

Robert Bergman, Emerging From The Darkroom

by CLAIRE O'NEILL



Robert Bergman

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Until recently, the artist-photographer Robert Bergman has been almost completely off the radar — no exhibitions, very few reviews, just the one book, published back in 1998.

Now, though, he's "springing out of the head of Zeus like Athena" — his words, by which he means he's showing his work. And not just anywhere: Bergman has concurrent exhibitions at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and at P.S.1, the Museum of Modern Art's Contemporary Art Center in New York City.

"What's really extraordinary about Bob's work is the way he presents people," says Sarah Greenough, the exhibition curator at the National Gallery. And Bergman has photographed a lot of people since he began his visual-arts career in New Orleans at the age of 6.

"Scopophilia was encouraged in my family," he explains. "My father was an eye doctor. He brought home microscopes, telescopes, cameras — and yeah, I loved taking pictures."

Bergman's work runs along the lines of street photography: color portraiture, intimate and in some cases difficult to look at.

"He's not catching people unaware," says Greenough, but instead "gives that person time to compose themselves."

That kind of photography — those intimate, closeup street portraits — can sometimes seem clichéd or even moralizing, like photos of the disadvantaged that just make us feel helpless.

And at first glance, Bergman's photographs may not seem that different: an emaciated man looks pensively to the side; an old woman with frizzy gray hair stares directly at the lens, directly at us. These photos all have something in common, and it seems to be the usual commentary on class.

But among these subjects, according to Bergman, "there's a housewife, there are three artists, there are two actors, an affluent owner of



Enlarge
Untitled, 1989

Robert Bergman

a bar; there's the son of a millionaire and the granddaughter of a billionaire."

Still, you can't tell who's who — and Bergman won't say. He makes a point of including very little information in his photographs: no captions, no titles, no names. He doesn't even include the scene. The photos are tightly centered around the face, and that's what makes them slightly uncomfortable: They're the life-size faces of people most of us usually overlook, or think we have all figured out.

On one hand, Bergman's photographs are simply about really looking at people. But if you ask him, he'll say they're about art.

"I'm an artist," he says. "I'm not a social scientist. I'm not a do-gooder. I'm not a documentarian. I'm not a journalist." Just an artist.

He's also, according to Greenough, "an absolute perfectionist in everything he does."

And maybe that's what makes his photos worthy of an exhibition after all these years: the simple fact that they're crafted so artfully. His printing process, for example, is one of a kind. He uses — again, his words — "multiple impression inkjets with various isolation coats of conservator chemicals used to intensify the colors, some of them with three days of hand-applied micro-crystal and waxes over the isolation coats."

In other words, it's very complicated and time-intensive. Which shows that he's not only a perfectionist, but also very patient.

He waited over a year for Toni Morrison to agree to write the introduction to his book, *A Kind of Rapture*, because he believed she was the only one suited for the job. And he waited more than 14 years for these exhibitions.

"I've learned in life that waiting pays," Bergman says. That lesson is simple enough. And there's another one at the heart of Bergman's work. As he puts it, with appropriate simplicity: "I like pictures of people."

So watch out, art world, because Bergman is finally making his way onto the scene. Like Athena leaping out of Zeus' head — or something like that.

