



Friday, October 23 2009

PERSPECTIVE: Portrait Photography at Gallery 339

City Paper welcomes Jonathan Wallis, assistant professor of art history at Moore College of Art and Design, to our Critical Mass team. His column, Perspective, will run monthly in this space, bringing a critical eye to a visual art scene that continues to thrive in Philadelphia. Questions? E-mail Wallis at jswallis@gmail.com.

The current exhibition at Gallery 339, **“Personal Views: Contemporary Photographic Portraiture in Philadelphia,”** brings together the work of six photographers who, by unintended chance through the selection process for the exhibition, are all women. It is a result worth noting, however, and the range of creative and well-crafted portraiture in the show is a testament to the vanguard presence of women photographers in the Philadelphia art community.

Jessica Todd Harper’s portraits in suburban backyards and interiors are quietly present, with long exposures and a sensitivity to backlighting that permits the eye to comprehend the subjects through an ethereal filter. There is no missing the fact that Harper’s background is steeped with interests in Western art history, most notably Dutch Baroque and Renaissance painting, and these traces are present but reworked to a new, original purpose in the works in the show

Andrea Modica’s portraits of Sicilian and Umbrian life are nothing other than stunning. Exquisite craftsmanship and flawless technique combine with Modica’s talent for spotting a latent modernity in rustic Italy, and she turns the ordinary into something extraordinary. This is proof that photography does not always need clever strategies of engagement or digital bells and whistles to have merit as a contemporary mode of art.

Rita Bernstein’s portraits on the second floor are a turn away from much of the other work in the show. If anything they share something of the ethereal experience and painterly references present in Harper’s images but in smaller scale, black-and-white hand-produced prints (*Awaiting Matthew’s* oblique angle reminds me of Mantegna’s *Dead Christ*). But **Bernstein’s artistic voice speaks sensually through the formal vocabulary of photography:** a hazy, soft light (not unlike some of Gertrude Kasebier’s photographs), emotive gestures and camera angles encourage voyeuristic intrusions on private moments that reveal little of the identities of the subjects, all to great effect. Many of the images offer views of intimate relationships between two figures where one appears as a definite physical presence and another as an intangible companion. This is accomplished through a reflection or an effect of blurring the figure, and it results in a secondary figure that might suggest its presence as thought alone in the mind of the primary sitter. Bernstein’s work reminds me of Susan Sontag’s *Against Interpretation*; I recover my senses. I feel more.