The Comer Collection

IDENTITIES

February 1 - March 7, 2008
Curated by: Marilyn Waligore

Exhibition reception:
Friday, February 1, 6:30 - 9:00 p.m.

This exhibition celebrates the donation of the Comer Collection, an archive of modern and contemporary photography to The University of Texas at Dallas. Marilyn Waligore, Associate Professor at UT Dallas, selected more than twenty images from the collection for the exhibition.

Gay Block
Renée Cox
Benedict J. Fernandez
Leonard Freed
Nan Goldin
Ernst Haas
Esrie Hudnall, Jr
Martina Lopez
Luis Mallo
Mary Ellen Mark
Anne Noggle
Gordon Parks
Marc Riboud
Sebastião Salgado

Flip Schulke
Andres Serrano
Cindy Sherman
Tom Sкурелла
Fanny Tapper
Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie
Dan Weiner

Hudnall’s Three Drummers perform confidently for the camera, becoming both musicians and sculptors with instruments crafted from plastic barrels. Hudnall establishes scale, as the buckets measure almost half the height of the young boys. While two of the children respond with a serious gaze, a third smiles, his T-shirt emblazoned with an image of the purple dinosaur Barney. Hudnall’s image seems to reveal the boys’ potential character, the adults they may become within the African-American community of Houston, Texas.

Martina Lopez inserts 19th century portraits into digitally-constructed landscapes to comment on family heritage, and collective his-
tories. She connects past and present, placing stoic monochromatic portraits within the vibrant colors of a fabricated locale. In Heirs Come to Pass, I, two male figures, perhaps father and son, sit in the midst of a landscape covered with red earth. A baby beside them references the next generation. Her expansive landscapes suggest migration to the west and the efforts of immigrants to establish a sense of place. Lopez’s images seem to underscore photography’s contribution to the recording of family history within the American frontier, through both the documentation of family rituals and the proliferation of photo albums. Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie in her Portraits Against Amnesia series also revisits images of the past. She combines black and white photographs of her family with brightly colored graphics to insistently affirm the present. In Idée, a large moon rises over a field of blue, an expanse of clouds, to bring this young woman’s life, and American-Indian heritage, back from faded memory. Lopez and Tsinhnahjinnie create amalgams, merging snippets from their personal lives with historical documents.

In a recent National Public Radio interview, filmmaker Todd Haynes, who directed I’m Not There, observed that people tend to view identity “as something that’s sort of imposed upon us by society.” He notes, however, in considering the many persons of Bob Dylan, that individuals can allow themselves “to be different people at different times.”

The work in this exhibition addresses the possibility that identity is in flux, despite the camera’s apparent ability to fix it.

— Marilyn Waligore 2008


Photographs of individuals, as in portraits, tend to prioritize appearance or likeness. These artists move beyond the surface, to foster our reexamination of the relationship between photography and concepts of identity. Images in this exhibition range from a display of hybrid identities, in an affirmation of existence, to a critique of socially constructed stereotypes.

Approaches borrowed from the tradition of painting influenced some aspects of 19th century photographic practice. Historians as well as contemporary artists have investigated how photographs reveal the identity of the sitter. Gisèle Freund discusses conven-
tions adopted by the 19th century French photographer Disderi, the father of commercial photography, who employed a reliance upon props and depictions of the entire body—in lieu of an emphasis on the head or face:

Moreover, the props included in Disderi’s portraits tend to distract the viewer from the subject in order to suggest a type rather than an individual. To depict a ‘Painter’ all one needs is a brush an an easel, although a heavy curtain makes a picturesque background. The ‘Statesman’ holds a roll of parchment; his right hand rests on a heavy balustrade whose massive curves suggest his responsibility-laden thoughts. Picturesque and symbolic props indicating the social status of the model filled out the background.

The photographer supplied the viewer with visual clues. The inclusion of various devices—the parchment, brush or easel—fostered interpretation of signs indicating the status and role of the sitter, their relative place in society. These formulaic portraits removed an emphasis on the individual and her character, parallel to the heavily retouched glamour portraits of today.
Earl Guinea Hudnall, Jr., Three Drummers, gelatin silver photograph, 1996.

The rapport between photographer and subject becomes grounded in portraiture. Marc Riboud emphasizes the voyeurism implicit in photography particularly as it relates to the male gaze. The viewer becomes aware of her engagement in watching, paralleling the actions of photographers who elude in closer to obtain an idealized view of the model. Over fifty photographers attempt to photograph two or more models, along ragged cliffs in the resort area of Karuizawa, Japan. The model nearest the camera averts her eyes, leaning against the railing of a sea of cameras frame a woman in nature. But the camera's perspective is repeated by the individual leg supporting the figure. The upturned prosthesis protruding from the satchel on his back reveals a painful whimsey. The image of the prisoner serves as a harsh testament of human endurance. By extension, the image functions as a symbol of the need to rebuild cities partially destroyed by bombing raids. The solitary figure awaits a trolley, suggesting that the future remains uncertain.

Gay Block of New Mexico makes previously invisible heroes visible through her portraits of those who sheltered Jews from the Nazis during World War II. The success of these “rescuers” resulted in part through their ability to keep their identity secret; on the surface they appeared to lead average lives. Block documented over 100 of these secret “rescuers,” individuals like Zofia Baniecka of Poland. This portrait, Staten Island/Warsaw, represents Baniecka, an elderly woman, smoking and leaning back in her chair, surrounded by the orange colors of autumn. The puffs of smoke represent breath, while they also in their negative connotation suggest the imagery of war; the aftermath of bombing. As the smoke recedes like a fading memory, Baniecka sits in Staten Island far removed from the Poland of World War II. Block strives to foreground this woman's physical presence. Despite her age, one can discern Baniecka's ability to savor life and to share in a desire for freedom.

Flip Schulke’s photograph of Coretta Scott King, Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., Montgomery,Alabama, from twelve years earlier, both document iconic figures in American history. Similar to Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother of the 1930s depression era, the portrait of Coretta King represents an icon of the '60s, providing a marker of the shared grief experienced by a nation. The Memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr. –to create a mausoleum, or picture within a picture—affirming their commitment to continuing his vision. They wear their sorrow, while they celebrate the life of the slain civil rights leader.

Leonard Freed’s Harlem, New York City, of 1963, records a young black child mimicking the gesture of activists in their call for black power. Or perhaps we simply see several youths flexing their muscles in a playful posing for the camera. The tight framing and low vantage point render the child’s body as imposing, exuding energy and strength. Houston artist Earl Hudnall, Jr. documents child’s play in the 1990s without Gameboys or Nintendos.