

Dona Ann McAdams: Some Women

We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort... looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.

Port Huron Statement

Dona Ann McAdams grew up in that particular time and place that was the 1960s on Long Island, NY. At the time of her rearing Long Island was dominated by former urban dwellers who had moved to the suburbs to provide their children a less hectic environment, relative safety, clean air, green grass and good schools. The part of Long Island where McAdams grew-up was very much a littoral zone. Lake Ronkonkoma was between the overwhelming suburban sprawl of Western Long Island and the bucolic fields and farms of Eastern Long Island. The train to Manhattan took under an hour and the drive out to Southampton about the same. The photo of her family's living room (Lake Ronkonkoma, 1976) informs us of modest comfort and apparent normalcy. Noting the plastic slip cover on the couch and the accumulation of tchotchkes we also can understand some of her urge to escape.

McAdams left home in 1973 heading to the West Coast. Within a year of arriving in San Francisco she purchased her first Leica camera. Photography provided McAdams a means to be a specific part of significant things, to preserve their appearance and to present them to us as part of her experience that insinuates into our perceptions. Her work grew directly out of the traditions of documentary and street photography. She shot with Gary Winogrand and Henry Wessel Jr. She knew the work of Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, and Tina Modotti. In Geary Street, San Francisco of 1975 we can already see the influence of her mentors being surpassed by her own sensibility.

Dona Ann McAdams is an activist and a woman – these are the core which informs all of her work. When she mentions her Leica as a weapon she is referring to both its handiness "...on the side of someone's head" as well as a tool for creating persuasive images. McAdams is deeply knowledgeable of the history of photography and especially as it was transformed by individuals embracing the fluidity of the Leica camera. Her work does not create a new language, but reinterprets a photographic language developed and practiced mostly by men. Her grammar may be masculine, but her vocabulary is decidedly feminine.

McAdams is a passionately engaged participant and recorder. She recognizes something as significant, frames it and presents it to us in a manner in which it seems natural and deeply human. The person or action in the photograph is significant in its own terms, not wholly reliant on its appearance in the photograph. This is central to the power of her work and particularly evident in her performance work. McAdams seeks to convey experience in the world not of the world. She is a participant as well as an

observer. She is bearing witness such as when she shows us a woman on the street because her place of employ, a bordello, has been demolished. Writing of McAdams' Olympic City series Gary Hesse noted that she is "the consummate archivist." She often mediates the voyeuristic aspects of street photography by giving us the perspective from a central figure's viewpoint. Sometimes the sense of being in the scene rather than observing the scene is conveyed more subtly.

McAdams carefully composes her images and the formal qualities of her work are always evident. Film and silver prints are essential to her work connecting it to the tradition, to our history, and ensuring a lasting presence. The photograph is insistently a sensual visual experience, an independent art object, and a document. This complexity is part of the nuance of McAdams' work. However, it is her engaged sensibility that gives these photographs their specific resonance.

Some Women emerged as a title for this exhibit for a number of reasons. One was the era of the earliest mature work – it was the era of the Rolling Stones' Some Girls. The decision was reinforced by admiration of Alice Munro's work and the appearance of her story "Some Women" and in counterpoise to both Winogrand's "Women are Beautiful" and Mapplethorpe's collection of the same name. Mostly, it was the result of realizing that McAdams empathic depiction of women is an umbilical through the decades of work.

Jim Richard Wilson

September 2009

Jim Richard Wilson is Director of the Opalka Gallery and Art History Lecturer for The Sage Colleges. He has been consultant to and lectured for numerous arts organizations and museums and was Director of the Peter S. Loonam Gallery in Bridgehampton NY for ten years prior to relocating to the Capital District of New York State. Wilson has been curating shows and writing on art for more than three decades. Among his writings on art and culture are; *New York School: Another View*, *George Hofmann: Inner Life Articulated*, *Wimberley's Mode* (exhibition catalogue essays), *Style and Appearance: Alex Katz at the New York State Museum* (a version of which appeared in *Chronogram*), *Bridging the Gaps; The Nature and Responsibility of Visual Arts Writing* (Apollo, ASLA), and *Cuneiform Currency* (included in *Toward A Second Dimension: A Sociology Reader*, ed. McGuire & Purtusati, Kendal/Hunt Publishers).