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Amy Arbus

FINDING BEAUTY IN THE UNEXPECTED

By Sue Harrison

SOME ARTISTS WAIT a long time to show their work to the world. Photographer Amy Arbus has not been shy about hers. She has produced five books and worked on many photo series exhibited around the world. But there was one set of photos that she has kept tucked away in a box since 1992. They represented a turning point in her personal and professional life, a cathartic moment. Until last summer's exhibition of *Tub Pictures* at the Schoolhouse Gallery in Provincetown, she wasn't ready to show them.

Arbus is famous for photographs that often find beauty in unexpected places. But these weren't about others—they were about her.

The show was comprised of eight large nudes taken in the bathtub of her New York City apartment. Years prior, she took a workshop with photographer Richard Avedon, and he'd asked his students to do self-portraits. Eight of the sixteen students, including Arbus, wanted to do something with water. It was February in New York and the only water she had access to was in her tub. She set up the camera on the sink, connected the shutter release and got into the tub. Then everything changed.

"The minute my toe hit the water I realized why I was there," she says, "which was that my mother had died in the bathtub." Her mother, the photographer Diane Arbus, committed suicide in a tub when Arbus was seventeen.

Arbus said, "I had a crashing realization—how could I have gotten that far in the project without realizing what I was doing?" When I took the photographs, I was thirty-eight. I had always wondered about how mom looked. In some perverse way, I wanted to have seen the police photographs of her and I started thinking about how she felt, and how I felt."

The resulting images weren't carefully framed. The water was moving because she was getting in and out of the tub; sometimes

parts of her wound up not in the frame. In the darkroom, she discovered that the bathroom lighting flattened out the negatives.

"I had to use," she recalls, "a very high-contrast filter, and all of a sudden the water got dark and scary and looked like bloody water, which is what I imagined it must have looked like when my mother passed away."

The pictures were raw and not flattering. They unnerved her, so she made others of herself dancing with her hair flying. She printed a dancing photo for Avedon, who looked at it for half a second before he caught sight of the contact sheet of the tub photos.

"He had his assistant run up and down the stairs, xeroxing enlargements of the contact sheet, bigger and bigger, until my naked body filled the entire studio."

Avedon whispered to her, "Should we tell them what it's about?" She says she hesitated and he said, "No, it's better not to."

He was so moved that he wrote about them in an issue of *Aperture* magazine, saying she had been reborn as her fully realized self. At the time Avedon said to her, "You have moved." Physically and emotionally, Arbus had moved forward: "I had gone to this place where I had never been. The photos prove to me that if you immerse yourself in a project, your thinking and feelings will show up on film or in pixels."

Images from *Tub Pictures* are haunted with the artist's vulnerability. They are off-guard, out-of-frame, and not posed, and the water possesses an ominous eddy of uncertainty. Nothing stands between the viewer and Arbus. It is as if you are in the room with her, staring down and looking into her eyes.

For most of Arbus's career, she has chosen not to talk about her mother or her mother's work. Many writers naturally look for similarities and have wanted her to compare her own work to that of her mother's. She won't.

But she will talk about what it was like having Diane Arbus as a mother. "She was completely nontraditional and she raised me to be completely independent," she says. "I was walking to school in New York City alone by the time I was six." She says her mother was not big on cooking and made odd dishes like tuna fish soup. Her parents had separated but her father, the actor Allan Arbus, lived not far away, and every Sunday they had a family brunch and he would take her for a ride on his scooter. She was jealous of a friend's very traditional family and their nightly dinners of meat and potatoes. But her mother was fun and made life interesting. For one birthday she held a treasure hunt with clues leading Arbus to dig in the garden for her present—a pair of riding boots.



(top of facing page and above) *Tub Pictures (Self-Portraits)*, 1992

And her mother took her on a few photo shoots—one was for a fashion piece commissioned by the *New York Times*, which took place on location in Jamaica. “I was in heaven,” she says. “Mom and the art director had this little rental car full of clothing. Every time they would see a gorgeous kid they would pull over and stop.” Arbus makes a car-screaming sound for emphasis. “They would get permission, dress the kid in the fancy clothing, and take pictures in the tall grass.”

Sometimes Arbus herself was the subject of her mother’s camera.

Once, she says, her mother rented animals from a pet shop—a turtle, a salamander, and a gerbil. “We went uptown to the woods in Washington Heights. She would dress me up, comb my hair, do all the styling, and I would pose with the animals. I adored being photographed by her. It felt like so much love.”

Arbus says she had no idea her mother was depressed and thinks she may have experienced manic episodes. “I remember the highs very distinctly. I think in the lows, she would lie in her bed for hours. She said she was thinking.”

Arbus was stunned when her mother took her own life. “I think was in shock for ten years,” she says. Even in planning her death, her mother was concerned about her daughters. She planned it to take place when Arbus was away at school and Doon, her older sister, was in Europe.

Also emerging from that workshop with Avedon was Arbus’s decision to teach photography. “I would never have taught if I hadn’t worked with him. Teaching has been a huge part of my life—half of my friends are former students or colleagues. There is loneliness being shut inside a darkroom. The privacy can be agonizing when you are doing work you are not happy with because it is not evolving. That isolates you. Teaching has been defining and fascinating. I know I have really helped people make better images.”

In the ’80s, Arbus became known for her *On the Street* series in the *Village Voice*. She wandered the Village, stopping people with distinctive style and asking to photograph them. In the beginning, they often said no. But then more started to say yes. She put her subjects in sharp focus with a little blur in the background and popped a fill flash to have them stand out. She also photographed from a low angle to give them what she calls “a superhero look.” Before long, people recognized the page, so when she stopped people, they were ready for their close-ups.

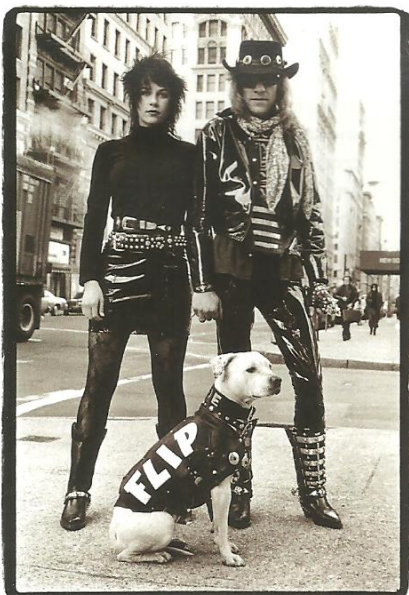
“The ’80s was an amazing time if you can forget AIDS and the political situation,” she says. “The scene I was documenting was of kids, broke, living on their own, determined to do what they felt was their calling and ambitious enough to not let anything stop them. Madonna couldn’t be a better example of that.”

The day she approached the then-unknown Madonna, the singer said, “That’s a coincidence, because the *Voice* is reviewing my first single this week.” When called for a comment that would run with her photo, Madonna said, “I still have my pajamas on.”

Arbus’s first book, *No Place Like Home*, was similar to her *On the Street* series. She looked for houses that displayed their owners’ big personas.

Her book on newborns, *The Inconvenience of Being Born*, began because all her friends were having babies and she was single and was not. “It was one after the other. One a month for nine months,” she says, and she wondered what she could give them all as a gift. The answer was a portrait of their newborn. “The infants were both scary and sweet, and angry looking,” she says. “They were completely untamed beings. They had no self-consciousness and there was no way to direct them.” She says she began to think of the pictures as music with upbeats and downbeats, and learned how to shoot when her subjects were changing expression. The portraits became a series that became a book.

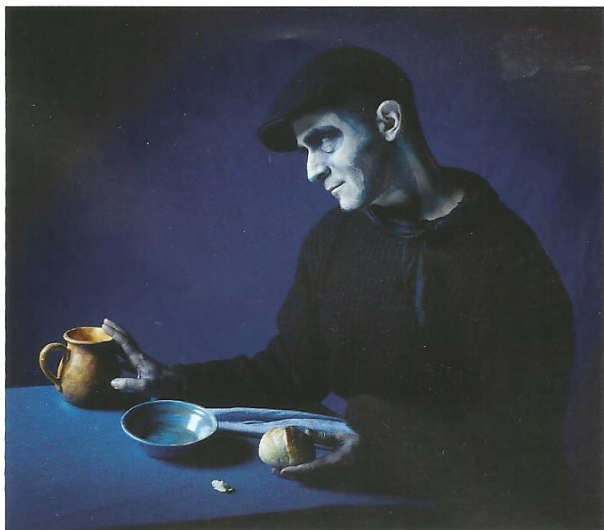
The Fourth Wall started on a visit to her dad in California. Allan and his wife, Mariclare Costello, were part of a theater group producing *Guys and Dolls*, and he asked the director if his daughter could photograph the actors in costume. She loved it and continued in New York. The concept was simple. Take an actor in full costume, take them out of the theater, and ask them to remain in character while being



On the Street (Flip Family), 1987



The Fourth Wall (Mark Povinelli and Nina Goldman/Belle Epoque), 2004



After Images (David/After Blind Man), 2012

photographed in a place that had nothing to do with the play.

"I was picking moments from the show I thought were particularly telling about the character. I would ask them to reenact a piece of the play."

As the project grew, *New York* magazine began to run her photographs with reviews of the shows. There were always rules to be followed. Actors could only go so far from the theater, and the more well-known ones had to be protected from being accosted on the street. She kept a car waiting and whisked them away. And no matter what, they needed to be back in their dressing rooms within half an hour.

A serendipitous conversation with an actor friend led to her next book, *After Images*. He had just gotten a cocker spaniel and said he thought he and the dog should be a Gustave Courbet painting. She asked which one, and he sent her Courbet's *Self Portrait with a Black Dog*. She was fascinated, and spent hours in the library looking up paintings that she might stage with real people, turning them into photographs. "I had no idea I was going to have people painted," she says. "I knew I needed painted backdrops but didn't know I'd wind up painting props, clothing, their faces, everything. So it really grew."

She worked on the project with a large crew for nine months and says, "I didn't expect the pictures to look like paintings but they do. There is an optical illusion: everything painted recedes, everything unpainted comes to the fore. Their eyes are popping out at you or their hands, whatever is unpainted."

There were problems. She couldn't source some of the clothing, her stylist couldn't do a particular era, and the cost was steep to keep all those people paid and fed for months. But the resulting book was received with critical acclaim.

Since then the concept has been copied extensively. Asked if that feels

like a compliment or makes her mad, she says, "both." When someone copies what you've done, that's not so bad, she says, but she had two projects that had to be shelved because another artist heard about it and jumped in to do the same thing, even down to pitching the same name for their book. That made her mad.

Her longest running series, *Rites and Rituals*, has covered events as diverse as a ballet school in Cuba, Irish dancers, the Puerto Rican Day Parade, Civil War reenactments, the Indian Festival in Wash-

ington Square Park, and Polish Scouts. She photographs the people ready to take part in the events, not the events themselves, remarking, "You have more access to the person when they are not in the act of being in the parade or dancing."

She did a nudist series that captures both the oddity of playing tennis in the buff and the mundane occurrence of a bunch of people sitting on a long bench, except for the fact that they're naked.

Arbus began a series she called *Goddesses*, photos of women in antique slips taken in old Victorian houses. But something was missing. She put it aside and moved on.

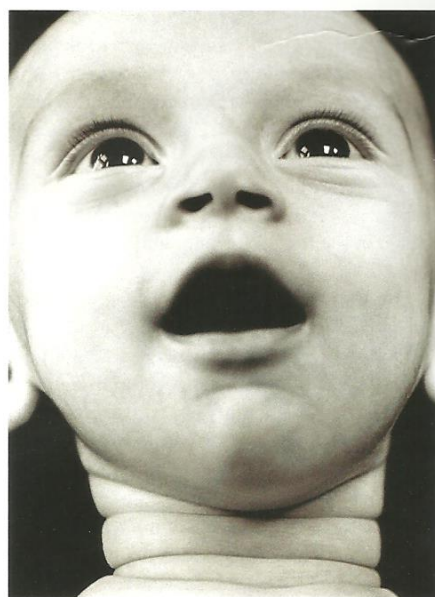
For a series titled *Prostitutes*, she shot quickly from the backseat of a taxicab, capturing working girls on the street approaching men in cars or just standing, waiting. The intensity of the night, with the starkness of streetlights and headlights against the sometimes-skimpy outfits, creates an almost voyeuristic feel of seeing what's forbidden.

The Outsiders, her series on homeless people, was shot a couple of years ago completely on

her iPhone. It signalled another change. "When Trump became president I thought, I have to do something. What can I do with my work to make a difference?"

She started by going to the Women's March in Washington, DC, but knew it wasn't her calling. The answer was right next door, literally. For twenty-four years she had seen the same homeless woman on her block. And there were many others.

"I thought, I've been walking by these people every day and nobody wants to look. If anybody can see the beauty in it, maybe I can," she says. The problem is not lack of funds to build housing for these people, but the fact that no one wants them in their neighborhood. "My point," Arbus says, "is that it is in your neighborhood, honey, whether you're looking or not.



The Inconvenience of Being Born (The Neck, NYC), 1994

"It's upsetting," she says, "but sometimes the body language is so beautiful, the way they sleep, the way they keep their belongings."

Shooting with her iPhone liberated her from taking herself too seriously and trying for that really good photograph, she says. "I was very quick and would crop them and turn them into black-and-white. But there is such gorgeous light in Washington Square Park, it's pretty poetic."

Most recently she did a collaborative work with Martha Posner. Since the early '90s, Posner's sculpture and painting has centered on women's issues of inequality, sublimation, and abuse. Lately Posner collected vintage slips and bed jackets. After the initial surge of the #MeToo movement, she began to handwrite "me too" over and over on the slips so it looks more like a pattern than words.

That turned out to be the missing part of what Arbus had been trying to



Goddesses (Kat with Screen), 2015



The Outsider Series (Cross), 2017

say with her *Goddesses* series. Posner and Arbus decided to collaborate on a work that would include the slips and bed jackets, covered in handwritten words, displayed on hangers along with portraits Arbus took of fourteen women of all shapes, sizes, and ethnicities wearing the slips. The photography was done in one day. Arbus wanted the slip-clad women to look as if they were emerging from the shadows into the light with their stories and their truths. The resulting images are vulnerable, beautiful, and evocative.

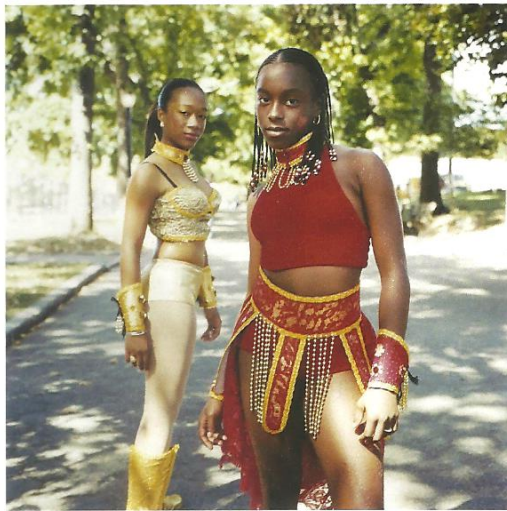
Posner asked each of the women to write down any #MeToo story they might have in a journal she brought. Three of the women burst into tears;

out of the randomly selected group, only one didn't seem to have had her own #MeToo experience.

"The tears were shocking," Arbus says. "I didn't really expect people to let themselves relive their experience with eighteen witnesses. I thought they would want to protect themselves."

Along with the portraits, Posner will handwrite the women's stories (anonymously) from the journal onto the gallery walls at their exhibitions.

Arbus says she would love to do more in this vein. The collaboration brings full circle her desire to combine the strength and beauty of women with a political message.



Rites and Rituals (Girl in Red with Yellow Behind), 2004



#MeToo Project (Regina), 2018

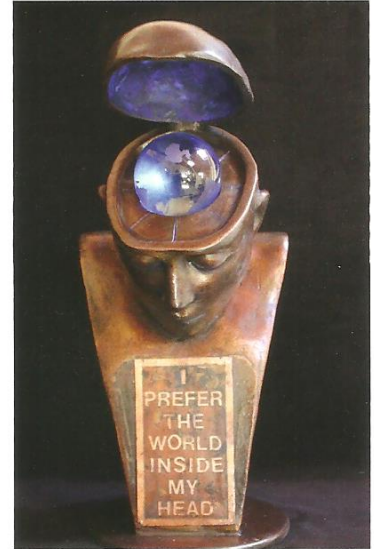
She has a method for finding out if a photo is what she hopes it was when she took it. "The test is to put it up, near your bed, and leave it there until you fall in love or you can't stand looking at it anymore, and then it goes in the box or in the trash."

Thinking of the long-ago photos from *Tub Pictures* that led to such a change in her work, she says, "The whole point of these photographs is to show people things and change the way they think about people, or themselves, or being human in the world. I just thought, I don't want to leave this planet and leave these pictures behind, so either I have to destroy them or I have to show them."

And she put them on the wall. ❧

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