



Cult Figure Exhibits Vivid Shots

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Sixty-five-year-old photographer Robert Bergman has been using a camera since he was 6, but he had never sold a single piece of work until two years ago. On Monday, however, his career gets a big boost, as his first solo exhibition is set to open at the National Gallery of Art.

Curated by Sarah Greenough, this intimate exhibition consists of about 30 untitled color prints of ordinary Americans, mostly in urban settings. Working without any lighting or special equipment aside from his 35mm camera, Bergman points his lens at ordinary people — and in the process, he has assembled a mélange of portraiture as diverse as America itself.

“He has been offered shows in the past,” Greenough noted. “I think he’s someone who wanted to make sure that his work was seen in the right context.” Indeed, for much of his career, Bergman remained a cult figure working in obscurity whose work nevertheless impressed a handful of influential critics and curators.

Beginning as a black-and-white photographer, he switched to color in 1985 and never went back. Citing Swiss-born photographer Robert Frank and his seminal book of photography “The Americans” as a profound influence, Bergman presents a series of mainly portraiture of ordinary Americans, taken during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Like Frank’s, the subjects of his work cross class, racial, gender and geographic barriers.

“Unlike a lot of the other so-called street photographers,” Greenough said, “Bergman increasingly sought out quiet, often contemplative moments to reveal the humanity of the people in front of the camera.”

“They’re very conscious that their picture is being taken,” Greenough said. “He concentrates on their very penetrating gazes, downcast eyes or sometimes a great sense of introspection to make a series of photographs that really speaks about individuals.”

It’s no surprise that his photographs crackle with the personalities of his subjects. Moreover, he’s a master at framing each image to provide just enough of the background.

Bergman’s models remain cloaked in anonymity. Aside from the year of the photograph, not even a hint of biographical detail about the subject is included. A few of the men have the pallor and world-weariness of the homeless, but it is impossible to say for certain.

The remarkable part of the exhibition is how little such context matters. In an exhibit that focuses on each subject’s individuality, age, occupation and location are largely unnecessary. Rather, they’re distinguished by their poses, their manner of dress and their facial expressions.

At the same time, the lack of context makes Bergman’s show uniquely difficult to describe. There’s a photograph of one man whose frenzied hair matches his wild stare. Another woman’s defining feature is an ugly scar on her cheek. Mostly, however, Bergman’s photographs capture people in all their difficult and messy complexity and

defy easy description.

In addition to the art installation, a corresponding event is scheduled for Nov. 1 at 2 p.m., when author Toni Morrison is scheduled to give a reading of her essay "The Fisherwoman," which she composed as an introduction for Bergman's 1998 book, "A Kind of Rapture." Advanced tickets are not required, but the event is expected to draw a crowd and space is limited to a first-come, first-served basis.

The exhibition runs through Jan. 10.

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