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Robert Bergman, New York and Washington

By Ariella Budick

The 65-year-old photographer Robert Bergman, who hasn't exhibited his work in 40 years, is suddenly everywhere. P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Chelsea's Yossi Milo Gallery and the National Gallery of Art in Washington have all mounted overlapping solo shows (although you will have to move fast to see them: they close early next month). It is an astounding roll-out for an artist who had only ever sold a couple of pictures in his entire career. Bergman spent those fruitful decades of obscurity stalking the streets of American cities with a Nikon 35mm camera, shooting derelicts, madmen, drug addicts and religious fanatics along with run-of-the-mill losers. The few who don't haunt society's margins reinforce the feeling that his sitters are deeply, irretrievably lost.

"You see someone on the street, and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw," Diane Arbus wrote a few decades ago. Bergman gravitates towards people whose imperfections bubble a little closer to the surface, whose emotional and physical scars disclose themselves to his pitiless lens. He homes in on the lesion, the wound, the fleshy protrusion or the emaciated jaw, the unfocused or paranoid gaze – all the loose threads of psychic unravelling.

Like Arbus, Bergman attends to people who are usually shunned or ignored, appraising them with an aesthete's eye. Whether he feels empathy, curiosity or even revulsion is anyone's guess. He keeps his intense scrutiny focused on his subjects, and his emotions to himself.

That close observation pays off in technical marvels. With nothing but his handheld camera and available light, he creates monuments of accumulated detail. A man with green eyes and a scruffy beard recalls Abraham Lincoln at the end of his life, burdened by war and fatigue. This fellow, too, wears the weight of life upon his face; it pouches the skin around his eyes and corrugates his forehead. His finely sculpted features emerge from a blurred background as if breaking through a watery surface to reveal themselves in shocking clarity.

Bergman's portraits look like paintings. During his long incubation period, he took the time to study art history, and it shows. In their gravitas, some subjects recall mourners in a Renaissance deposition; characters usually shunted to the periphery of a teeming tragedy become icons of sorrow.

Bergman may have been largely invisible, but he has enjoyed a long-simmering reputation among a handful of curators and art world potentates. In 1998, he published a book of his photographs, *A Kind of Rapture*, and cajoled the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison to write the introduction. She demurred, stalled, then finally gushed: "One by one, each photograph unveils us, asserting a beauty, a kind of rapture, that is as close as can be to a master template of the singularity, the community, the unextinguishable sacredness of the human race."

Morrison's encomiums do Bergman a disservice. This is one of those times when the rhetoric around a picture can blind us to what is before our eyes. The more powerful the image, the deeper verbal descriptions tend to sink into cliché. Bergman has belatedly arrived before the public, borne on a ceaseless stream of platitudes. An essay by David Levi Strauss in the P.S.1 catalogue, for example, calls his portraits "the true physical and spiritual embodiment of our common humanity and ultimate vulnerability". It's a pity that those in control of his current debut have chosen to frame him as a humanist priest, rather than as the jaundiced realist he turns out to be.

Bergman's technique is fine enough to provoke normally cautious curators into throwing around comparisons with Rembrandt – which would be all right if it didn't involve simultaneously romanticising both the New Orleans-born photographer and the Old Master himself. In an essay in the P.S.1 catalogue, Phong Bui describes Rembrandt's self-portraits with Morrisonian heat: "He saw his flesh, with all its firm purpose, displaying the flaws of his character and the ruins of his life. He saw his presence whole, a spectacle of a self-destroyed man. He saw his own searching eyes penetrating into the human soul."

The thing is, Rembrandt was also a highly skilled manipulator, a theatrical genius who mimed melancholy and fashioned an aura of

truth around his subjects. In the same vein, Bergman's formal flair creates an illusion of psychic depth. It would be a mistake to read such carefully constructed artworks as mere reporting of fact. They are photographs of actual people, but also extraordinary inventions.

With his eye for specificity, Bergman doesn't need the specious claims of universality, but he does tacitly encourage them. He plies us with no titles, provides no background on the *dramatis personae*, and no indication as to where his men and women were born, which towns they inhabit or how they make their living. Their stories don't matter, only their masks, and behind them the mute characters whose complexities we are asked to intuit.

'Robert Bergman: Selected Portraits' is at P.S.1 until January 4, tel +1 718 784 2084; *'Robert Bergman: A Kind of Rapture'* is at Yossi Milo Gallery until January 9, tel +1 212 414 0370; *'Robert Bergman: Portraits, 1986-1995'* is at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, until January 10, tel +1 202 737 4215

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