

Susan Jahoda

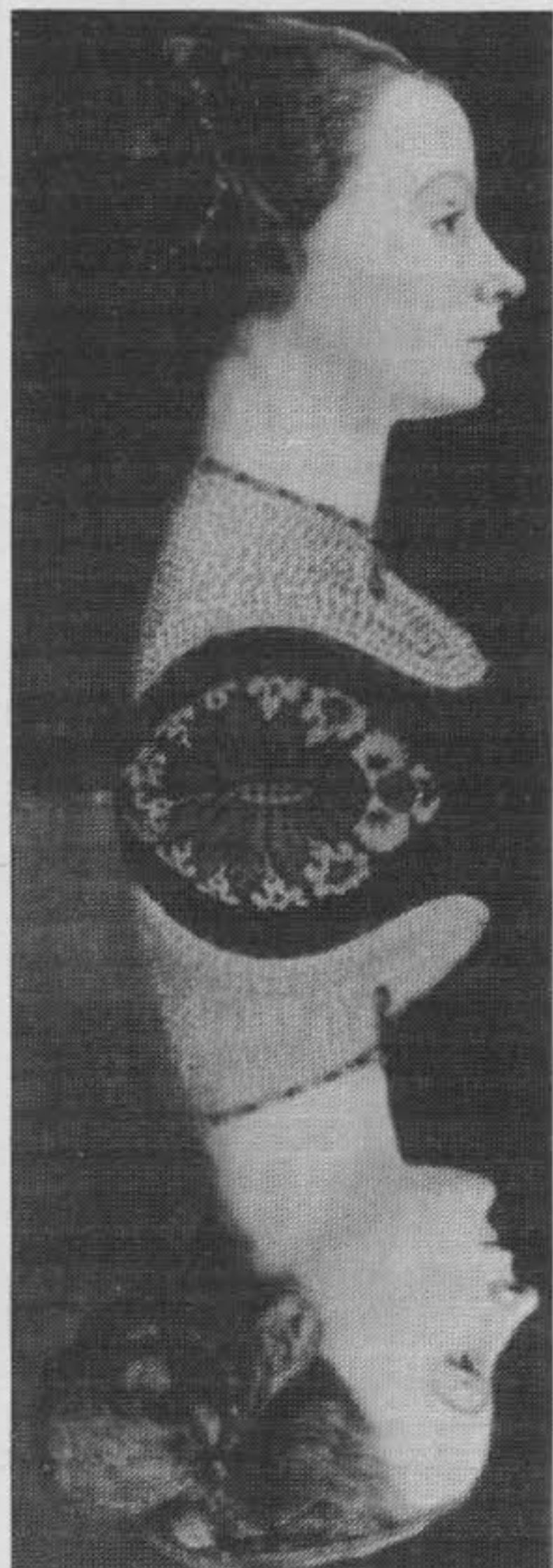
Subverting from within

BY PATRICIA WRIGHT

I feel ill. My nerves are raw and I have pains in my groin.

I sit with my head down. The shadows in the room are creating faces, intestines and petals. She is staring at me.

An image on the wall. Pain(t)ed face – yellow, green, pink flesh. — from Family Picture(s)



Weeping, mostly by women, was reported in Hampden Gallery last spring with the installation of *Family Picture(s)*, a series of photographs and wall texts by assistant professor of art Susan Jahoda. A certain amount of outrage (male) was also expressed over Jahoda's treatment of what one visitor called "pure American family values."

Both reactions were understandable, given the airless amniotic spaces of Jahoda's life-

resentment.

Jahoda's own parents and the photographer herself are the principal props in these bleak dioramas. The texts bulge with enigmatic allusions to aging, abortion, survivor's guilt and emotional blackmail. (Jahoda's father reached Britain, where she was born and spent her childhood, as an Austrian Jewish refugee in 1938.) The personal connections were clinched in the Hampden Gallery show by a cluster of small images including Jahoda family snapshots. These confluences of fact and fiction led many visitors to assume Jahoda's intentions were autobiographical.

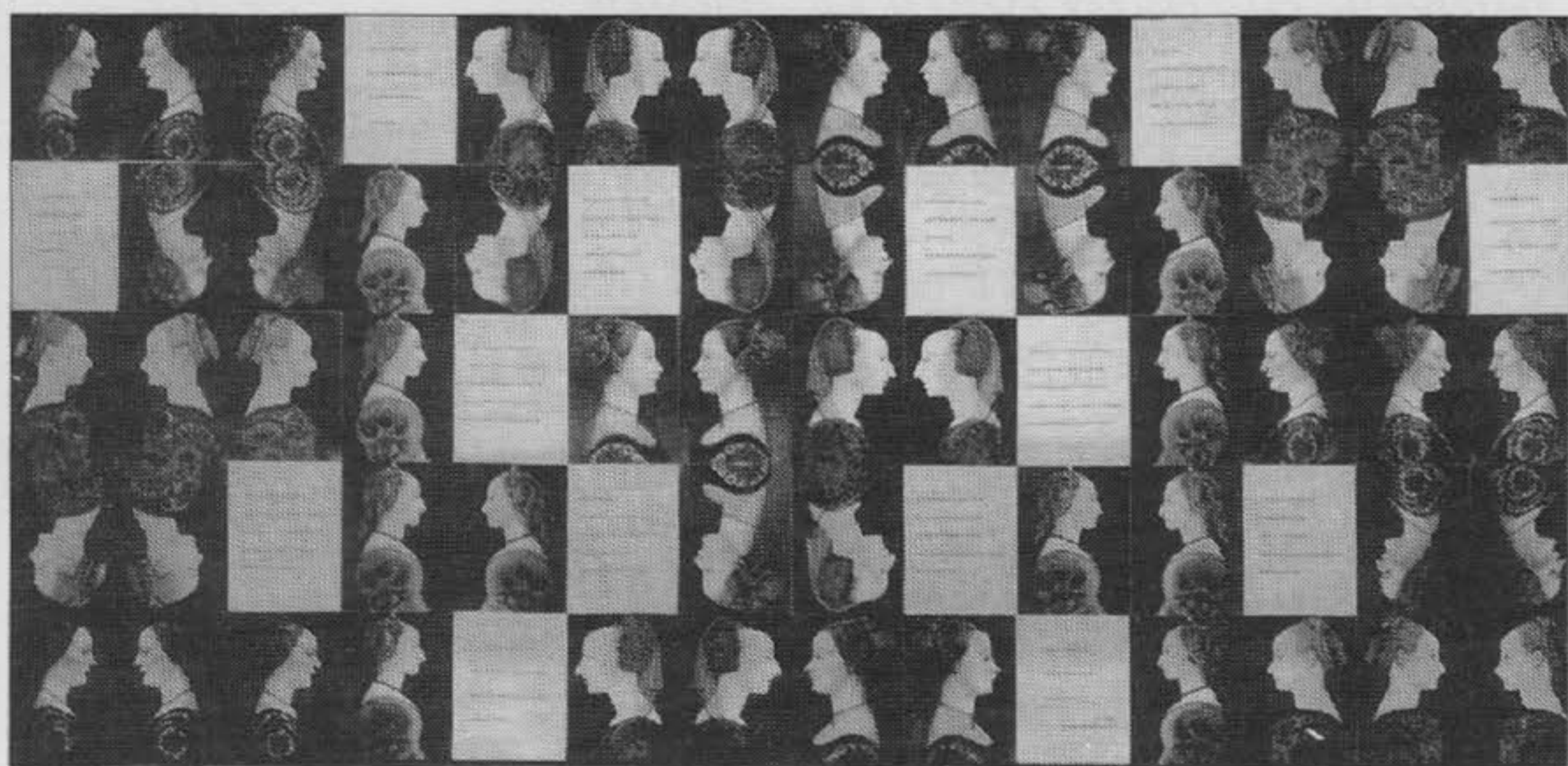
In fact, the artist is after larger game. Her aim is to "locate a feminist practice" within a traditionally male-dominated medium. "If photography is the conversation," she asks, "how do you subvert it from within?"

Her answer has been to manipulate the print, to make its subjectivity obvious. Scenes are conspicuously

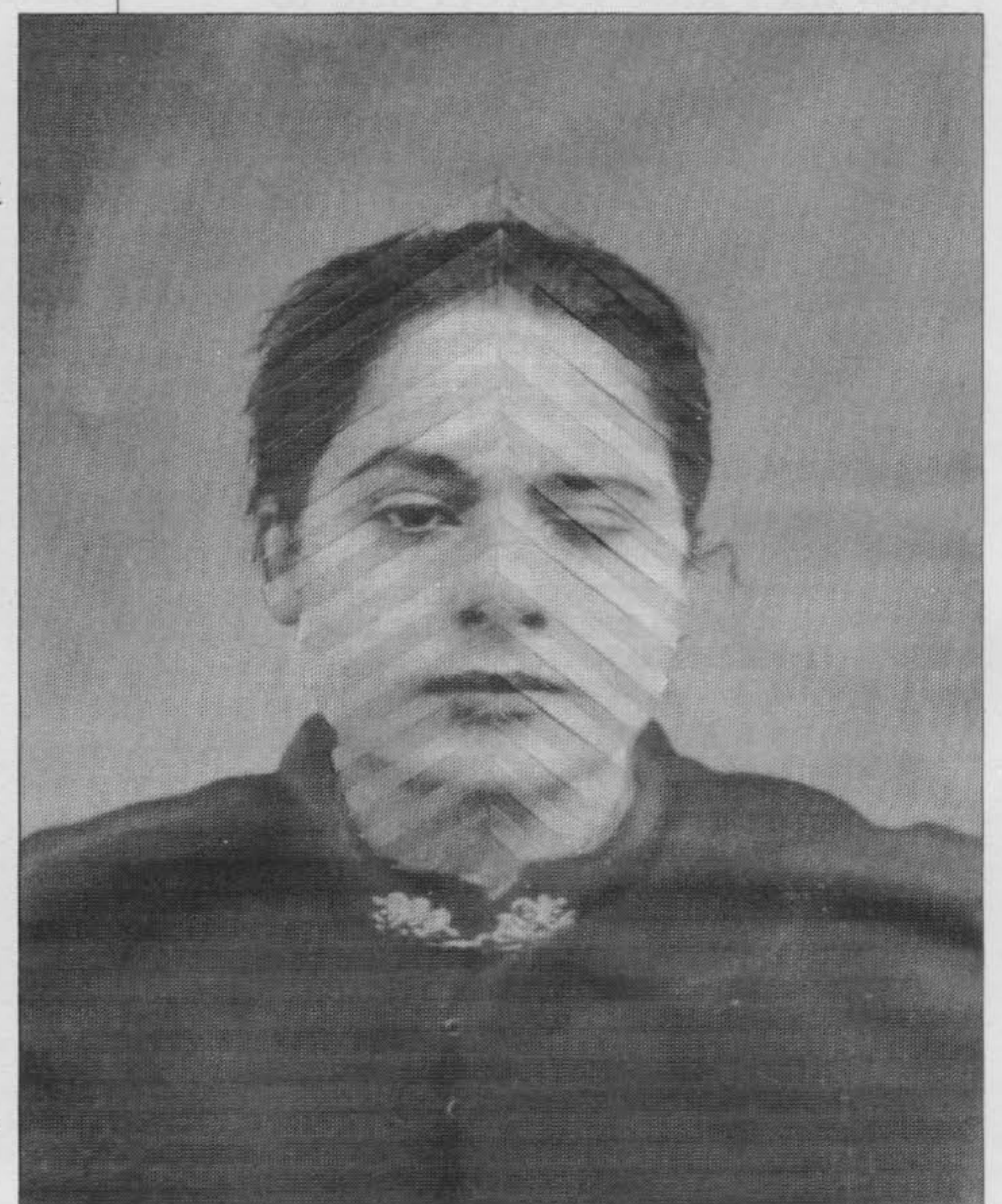
staged; images are "appropriated" – lifted from historical or commercial or clinical contexts – and submitted to "culturally gendered practices" – cutting, stitching, coloring – that rupture the bland, seamless arrogance she sees as a principal patrimony of photography.

In the late eighties, Jahoda subverted the romance of Florentine portraits with texts expressing 15th century views of women; she sliced, reassembled, and stapled clinical photographs of "female hysterics." This "highly theorized" work provided the intellectual fuel, the artist says, for a return to her earlier *Family Picture(s)* and the generation of their powerful texts.

Those texts are now moving into a new incarnation as audio



sized, queasily hand-colored photographs, and the choked, cloaked silence of the figures enclosed in them. Not to mention the equally large-scale texts, which drew visitors directly into the familiar foggy precincts of family guilt, fear, longing, and





elements in a mixed-media installation. And Jahoda is moving into video, “a much more natural way of working for me,” in which meaning accumulates in series of images and relationships can be more deliberately imposed.

If Jahoda’s medium is shifting, her message is not. “Inside the disjunctures,” she writes in a proposal for the new work, “I am hoping for an opening. A space for silenced voices that begins to dispel some of the myths surrounding family life and gendered identity.”



■ This page, top left: Susan

Jahoda at home (photograph by

Stephen Long); bottom left, from

Family Picture(s); above, images

appropriated from fifties and

sixties medical journals for

Jahoda’s work-in-progress,

The Unstable Subject.

■ Opposite page, left:

Renaissance images and text in

“Economy of Desire,” detail and

full view; right, manipulated clinical

image from *Theatres of Madness.*