

## Dona Ann McAdams: Photographer as Storyteller

Eleanor Heartney

How does the camera see? The camera is a machine, of course, but one guided by a human being. Over the years, the debates about photography's status have been shaped by this apparent paradox. Is photography an art, a technology, or a craft? Is it subjective or objective? Is it merely, in Walter Benjamin's formulation, a mechanical means of reproduction or is it capable, as Roland Barthes suggested, of capturing the hidden truth of an individual or moment, preserving as a relic that which will never come again?

The fact that we can talk about a photographer's style and recognize the products of his or her distinctive eye sways the argument toward art and subjectivity. The lack of evidence of the artist's hand and the sense that (at least prior to the arrival of digital manipulation), a photograph is a slice of pre-existing life sways it in the other direction.

The photographs of Dona Ann McAdams feed into this debate. She has spent the last three and a half decades producing series after series of remarkable photographs that capture the essence of various scenarios and individuals. Yet, she practices a modest self-effacement, letting her subjects appear to speak for themselves as she cultivates the illusion that the formal decisions that underlie their presentation are effortless and natural.

In McAdams' works, such details as a significant exchange of glances, the juxtaposition of a figure against an architectural backdrop or a telling relationship between figures in the foreground and the background, appear to have just happened, passively captured by the camera lens. It is only when one sees a number of works together that it becomes clear that McAdams is carefully framing and shaping the images that we see. A street scene featuring an old woman shielding her face with a newspaper would not be nearly as effective without the striped foreground that sets her off as if on a proscenium stage. Nor would a long shot down a diner counter without the open wallet of a cropped foreground figure that half obscures the face of the little girl at the far end.

The range of McAdams' subjects is immense. She has photographed elder farmers in rural West Virginia, people living with mental illness in a facility on Coney Island, socialites in the Winner's Circle at the Saratoga Race track, cheerleaders in Los Angeles, avant-garde performers at Performance Space 122 in New York City, sex workers in Barcelona, and nuclear activists at American nuclear power plants. Other series reflect her activist efforts on behalf of issues like women's rights, feminism, gay rights, and AIDS. Her camera has recorded the young and old, the rich and poor, the famous and obscure.

Many of McAdams' photographs are the outcome of a sustained relationship with her subjects. To produce the series *The Last Country*, she lived off and on near the elder farmers of Greenbrier County for four years. *The Garden of Eden* photographs are the outcome of fifteen years of photography workshops she conducted with the mentally ill under the auspices of Hospital Audiences, Inc. For

Olympic City, McAdams traveled frequently to Barcelona between 1988 and 1992 documenting a shadow world that was about to be swept out of sight by the 1992 Olympics. For twenty four years, between 1983 and 2006, McAdams served as the house photographer of P.S.122, resulting in a cache of images of soon to be famous (or notorious) avant-gardists like Karen Finley, Eric Bogosian, Holly Hughes, Ann Magnuson, Meredith Monk, and Ethyl Eichelberger. A number of early staged self-portraits with nuclear cooling towers as a backdrop were the outcome of activist efforts on behalf of nuclear disengagement.

Other works are more serendipitous. They reveal McAdams' ability to seize "the decisive moment", to use a term coined by French photographer Henri Cartier Bresson. A master of street photography, Cartier Bresson maintained, "There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture. Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera...Once you miss it, it is gone forever."

One such decisive moment is evident in McAdams' photograph of a pair of little girls playing above a sidewalk grate in a nearly deserted sidewalk café in Madrid. As their billowing skirts inflate the image becomes a witty homage to the iconic photograph of a similarly upswept Marilyn Monroe. A similar humor underlies a photograph taken on New Orleans Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras. Here McAdams focuses, not on the obvious exhibitionists, but on a group of eager young men who peer skyward at a young woman who is flashing her stuff just out of camera range.

Such images reveal McAdams' acumen as a storyteller. Her black and white images are rich in wit, poetry and human interest. Even when her works recall the approaches of other photographers, they remain distinctly her own. For instance, a series of photographs taken during a series of road trips through California and the Southwest suggest the expectant vacancy of the landscape and inhabitants of the American West, but resist the clinical cruelty of Richard Avedon's version of this subject. Several images, for instance of a pensive young woman alone in a cavernous airport, or another girl in a gingham dress standing alongside a motorcycle, bear a startling resemblance to Cindy Sherman's staged ingénues. The difference, of course, is that McAdams' hopeful young subjects are real people. And her portrayals of the mentally ill or weather beaten farm women may bring to mind the voyeuristic freak shows of Diane Arbus, but McAdams presents her worn or troubled subjects with a heartbreaking sympathy that comes from her close association with them.

McAdams came to photography through the doing of it. Very much a free spirit, she partook of the freedom of the 1970s to assume an experimental attitude toward life. Raised in modest circumstances in Long Island, McAdams did not originally consider art as a potential career. However, while working as a dental assistant in San Francisco, she began to monitor art classes at the San Francisco Art Institute. Here she discovered an affinity for photography, culminating in the purchase of her first Leica camera in 1974.

A peripatetic existence followed, as McAdams pursued her romantic and political impulses to various far-flung locations, all the while teaching herself what she needed to know about photography. She finally landed back in New York, where she assumed the position of performance photographer at P.S. 122 just as the culture wars were ramping up. A number of her subjects, and the photographs she took of them, became primary evidence in the right wing battle against “amoral” artists. Eventually the nasty battles with the religious and conservative right inspired her to return to school. McAdams earned her BFA from Empire State College in 1990 and her MFA from Rutgers University in 1994. At Rutgers she studied with Martha Rosler, an activist/artist who shared her outlook on the world and encouraged her to persist in regarding photography as a medium that both records and influences the social world. The years since have been equally nomadic. Currently McAdams maintains a studio in New York City but spends the majority of her time in Vermont where she raises dairy goats and makes cheese with her husband, novelist Brad Kessler. Sometimes an activist, sometimes a chronicler, sometimes a poet, in her recent works McAdams has focused on animals, engaging in a search for unexpected beauty.

This exhibition offers only a taste of McAdams' work. It is organized around some of her images of women – not her sole subject certainly, but one which appears frequently in her work. Cutting across her many series, McAdams' photographs of women reveal the validity of the notion of the gendered gaze. Here is a woman looking at women – she observes and records them with an immense empathy – capturing the awkward exhibitionism of prostitutes in the back streets of Barcelona, the wary calculation of a mental patient, or the weary resignation on the deeply lined face of an elderly farm woman.

Never objectified, these women retain their humanity and offer us a glimpse of complex inner lives. One suspects that for McAdams, the camera offers a kind of second sight. In these images we see that it guides her as much as she guides it, leading her, and hence us, into otherwise inaccessible worlds.

Eleanor Heartney is an independent cultural critic and author residing in New York City. Currently, she is contributing editor for *Art in America* and *Artpress* and co-president of AICAUSA, the American Section of the International Art Critics Association. She has written for most major cultural publications including *Art News*, *New Art Examiner*, the *Washington Post*, *Sculpture*, and the *New York Times*. She was the 1992 recipient of the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism and has also received grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts (1993) and the Asian Cultural Council (1995). Heartney's books include a collection of Heartney's essays published in 1997 by Cambridge University Press under the title *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads; Postmodernism* published in 2001 by the Tate Gallery Publishers; *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* published in 2004 by Midmarch Arts Press and *Defending Complexity: Art Politics and the New World Order*, published in 2005 by Hard Press Editions..