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“Looking Back: Diane Arbus at the Met”

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The revolutionary photographer Diane Arbus, who died in 1971, at the age of forty-eight, said, “A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know.” That’s not quite right, on the evidence of “Diane Arbus: Revelations,” an indeed revealing, though gratingly worshipful, retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum. Confronting a major photograph by Arbus, you lose your ability to know—or distinctly to think or feel, and certainly to judge—anything. She turned picture-making inside out. She didn’t gaze at her subjects; she induced them to gaze at her. Selected for their powers of strangeness and confidence, they burst through the camera lens with a presence so intense that whatever attitude she or you or anyone might take toward them disintegrates. Arbus’s fine-grained black-and-white film and minimalist form—usually a subject centered in a square format—act with the virtual instantaneity of punchy graphic design. The image starts to affect you before you are fully aware of looking at it. Its significance dawns on you with the leisureliness of shock, in the state of mind that occupies, for example, the moment—a foretaste of eternity—after you have slipped on an icy sidewalk and before you hit the ground. You may feel, crazily, that you have never really seen a photograph before. Nor is this impression of novelty evanescent. Over the years, Arbuses that I once found devastating have seemed to wait for me to change just a little, then to devastate me all over again. No other photographer has been more controversial. Her greatness, a fact of experience, remains imperfectly understood.

“Revelations” is on a triumphal tour: having appeared in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Houston, it’s also scheduled for Essen, London, Barcelona, and Minneapolis. Prepared by curators working with Doon Arbus, the photographer’s daughter and the firmly controlling administrator of her estate, it is really two shows: one of them presents the photographs, and the other is hagiography. There is valuable documentation, such as a contact sheet that shows that the subject of Arbus’s famous, horrific picture of a boy clutching a toy hand grenade was actually a fairly normal-looking kid, with a talent for clowning. (Arbuses often amount to staged collaborations with their subjects; this is a matter not of falseness—she never said she was a documentarian—but of art.) And samples of her aphoristic prose beguile. Arbus could have been a fine writer, had she not ceded that worldly role to her adored brother, the poet Howard Nemerov. But the show’s theatrical, moodily lighted installations of biographical materials—snapshots, letters, notebooks, cameras, books, keepsakes—strike me as creepy and pointless, except as fuel for the cult of a spicily neurotic woman who committed suicide. The phenomenon is familiar. Self-destroying celebrities in our culture seem to waive their right to ordinary decencies, becoming fair game for anybody’s poking and pawing. But the tendency, thus reinforced, to confuse Arbus with her work—a confusion shared and exploited by her critical detractors, most notably Susan Sontag—obscures her art’s key personal quality: detachment under pressure, including the pressure of her own troubled emotions.

Arbus is important not for what she was but for her regular feat of vanishing, as a personality, when her camera clicked. T. S. Eliot's tenet of a necessary separation of "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" cannot be better exemplified than by Arbus at that recurrent moment when we as viewers are abandoned to visions overwhelmingly both fierce and tender. Imputations of "voyeurism" are absurd; voyeurs must feel safe, and Arbus's pictures are like the gaping barrels of loaded guns. Her personal background—sheltered, rebellious child of a cosmopolitan Jewish family; successful, dissatisfied fashion photographer; insecure, hungry spirit—explains much about her life, including her eccentric passion for the weird and the seedy. She was a thrill-seeking depressive fortunately not given to drink or drugs but excited, and made reckless, by prospects of rare and strong sensation. Both her genius and her compulsive adventuring, often sexual, took off in the nineteen-sixties—abetted by a collective taboo-breaking mania that, in retrospect, makes a pretty good case for taboos. (Arbus was far from the only bruised daredevil of that epoch to have crashed in the early seventies.) But her cynosure as an artist is a disciplined evacuation of psychic distance between her subjects and the viewer. Compared with Arbus's self-possessed, monumental dwarfs, transvestites, twins, carny folk, nudists, prodigious babies, aging dames, desperately bored suburbanites, and young people palpably facing long odds in life, even the most rigorous pictures by her particular artistic heroes—Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Lisette Model—can seem sentimentally overburdened.

Sontag's notorious attack on Arbus, in an essay from 1973 that became the linchpin of her book "On Photography" (1977), passed one test of great criticism. It asked the right question—about photography's claim to be a full-fledged and legitimate art—at the right time, when Arbus's work had advanced that claim with unprecedented force. Otherwise, the essay is an exercise in aesthetic insensibility, eschewing description of the art for aspersions, often pithy, on the artist's ethics. "Arbus's interest in freaks expresses a desire to violate her own innocence," Sontag wrote. That's probably right, but it's incidental to photographs that transcend the interest and desire of their maker and, in the process, shatter the idea of "freaks" as a stable category of experience. Sontag rushed to rescue the idea. "In photographing dwarfs, you don't get majesty and beauty," she insisted. "You get dwarfs." She noted with bemusement that in Arbus's pictures people who are "pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive" look "cheerful, self-accepting, matter-of-fact." She wondered, "Do they know how grotesque they are? It seems as if they don't." They "appear not to know that they are ugly." It's an interesting complaint, suggesting that people who look or behave in unusual ways merit sympathy from the rest of us only if they visibly assent to our disgust with them. Saying such things shows how far Sontag was willing to go in a campaign that aimed, beyond Arbus, at photography itself. She denied it the power, which she granted to literature, of altering conventional responses—and even the possibility of being creatively inspired. She wrote, incredibly, "There is a large difference between the activity of a photographer, which is always willed, and the activity of a writer, which may not be."

In fact, Arbus's best pictures feel hardly more willed than "Kubla Khan." Of course, she knew how to put herself in the way of epiphanies. Photography is the art of anticipation, not working with memories but showing their formation. As such, it has relentlessly usurped imaginative and critical prerogatives of older, slower literature and handmade visual art. Sontag wasn't alone among critics in lamenting the growing hegemony of photography; the best of them all, Baudelaire, immediately saw in the daguerreotype—a "trivial image on a scrap of metal"—"a

cheap method of disseminating a loathing for history and for painting among the people.” (I take the quote from an appendix to “On Photography.”) To admit that such mechanical, lumpen craft can attain the full consciousness, and self-consciousness, of great art ends the debate. Arbus brought about nothing less by fusing photography’s documentary and expressive functions, and charging that synthesis with a conviction of reality so strong that it resembles myth. She remarked of a favorite subject, “There’s a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle.” She went on to say, “Most people go through life dreading they’ll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.” These words, making crystal clear Arbus’s personal and intellectual attractions to oddities of nature and society, convey a responsiveness that is also a sense of responsibility. ♦