

ARTFORUM

MARCH 2010

WASHINGTON, DC

Robert Bergman

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Robert Bergman's closely framed portraits of men and women exhibit finely choreographed relationships among color, spatial definition, and mood. Seen together, the pictures form a "gorgeous mosaic," to use former New York City mayor David Dinkins's felicitous phrase celebrating demographic diversity.

Bergman's subjects are strangers ("I know most of them for minutes"), and they fall within a broad spectrum of race, age, ethnicity, and economic class. The photographer has a fascination with the expressiveness of skin texture and tonality, as well as with bone structure (rarely have clavicles seemed so intriguing). He also favors the

distinct and unusual physiognomy reminiscent of some of Diane Arbus's subjects, though Bergman eschews Arbus's air of fetishized freakishness, dwelling instead on the contours of the face in order to reveal the physical expression of emotion.

In most of Bergman's works, the subject is revealed by his or her gaze. *Untitled*, 1994, for example, portrays a slender young man with close-cropped hair, beard, and mustache, an aquiline nose, and blue eyes that stare resolutely. Compositionally and atmospherically, the work recalls Petrus Christus's *Portrait of a Lady*, ca. 1470, in its simple yet declarative use of form and color, and in its treatment of the subject as both an object in space and an emotionally complex, perhaps vulnerable person. Contrasting textures of skin, clothing, and hair amplify the mood of *Untitled*, 1989, in which a grizzled, seated male with a circumspect gaze clutches two books. He appears tightly wound, ready to spring out of the picture plane. Other times, Bergman cap-

tures individuals seemingly at a moment of transfiguration, such as the grimy man in filthy clothing in *Untitled*, 1998. With his head tilted heavenward and eyes shut, he appears to be shedding everything corporeal. By contrast, *Untitled*, 1988, portrays a sinewy, elegantly dressed woman with short blond hair who seems lost in very earthly thoughts. As with all of the portraits on display at the National Gallery, Bergman reaches beyond clothing, hairstyles, and other superficialities to reveal a private self.

When I spoke recently with the garrulous and inquisitive artist, he cited many who inspire him, including Piero della Francesca, Giotto, Soutine, Bill Jensen, Cézanne, Auden and Eliot, Abstract Expressionists, the late work of Edward Weston, and Socrates (and that's a partial list). However, he cites Robert Frank's book *The Americans* (1959) as perhaps his single most important influence, not because Bergman wants to imitate Frank but, the artist says, because Frank "confirmed my own instincts, both temperamental and aesthetic, about the type of work I wanted to create . . . art that dealt not with a life of reason, but with life as it's felt."

Although Bergman describes his creative process as "always irrational and intuitive . . . not analyzable," his prints are meticulously planned, involving numerous ink-jet applications and the use of custom varnishes. The luminous results are intoxicating color studies. (By contrast, C-prints of the same images exhibited at Yossi Milo Gallery and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, both in New York, have less of the depth, subtlety, and luster of the ink jets.) Exemplifying Bergman's mastery of color, form, composition, and texture (and collarbones) is *Untitled*, 1994, featuring a freckle-faced young woman with a high forehead. Gauzy bands of blue, purple, and magenta in the background strengthen the outlines of her captivatingly angular face and augment her haunting stare: a fleeting moment Bergman has rendered with a jeweler's precision.

—Nord Wennerstrom



Robert Bergman.
Untitled, 1989,
color photograph,
23% x 15%.