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REVISIONS

REVISIONS; A City Impinges, Through a Lens, Not Always Darkly

By Margo Jefferson

If you surfed, sat through or tuned in, turned on and dropped out of the high and mighty PBS mastodon "American Photography: A Century of Images" last week, you probably also went rifling through your collection of photography books, craving images you knew would delight you and looking for those that asked something new of you.

I found them side by side in Berenice Abbott, so very well known, and in Robert Bergman, whose first book was published just last year. Between them, since they are masters of their art and craft, I found two ways of looking at city life. Abbott's permits us freedom from human insistence and centrality. She sees the city as an architectural and material ecosystem of which we are just one part. Mr. Bergman's way demands full acknowledgment of each face, body and soul you encounter. You may be moved; you may be repelled or unsettled. Acknowledgment can be deeply ambivalent. But he denies you the right to feel wholly estranged or safely apart from anyone.

Abbott photographed the neighborhoods of New York City, (sidewalks, skyscrapers, buses, bridges and every kind of house) for the Works Progress Administration between 1935 and 1939. She called her project "Changing New York," and two years ago the Museum of the City of New York and The New Press collected this work and published it in a big, altogether beautiful book. Of course it's no more just about New York than her mentor Eugene Atget's work was just about Paris. Rather it is about how we live in (and with) an artificial world -- the city -- that is as intricate and overpowering, as impervious to our will, despite being designed by us, as the natural world.

"How shall the two-dimensional print in black and white suggest the flux of activity of the metropolis, the interaction of human beings and solid architectural constructions, all impinging upon each other in time?" she wrote in 1936. The beauty is in the impinging. A woman in a dark coat holds the hands of two children in light coats, as they walk past a light frame house in Greenwich Village.

Their posture, clothing and steps are, momentarily, as clean and symmetrical as the wood frames, the iron fence and the shuttered windows. Well, one child is a little shorter than the other. But the rug over

the fire escape hangs a bit crookedly, too.

Abbott switched cameras, mixed styles (documentary abstraction, documentary realism) and changed her angle of vision constantly. Take three views of the Triborough Bridge. In the first, "East 125th Street Approach," we move with the cars. There's a steamboat on one side, and there's a toy-town quality to everything. We might as well be entering a life-size version of those miniature towns with elaborate bridges and trains that people build in their rec rooms.

In the second we see a lone car dwarfed by the massive robot limbs of steel girders. The third photograph, taken on the suspension span of the bridge, shows us slender cables that rise into the air like pencil-point columns. There can be no doubt that we have been invited into an imperial arena. (A \$60 million one at that, masterminded by Robert Moses.)

Abbott's sense of form and purity of intent make her a kind of urban utopian. A line of Greyhound buses diagonally parked in a terminal could be horses in a stable settled down for the night. Seen from above, the Rockefeller Center parking lot filled with cars looks like a concrete field of cows.

Signs like "Broke -- Call on Uncle" (the local pawnbroker) or "Flam & Flam: Lawyers" have a life of their own even without human activity. So does the name "August Pingpank: Barber" on a window, behind which the tools of his trade sit waiting. They have life thanks to the arrangement of light and shadow and, of course, shape. But Abbott gives them something more. There is no longer a line between animate and inanimate in her New York. The things we made have as much power over us as we once had over them.

The people in Abbott's photographs, working, sitting, walking down the street, are just another part of the whole. The people in Robert Bergman's photographs make everything else fall away. We are in the presence of the overwhelmingly human -- the face, the body, the soul -- and there is no escape.

For the last 10 years Mr. Bergman has traveled through the cities of the Midwest and the East by car, taking photographs of anyone who moved him. These are struggling people; some have gone beyond struggling. The faces are avid, stricken, self-dramatizing, bent on some kind of transcendence or on the edge of self-obliteration. They are aging and shriveled, young and pimpled, occasionally utterly pure. And all are caught at a moment when they seem to be seeing everything life has already taken from them or anticipating what it might still try to get.

Mr. Bergman's colors are intense, almost lurid. And I use that word to mean fierce and jolting not sensational or ghoulish. They made me recall this line from Louise Bogan: "Everything human glitters fever-bright." And this short poem, also hers:

Pasture, stone wall, and steeple,

What most perturbs the mind:

The heart-rending homely people,

Or the horrible beautiful kind?

Mr. Bergman works with a plain old 35-millimeter camera and without special lighting devices, but he has devised his own method for color separations, and these reproductions are uncannily beautiful. Texture is everything: the texture of hair, (bushy, fine, dirty, clean, dry, greasy), the porcelain of the crooked teeth that remain in a damaged mouth, the weight of two big bejeweled rings, the thickness of eyeliner on a pure-faced girl. You can almost feel the scraggly bristles of one man's beard and gauge the thickness of his once-decent sweater, which will be nothing but rags soon enough. And what is in this man's face? Grief, pure and simple.

Mr. Bergman is silent about his work (the pictures are untitled), but in an afterword the art critic Meyer Shapiro writes of his freedom from the conventions of any period style, and of how he scrutinizes faces for individuality and for thoughts that lie too deep for tears: "otherwise unsoundable pervasive states and particular moments of feeling."

The book, published by Pantheon, is called "A Kind of Rapture." The title troubled me at first. There's too much suffering here for that, I thought. But rapture isn't only a state of ecstasy, it is the act of being carried away, taken to another place, another way of feeling and seeing. It is the desire not to turn away in the face of something that might terrify or overpower you.

Photo:"Triborough Bridge: East 125th Street" by Berenice Abbott, who saw the city as a system of which humans are just a part. From "Berenice Abbott's Changing New York"(New Press)