

REVIEW

Volume 22

Number 2

Spring 1999

Rita Bernstein**Photographs: Friends and Families**

by HELENE RYESKY

Six years ago, Rita Bernstein gave up a successful 14-year career as a civil rights lawyer to become a photographer. Trading in the adversarial work of the courtroom, Bernstein is now free to focus on the complexities and ambiguities of everyday life. Rather than arguing, she discloses.

"Friends and Family," the recent exhibition of her work at the Noyes Museum in Oceanville, New Jersey, demonstrates that Bernstein has mastered the medium quickly. A stunning display of photographs from four different series, this exhibition features earlier images in which family members served as models and more recent work, in which she turns to strangers for her subject matter. Throughout, Bernstein explores the intricacies inherent in human relationships.

Take, for instance, the beautiful photographs from the "Domestic Landscape" series. In each of these images, Bernstein creates a painterly study in dark and light. In one, a young girl sits on the edge of a bed, with her face downcast and turned to the side. In the shadow behind her lies a young boy, but all you see of him are his bare feet and jeans. The girl's expression and her body language speak clearly of sadness, rejection, and vulnerability — themes that recur throughout Bernstein's work.

In another image from the "Domestic Landscape" series, Bernstein gives us a family triangle: a boy stands in the background, while his father and sister sit at the table eating spaghetti. A folded napkin, a glass half full of milk, and a plate underscore the sense of separation. In a similar image — this from the "Porch Life" series — Bernstein presents another domestic triangle: a girl, finger in her mouth,

stands leaning on her father, who is seated in a rocking chair, engrossed in the sports page. In front of the screen door, a young boy stands apart from them. Although literally in the picture itself, he seems emotionally very much out of the picture.

The work from the "Eagles Mere" series and the "Urban Parks" series signal a shift away from Bernstein's circle of family and friends. With great sensitivity and concern for her subjects, she has turned her camera to strangers. One image, depicting two daughters carefully grooming their mother's hair, perfectly captures the love and tenderness in the girls' hands and faces, while another shows a frightened child, standing alone and crying in the middle of a cobblestoned walkway, as five adults sitting nearby direct their attention elsewhere.

Likewise, *Train to New York* focuses on the ambiguities of the human

Taken together, Bernstein's photographs form a single vision that isn't limited to childhood. They speak to all of us about exclusion, vulnerability, rejection, and tenderness.



Rita Bernstein: Untitled from the *Domestic Landscape* series



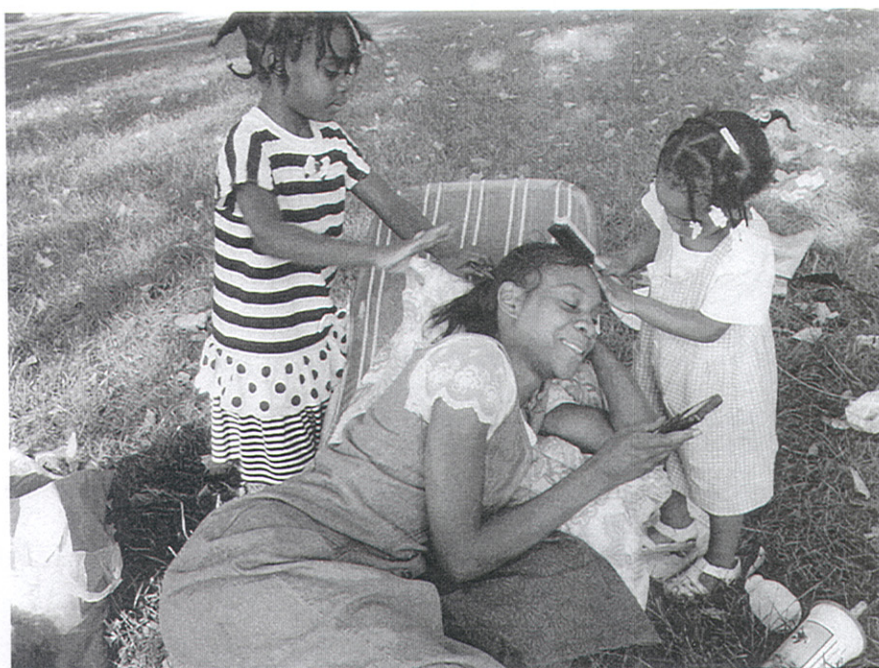
Rita Bernstein: Untitled from the *Porch Life* series

condition. Strikingly reminiscent of Daumier's *The Third-Class Carriage*, this image catches a familiar scene: a child sleeping on the train. But as you study it closely, what at first seems a charming picture takes on a disturbing air. You begin to wonder: Where is the mother? Is the man who sits nearby indeed the child's father?

The Noyes exhibition — the photographer's first major solo exhibition — serves her well. Certain of these images — so many of which de-

pict children — have been seen individually in various group shows. Seen in bits and pieces, her work has seemed to consist of sensitive images of children. But taken together, they form a single vision that isn't limited to childhood. They speak to all of us about exclusion, vulnerability, rejection, and tenderness. ■

Helene Ryesky is a regular contributor to *Art Matters* and *Art Matters Magazine* as well as to *The Photo Review*.



Rita Bernstein: Untitled from the *Urban Parks* series