ARTFUL DODGE

A Conversation with
Vaclav Havel

Questioning the Photograph:
Shelley T. Fuller, Jane Alden Stevens,
and Carrie Lyn Peterson

Questioning the Photograph: Shelley T. Fuller, Jane Alden Stevens, and Carrie Lyn Peterson

CAPTURING CEREMONIES SMALL and large—first steps, lost teeth, opened presents, marriages, vacations, proms—family pictures are the common genre of photographic experience. Given our eagerness to pose in front of the lens, they even provide frequently their own occasion for ceremony. In aggregate, they constitute a portrait of who we are and what we want our lives to be, and, if they endure long enough, they may become the hieroglyphics of our culture, fodder for the archaeologists of the future. But what do our photographs preserve? In a world where art and information become increasingly orchestrated, it is a danger that self-identity becomes over-codified as well. What do these seemingly spontaneous and self-crafted images show about us? Do they chart our own specific journeys, or are they visual myths, through whose creation (and subsequent viewing) we participate in a culturally-created ritualistic "seeing."

The three artists represented in this portfolio—Shelley T. Fuller, Jane Alden Stevens and Carrie Lyn Peterson—all seem to share the existence of the personal photo as a common visual language in their own questioning of not only the conventions of photographs, but of personal and cultural identity as well.

For example, in Shelley T. Fuller's work, the celebration of everyday events within the family unit seems to involve fragmented action and random posing instead of formal grouping. There is no air of self-satisfaction and celebration, no proverbial saying of "Cheese!" If the family snapshot's function is to attempt to fix a substantial part of one's identity not only in relation to family and friends but also to the surrounding society, what happens when these overriding structures become harder and harder to define? What is family, community? Part of the impetus for Fuller to turn the camera on family life in the way she does is that the family unit is no longer the incontestable, unitary model it once seemed to be. Contemporary life fills the territory of the family with countless possibilities: extended families, second families, families of origin, nonrelational families, even pet families. In such a world, the urge to explore one's own type of family and to re-envision what it represents is almost inevitable. And, just as we cannot afford to dismiss these complexities linguistically (to no longer speak of broken homes, for instance, but of single-parent families), we need to search for a way of visually apprehending such an open-ended situation, where personal identity might represent the basic unit of

stability in a world increasingly plagued by dislocation and atomization.

By using a panoramic camera, Jane Alden Stevens produces a radically oblong 5" x 14" image, treating the photograph as an illusionistic space and creating a world that exists only for the photograph. Blurring the line between what is posed and what is spontaneous, her pictures look like simulations rather than true snapshots. Stevens is interested in depicting one's private environment as well as heritage—which reflects a widespread need to understand more clearly who we are and where we came from, but also emphasizes the complexities and discontinuities of such a enterprise. This is why her pictures transgress the borders of polite convention; she uses her camera to probe into deep and subtle connections, into possibilities, not to affirm the already known.

Instead of claiming that human experience is essentially the same no matter where it occurs, Fuller and Stevens acknowledge that differences exist among us and that they are often rooted in the photographic experience of family. But the process of exploring questions of how we identity ourselves through photographs may take on vastly different forms. Although Carrie Lyn Peterson's subjects seem to exist by themselves, involving images only of the face and hand, there is still a strong sensitivity present as to the complexity of identity. For one, Peterson utilizes the formal strategy of incorporating many photographs into one work. But, rather than being representations that are pieced together to make a complete scene or combined to form a mosaic, these works hit the viewer abruptly—raw data on the verge of being taxonomic display, much like scientifically organized collections of specimens. Indeed, each of the pieces seems to be self-contained, almost solipsistic in its concentration on one individual. But, taken together, they evoke a sense of anthropological or even archaeological method, an examination of the mythos of identification. As with Fuller and Stevens, Peterson has produced work that expresses a complicated position towards both the photograph and the process of interpretation, leading the viewer away from easy classification and forcing us to explore the role of the snapshot as a means of apprehending identity.—*Susan Hansen, Enfield, Connecticut, August 4, 1994*

Jane Alden Stevens

Artistic Statement

I HAVE BECOME particularly interested in juxtaposing people and objects in unexpected ways since 1985, when I first started shooting with a turn-of-the-century panoramic camera. The elongated format of the negative lends itself well to my kind of psychological portraiture by allowing more than one "event" to take place within the scene. Additionally, I find that making pictures in isolated environments fosters my creativity and enhances the introspective atmosphere of my work.

The panoramic camera I use is an Al Vista Model 5D that originally belonged to my great-grandfather. The camera is loaded with a sheet of 5" x 14" film which lies in an arc along the back of the camera. A small viewfinder sits on top of the camera and swivels in order to reveal the full image in front of the camera. When ready to make the exposure, the lens is wound up and, when released, swings in a roughly 170 degree arc to take the picture. The film is then developed and contact-printed to produce the final image.

Since such a process is so slow and deliberate, it is impossible to take truly candid portraits. What seems to work is to keep an eye out for places and activities that seem to lend themselves to the creation of layered meanings. Also, although we discuss the shots beforehand, my subjects are free to pretty much do what they want in front of my camera, the only requirement being that they freeze in place while the lens takes twelve seconds to make its pass across the scene. Collaborating with my subjects (in this case, family and friends) makes the pictures a result of many minds, enabling all of us to weave together our picture-making ideas into an overall narrative fabric. In this way, the final images become invested with an enigmatic mix of fiction and nonfiction, of playfulness and power.

(*All original images are silver gelatin contact prints, 5" x 14."*)

Muscle Girl

Bandage Boy

Freeman Defying the Future

Dick's Wood Pile

Sarah with Skull

Welcome