

FEATURE

The 65-Year-Old Virgin

Robert Bergman's photographs, finally revealed.

By [Miranda Siegel](#) Published Nov 1, 2009

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(Photo: Robert Bergman. © Robert Bergman and courtesy of the artist and Yossi Milo Gallery, New York)

The last time Robert Bergman had a gallery show, it was 1964, and he was 20 years old. The college dropout and his best friend, Danny Seymour, took their earliest photographs, produced in a “lint-filled darkroom”—a.k.a. his mother’s laundry room—to a “rinky-dink bookstore” in Minneapolis’s run-down West Bank. “Me and Danny just threw some pictures up on the wall,” he says. “You couldn’t even call that a show.”

Bergman is 65 now, and making a real debut in not one but three venues, at [P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center](#); Chelsea’s [Yossi Milo Gallery](#); and, extraordinarily, the National Gallery of Art. (This is the National Gallery’s first artist’s debut show *ever*.) Although he received a little attention in 1998, when Pantheon published a collection of his photos, he’s spent most of his career avoiding the markers of success. “This curator offered me a one-man show when I was in my early twenties, which I turned down. He thought I had a mature vision, but I didn’t feel ready.” At one point in the seventies, wealthy collectors who were helping Bergman out financially began to meddle in his process, whereupon, he says, “I decided to just drop out of sight and not relate to the art world.” When people called to buy prints, he’d claim to be someone else, to make them go away. “I just didn’t fit in. I’m the obverse of a careerist: so isolated, so neurotic, so despairing, so tormented with various obsessions.”

Bergman makes portraits of everyday people, shooting on 35-mm. film with natural light and unaltered surroundings. His subjects project an inner radiance that never feels cheap or treacherous. “It really is about them,” says Bergman. “I don’t have any special talents. I just catch these people in the act. In my opinion, the artist should just get the hell out of the way. It’s about the images; it’s the right moment for them to be entering the world.” Yossi Milo, his dealer, agrees: “There’s a great eagerness for this type of work. Something about the current atmosphere or economic situation—people are hungry for a strong emotional connection, a psychological impact.”

The core of all three shows is the set of lush, painterly portraits he took during an extended U.S. road

trip, from 1985 to 1997. "It's hard to say what drew me to certain people—I guess I saw my own vulnerabilities in them," Bergman says. "Only a few people out of thousands said no."

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