

# 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  
Earlie Hudnall, Jr

Martina Lopez  
Luis Mallo  
Mary Ellen Mark  
Anne Noggle  
Gordon Parks  
Marc Riboud  
Sebastião Salgado

Flip Schulke  
Andres Serrano  
Cindy Sherman  
Tom Sicurella  
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 histories. 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.<sup>4</sup> She combines black and white photographs of her family with brightly colored graphics to insistently affirm the present. In *Idelia*, 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 personas of musician Bob Dylan, that individuals can allow themselves "to be different people at different times,"<sup>5</sup> which can have a positive effect. 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

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS  
SCHOOL OF ARTS & HUMANITIES  
CECIL & IDA GREEN CENTER

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- <sup>1</sup> Gisèle Freund. *Photography & Society*. Boston: David R. Godine. 1980. 61, 63.
- <sup>2</sup> Renee Cox. "Bio." Homepage. 7 Jan. 2008  
<<http://www.reneecox.net/bio.html>>
- <sup>3</sup> Gay Block. "Rescuers 1986-1988." Homepage. 12 Dec. 2007  
<<http://www.gayblock.com/rescrs/indresc.html>>
- <sup>4</sup> Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie. "Fine Art." Homepage. 7 Jan. 2008  
<<http://www.hulleah.com/fineart.htm>>
- <sup>5</sup> Todd Haynes. Interview with Terry Gross. "Exploring Six Degrees of Dylan." *Fresh Air*. Natl. Public Radio. WHYY, Philadelphia. 19 Nov. 2007.

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Martina Lopez, *Heirs Come to Pass, I*, cibachrome, 1991

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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 conventions 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 and 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.





Earlie Hudnall, Jr., *Three Drummers*, gelatin silver photograph, 1996.

The rapport between photographer and subject becomes foregrounded 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 elbow 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 rock with her arms braced, striking a pose. The film images captured by this sea of cameras frame a woman in nature. But Riboud's alternative reality reveals a city of amateurs, who swarm like insects. The viewer becomes in a sense complicit. Marc Riboud's image testifies to the ability of the camera to fix identity, and also to fail. Meanwhile, the portrait of the model in this context can at best reveal appearance. This document of an artificial rapport between photographer and model highlights the fact that photography is in many ways about illusion, about constructed realities. Photography can also facilitate the creation of constructed or alternative identities.

Renée Cox presents an idealized male form in *Atlas*, replacing the classic white male nude—as in *The Farnese Atlas* sculpture—with its black counterpart to comment on racial identity. Renée Cox similarly exploits contrast to undercut the concept of the powerful male body, as the model balances an inflatable toy world, a lightweight balloon, over his head, in lieu of a marble globe depicting constellations. She subverts this Greek ideal by presenting an image of the world with Africa at its center, as part of her revision of great works of European art in her *Flipping the Script* series.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Gordon Parks revisits Grant Wood's classic painting through his study of *Ella Watson, American Gothic, Washington, D.C.* Park's photograph from 1942 substitutes a broom and long-handled floor mop for the pitchfork. He replaces an iconic image of an American farming couple with the grim reality of urban life in the nation's capital as experienced by this African-American woman.

Cindy Sherman employs replicas of the body in her *Untitled (cigarettes)* that serve as stand-ins for the artist. She hides her identity by using a surrogate representation of the female form. The repetition of mannequin hands illuminated by garish cyan and yellow gels contributes to a scene of a girls' night out, as cigarettes overflow from ashtrays, their red embers glowing. A female torso with a sailor's anchor chain fills the background, while in the upper right corner a baby's torso appears upside down and blurred. The dealt cards held by one of the mannequins reveals the queen of spades and a pair of jokers. A cross-star filter introduces gleaming points of light on silver fingernails and jewelry. Sherman appears to construct an image of the female chain smoker, who neglects her child. A conventional depiction of depravity may rely upon negative images of the female body, and Sherman exposes this stereotype.

These artists render identity as complex, informed by social, historical and cultural contexts. Anne Noggle's self-portrait, *Myself as a Pilot*, acknowledges her uncommon twin roles as woman photographer and pilot—as a Women's Air Force Pilot (WASP) during World War II, a crop duster pilot and a flight instructor. Andres Serrano captures the intimacy displayed by two sisters in *Istanbul (Sisters)* through their touching of foreheads and hands—prompting two figures to fuse into one. The sisters wear head coverings, challenging photography's ability to reveal appearance, while asserting their religious and cultural backgrounds as Muslims in Turkey—a Middle Eastern nation which embraces secularism. *Lynette and Donna at Marion's Restaurant, New York City* is bathed by a warm glow under diffused lighting. An orange and yellow color envelopes these two women in a moment that suggests their intimacy. Nan Goldin, through her documents of couples, suggest that we discover our identities through our personal relationships, our sexuality.

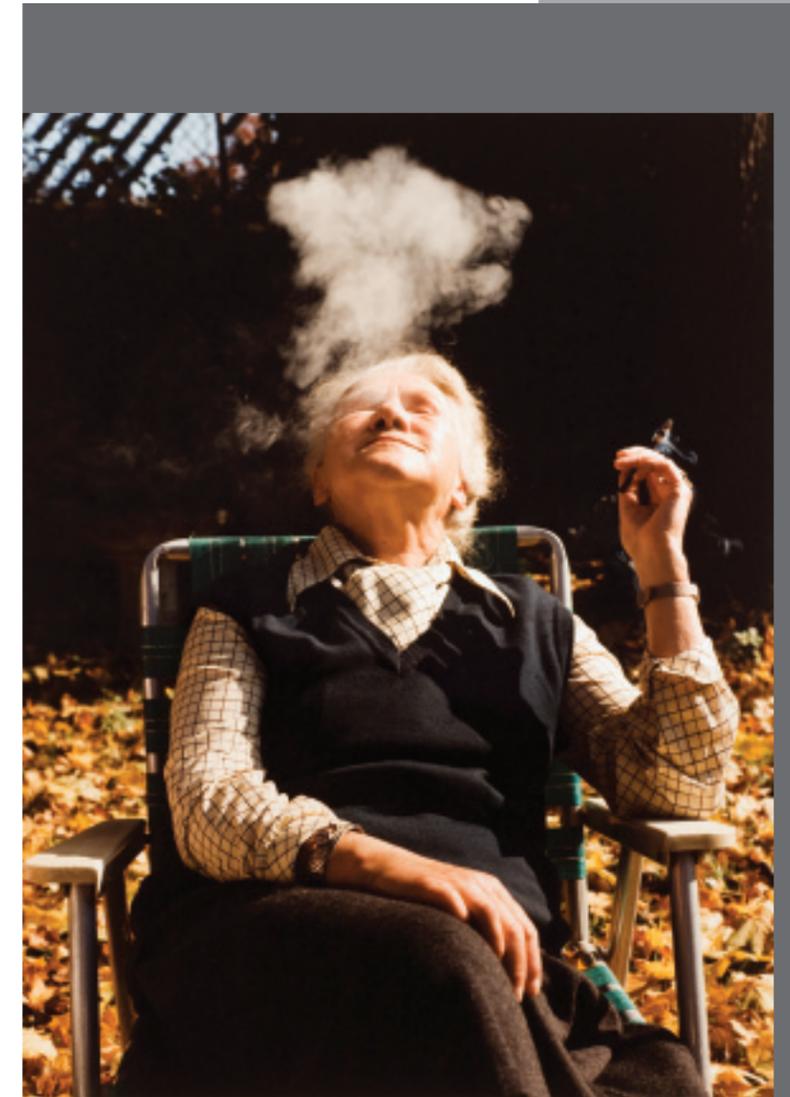
Mary Ellen Mark explores family relationships in *Vashira and Tashira-Twins, Suffolk, New York*, depicting two girls at a shelter. The twins are held by parents who appear just outside the frame, creating a delicate chain, referencing the fragile nature of their lives but their unity as a family. Identical twins often cannot be discerned as unique individuals by the average person. The twins wear the same polka-dot dress, and patent leather shoes, but Mark suggests their individuality through facial expression, as one of the girls responds in awe. Through these documents of ordinary people, identity is rendered as multi-faceted, informed by our social roles, our relationships, our families.

One's position the context of history adds to reflections on identity, as we consider the roles of survivors, heroes, rescuers and witnesses. The stark description of an amputee in Ernst Haas' *Homecoming Prisoner* from 1946 represents part of the aftermath of World War II. The alternating lines of the crutches are repeated by the individual leg supporting the figure. The upturned prosthesis protruding from the satchel on his back reveals a painful whimsy. 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.<sup>3</sup> 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., Atlanta*, and Dan Weiner's portrait 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. Central Park, New York City, April 5, 1968*, created by Benedict J. Fernandez presents an elegy. Three young men adorn themselves with photographic buttons depicting the image of Martin Luther King, Jr.—to create a metapicture, 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 Earlie Hudnall, Jr. documents child's play in the 1990s without Gameboys or Nintendos.



Gay Block, *Zofia Baniecka (Staten Island/Warsaw)*, Type C color photograph, 1986.