

The Museum of Modern Art

NO. 105B

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

PHOTOGRAPHS OF WOMEN

WALL LABEL

Women are as popular a subject in photography as landscape, and photographers' interest in both dates back to the medium's earliest investigations. Some photographers have consciously chosen to photograph women, and have selected subjects according to their prejudices. They have been interested in their subjects as persons, as physical phenomena, or as symbols of private or popular ideas and attitudes.

Photographers motivated by the idea of women in the abstract have been particularly interested in the myth of glamour and the mystique of beauty. The women they have photographed have generally been young, attractive, nude, famous or rich. Their photographs have had more to do with their preconceptions than with the women before their cameras. Edward Steichen's women are consistently romantic; Todd Walker's are grotesque.

Other photographers have been more motivated by their love of the physical universe and their desire to render anything in it that they have found interesting or memorable. In such situations, it is as notable that the subject is a woman as it is notable that the wall behind her is brick. The fact that the central figure is a woman has gained significance only as the viewer (and the photographer in retrospect) has searched for meaning.

It is notable that photographers concerned with capturing bits of reality have seemingly discriminated between their masculine and feminine subjects in the kinds of photographs that are taken of each sex. Women are photographed as wives, mothers, prostitutes and strangers, and men are photographed as husbands, fathers, strangers and voyeurs. But men are also portrayed as artists, athletes, politicians and explorers. Women are recognized in those traditionally masculine roles only in the news.

In the history of photography, why are there proportionately so few character portraits

(more)

of women such as Diane Arbus' "Veiled Woman" and Dorothea Lange's "Texas Panhandle"? And conversely, why are there so few photographs of male nudes? Why are there still so few recognized women photographers who are attempting visually to explain their existence as women?

These photographs of women were selected as examples of the many kinds of photographs in which women appear. Not all of them are about women. Some are about men. Their pertinence is that they are effective -- as photographs and as symbols which influence the people who look at them.