

Ambiguity explored in photography show

PHOTOGRAPHY S E E N

by Helene Ryesky

Rita Bernstein is following her bliss. She gave up a successful 14-year career as a lawyer who specialized in civil rights and sex discrimination cases in order to become a photographer. "Maybe if I didn't have this passion to do something else, I wouldn't have had the nerve," she explained.

She found that practicing law was a very adversarial type of activity in which her job was to convince the judge that things are absolutely one way. This was at odds with her temperament because she always saw complexities and ambiguities in the cases. Rather than arguing, she prefers disclosing. "It became apparent that the core of a lawyer's pursuit was really at odds with who I am." And so for the past six years Rita Bernstein has been using photography to explore and reveal the ambiguities in everyday life.

Bernstein's "Friends and Families," a stunning display of photographs from four different series, demonstrates that she has mastered the medium quickly and has put it to use to illuminate human relationships. The exhibition also indicates the changes from use of her family for models to photographing people in outdoor settings.

"Ambiguity" harks back to her years as a lawyer and is the operant word in her work. Take, for instance, the beautiful photographs, untitled, from the "Domestic Landscape" series. Each photograph is like a painterly study in darkness and light. Of the 13 on exhibit, 10 were set in a bedroom. In one photograph, a young girl is seated on the edge of the bed, her downcast face is turned to the side. In the shadow behind her you see only the bare feet and jeans of a young boy. In this and all of the photographs the expressions and the body language speak clearly of universal sadness, rejection and vulnerability. And the language is not limited to childhood, but clearly resonates for every age.

Bernstein explained that the photographs are never posed. "It is planned in the sense that we would decide we were going to do this. But what exactly happened is never planned. To me, it is really an inquiry."

Three photographs from

the "Domestic Landscape" series depict people eating, either at home or in a restaurant. Again, it is the relationships that come through. There is always a sense of separation. In one, the boy is in the background, the father and daughter are seen eating spaghetti at a table where a folded napkin, a glass half full of milk and a plate signal an ambiguous message.

The relationships continue in the five images from the "Porch Life" series.

Here, in another domestic triangle, the girl, finger in her mouth, stands leaning on her dad, who is seated in a rocking chair. He is totally engrossed reading the sports page, while the boy stands alone in front of the screen door. The boy is fully in the picture, yet seems out of the picture.

In five photographs at Eagles Mere, and eight more from the "Urban Parks" series, Bernstein demonstrates her innate sensitivity and her ability to photograph people who have been previously unknown to her. She does this unobtrusively and with great concern for her subjects. A superb example is of a mother and her two daughters who are seen carefully grooming the mother's hair. Bernstein has captured love and tenderness in their faces and in the caressive expressions of their hands.

At the other end of the spectrum, a starkly moving image from the "Urban Parks" series shows a frightened, angry young child. He stands alone, crying,

unattended, in the middle of a cobblestoned walkway while five adults sit on benches behind him, their attention elsewhere.

"Train to New York" is a singularly striking example of ambiguities. To see it is to fall back more than 100 years to Daumier's "The Third Class Carriage" and see the human condition and a lonely crowd. Bernstein catches the familiar scene — a sleeping child, this time with pacifier, riding on a train. Ambiguity is rampant. What at first seems to be a charming picture of a child asleep on a train begins to make you wonder why the mother is not there too. You could even wonder whether the man is the child's father.

Using camera and film, Rita Bernstein has found a way to illuminate human relationships and share her vision with a broad audience. Measuring from 5" x 7" to 9" x 12", the black-and-white gelatin silver images invite close attention.

Each photograph tells a story and, without exception, whoever looks into Bernstein's photographs sees something different.

While some of her photographs have been exhibited separately, seeing so many together makes a profound revelation. They are no longer merely sensitive images of children, about childhood. Though most of the models are children, the issues are truly about exclusion, vulnerability, rejection and tenderness in human relationships.

If you go

The Noyes Museum of Art - Rita Bernstein: "Photographs: Friends and Families" Through May 2. Lily Lake Road, Oceanville, New Jersey. Hours: Wed.-Sun., 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and by appointment. Phone: 609-652-8848.



Untitled photograph from "Urban Parks" series © Rita Bernstein