair of hands, the other of a man's torso—nominally intriguing.

Taken with a hand-held, small-format camera, the pictures have a gritty quality that, even when switched to pixels, resembles old-fashioned film grain reminiscent of the work of Robert Frank. The Frank connection is central to the show in more ways than one. Bergman cites Frank's *The Americans* as having first inspired him to have a career in photography, and Bergman's pictures lean similarly toward society's margins. The National Gallery is home to Frank's archives, and Greenough recently organized the fiftieth-anniversary exhibition of *The Americans*. Is it any wonder, then, that Bergman's professed ambition was to launch his exhibiting career at this museum, and with a one-person show no less? But the real wonder is that the museum collaborated in this willful and seemingly quixotic enterprise.

Beyond this, though, it is really Bergman's motives for choosing to photograph the people he does that remain the central question. Surely he can't be concerned that these pictures in any way improve the lives of the people they portray, since we don't know where or who they are. Perhaps the ambition is for our regard of the pain of others to make

OPPOSITE: *Untitled*, 1990; THIS PAGE, ABOVE: *Untitled*, 1987; RIGHT: *Untitled*, 1989.

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us more attuned to human suffering in general (come back, Susan Sontag, please), but this aim is attenuated by our prior experience of pictures in the same vein. We might expect anyone conversant with recent photographic practice to know this as an existing critical problem, which leaves us with a far less ennobled idea of what is afoot here: that Bergman is out to convince us that he is a great photographer. Unfortunately, he has appeared a half-century too late. 🗨️

—Andy Grundberg

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Andy Grundberg is an associate dean and Chair of Photography at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C.

