

By Susan White Bogart

Beyond the fact that the show dealt with photographic portraits, the title, "Visage: Large Format Portraiture," gave little information about what to expect. It did, however, leave the viewer free to experience the exhibit in several ways. The four artists in this invitational exhibition had four very different, very distinctive styles all done with large-format cameras. The gallery space was divided into two large rooms. The first contained the photographs of Susan Eve Jahoda and Jeffery Silverthorne. Up a few wide steps, a second room housed the pictures of JoAnn Verburg and Linda Benedict-Jones. As viewers passed through this sequence, several main trends in modern portraiture emerged.

First, the exhibit illustrated the continuity from highly manipulated prints to straight, unmanipulated photos. Second, it illustrated the progression from imaginative, symbolic images to realistic, documentary images. Third, and most interesting, it showed a range of fundamentally different approaches to the medium of photography.

To begin, Susan Eve Jahoda showed ten 18 x 22 black-&-white portraits, primarily of women. The photos had been beautifully hand-colored. The people were posed wearing patterned clothing in front of draped, patterned curtains and divans. In the photos they are viewed either straight on or from slightly above, filling and even overfilling the frames. For the most part, they confront the viewer directly. The subjects in her pictures have great dignity.

"Hand-colored" hardly conveys the true effect of these images. They have been so elaborately enhanced with colored pencils and inks, so enameled and tinted as to appear almost embroidered. The effect is very rich, illuminated by a choice of colors as subtle as old tapestries as well as gilded with areas of dull gold. The result of this elaboration of surface texture is a very flat picture space and a fascinating ambiguity between the background and foreground. The images are so flat they appear almost collaged. The photographic image is secondary to the general pictorial effect. The juxtaposed patterns and the bright color are an homage to Matisse. But I was reminded of Klimt in the use of gold and of the bits of color assembled like mosaics.

The simplicity of composition managed to balance the strong decorative effect. A representative picture showed a woman — dressed elaborately in a long flowing patterned robe — curled on a sofa covered in a striped multicolored robe. The stripes of the cloth swell toward the viewer,

flowing up and down. In contrast, the woman curves horizontally. She is propped up on one elbow, the other arm resting in front of her body. The lines are flowing and organic. The result is serene and decorative. The images are almost icons. They symbolize an imaginary world of the photographer's making. However, they have such sensual reality — they are so textural, so physical that they have a strong impact on the viewer.

In contrast to the innate, unforced sensuality of Jahoda's images, the next photographer — Jeffery Silverthorne — had consciously tried to portray (literally) naked sexuality. His sixteen 15 x 18 black-&-white photos were all of undraped or half-draped people. There was one child and one man; the rest were women. A dedicated but not quite successful searcher after the distasteful, Silverthorne had eight of these women bound and/or smeared with dried flour. Two were paired with an old, ugly item: e.g. a naked woman stands outdoors next to a dilapidated, abandoned tub set on its end. It was rather like the obligatory shot of the tourist next to a national monument. There were shots of rather mournful nudes shown from the waist up. And the last was a woman's head in profile. These images contain Silverthorne's own metaphorical or mythological meaning. What else can we make of a naked woman with a fur neckpiece, her head bound up in twine? These photographs apparently were meant to shock the viewer into outraged but ultimately enlightened gasps of understanding. Unfortunately, my reaction was more often a derogatory snort.

A representative image showed a woman, naked from the knees up, squarely facing the viewer. Covered with the ubiquitous flour, she has one string tied around her upper right arm and another around her waist, holding a fish (halibut, I think, although flounder would have been more appropriate). The background is plain white. The lighting is flat. The image is banal. Instead of rejecting, identifying with, understanding, or otherwise responding to the idea of the picture, I was left with the nagging feeling that I had seen that image before. And, wasn't it done better then? It is true that these images stay with you — like a nasty aftertaste.

There were a few good images in Silverthorne's presentation, especially two pictures of people looking out to sea. Instead of the complicated compositions that tended to get out of his control, these were simple closeups that gave me the impression that something of emotional psychological importance was going on.

While Jahoda manipulated the print, Silverthorne manipulated the subject. He tried to portray the inner life of the mind. But rather than a vision of the mind of us all, we are left with a murky glimpse of one man's mind. This could be a worthwhile exercise. But this glimpse tells us nothing useful about the human condition: nothing, that is, beyond the revelation that this is one psyche we won't invite to a fish dinner.

The third photographer, JoAnn Verburg, had twenty-seven 8 x 10 color contact prints on exhibit. Besides being the only one to use color film, Verburg was unique in her use of unusual angles and matting to enhance her compositions, which were complicated and dynamic. Many objects and props contributed to the total effect.

One picture of a wooden deck — shot from slightly above — showed two men stretched out on lawn chairs. The three bright yellow chairs form a zig-zag from lower left to upper right. The weathered gray planks slanting right to left beneath them are dappled and striped with strong afternoon sun. The men stretch languidly in the middle and upper chairs. They smoke cigarettes, their faces lifted toward the sun, their eyes closed. In the center, a man lies quietly with his torso and right arm swathed in white bandages.

There is something unsettling about a Verburg photo. The scene is superficially simple but a mysterious current flows beneath the calm, contemplative surface. Her pictures have a reticent, introspective feel about them that is enhanced by the closed compositions.

Verburg's photos are an interesting mix of the imaginative and the documentary. They appear at first to be direct representations but there is a curious unreality to them. It might be the almost unnaturally intense color. It might be the dreaming, gently drifting demeanor of the people. Whatever the reason, in her pastoral photographs of people lying with their eyes closed, the viewer gets the feeling that a white rabbit with a pocket watch will rush past momentarily. It is a feeling of waiting, of anticipation.

Reality dominates the work of Linda Benedict-Jones. Her twenty-eight 15 x 18 black-&-white images were clear, straight documentary photographs. They were all face-on, middle-range shots from the knees up of students at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School. The composition are severe. All were posed against backgrounds of brick, concrete blocks, blackboards, or banks of lockers. The soft lighting without harsh shadows delineates their distinct personalities. Each individual is unique and clearly presented. Or, rather, they are all allowed to present themselves, for Benedict-Jones, of all these photographers, shows the person photographed more than the personality of the photographer.

However, she does have a unifying vision. She wanted to portray "a microcosm of the city of Cambridge" with all its variety and individuality as well as its unity. She was the only one to put up unmatting photos. The effect, in spite of the strong individuality of the portraits, is of one mass portrait. The closed limited environment in which she makes her pictures reveals the restricted environment of high school. The only human elements are the students themselves and she often poses them with a friend or two. Their warmth and closeness in a brick and concrete world is revealed in the way they turn toward or touch each other. They engage the viewer with great directness. There is much intense emotion in these pictures: wistful, defiant, shy, confused, inpatient, wary, but not often happy.

One photograph showed a young black woman leaning against a brick wall. She had consciously composed herself — her left hand casually tucked into a pocket, her right draped gracefully in front of her body. Her wary sidelong glance was calculated to demonstrate indifference to the world's opinion but her nonchalance was as studied as her elaborately constructed corners. There was a hesitancy, a touch of insecurity as to whether the effect was just what she planned. Benedict-Jones has captured, by letting them speak for themselves, the fact that adolescents live not so much in a happy as in an intense time of life. There are few smiles, more bravado, and much integrity in these photographs.

The Creative Photography Gallery designed this exhibit to show the variety of artistic styles possible using the same tools: view cameras on tripods. In this, it was successful. Large-format portraits are a recent trend away from the 35mm work of the seventies, and this exhibit illustrated the diversity and creativity of work being done in this area. In addition, it demonstrated diversity within modern portraiture as a whole. Some photographs were more successful than others. But the exhibit integrated them all and presented a short but succinct course in modern portraiture.



Photo by Susan Eve Jahoda (Original in color)