

Lee Friedlander, nudes : Edward Steichen Photography Center, Second Floor, July 25-October 8, 1991 : checklist

Date

1991

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/341

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The Museum of Modern Art

Department of Photography

Friedlander Nudes

During its first century photography added little that was new to the subject of the nude, except in the specialized subgenres of anatomy and pornography.

Artistically ambitious nudes had of course been made by photographers of the Victorian and Edwardian periods, but these pictures were deeply in debt to conventions that had been invented or revised earlier by painters - especially Symbolist painters, whose pictures of vaguely despondent figures in the gloaming, at the edge of the woods or the edge of the sea, were the easiest for photography to mimic.

It was not until the 1920's that a few adventurous photographers began to make nudes that courted the very photographic qualities that the earlier people had gone to such lengths to avoid: the eidetic replication of surfaces, the eccentric qualities of photographic drawing (often called distortions), and the surprising elisions and reconstructions that are produced by the squeezing or stretching of the photographic gray scale.

Perhaps the most radical of this first generation of modern photographers of the nude was Edward Weston, whose success depended less on formal invention than on the native originality of his vision. After Weston, during the forties and fifties, original photographic contributions to the idea of the nude were

Ernest R. Rieu

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It was not until the 1930's that a few adventurous photographers began to make nudes that courted the very photographic qualities that the earlier people had gone to such lengths to avoid: the sidestepping replication of surfaces, the eccentric qualities of photographic drawing (often called dissections), and the surprising ellipses and reconstructions that are produced by the squeezing or stretching of the photographic gray scale.

Perhaps the most radical of this first generation of modern photographers of the nude was Edward Weston, whose success depended less on formal invention than on the native originality of his vision. After Weston, during the forties and fifties, original photographic contributions to the idea of the nude were

made by Harry Callahan, Irving Penn, and Bill Brandt. It is difficult to think of a contribution of comparable surprise and vitality made since then, until the appearance of these recent nudes (made since 1977) by Lee Friedlander.

It would perhaps be true to say of these pictures (or of some of these pictures) that they are the most unblinkingly, unreservedly candid descriptions of other people's bodies that serious photography has produced. But it would be necessary to add that these bodies seem to be described with remarkable disinterest, that they are described, that is, without being invested with any programmatic overview that might limit their future freedom of meaning.

In this sense, the pictures are typical of Friedlander's work, which has aimed not to delimit but to expand the territory within which the truth might lie. The qualities of generosity and openness, and the habit of continual exploration - of logical extemporization enlivened by an unassuming audacity - have produced pictures that persuade us not that the world is simpler and neater than we thought or feared but that it is more richly and rewardingly complex. In the present remarkable case he has produced nudes that are simultaneously carnal and friendly.

John Szarkowski

made by Harry Callahan, Irving Penn, and Bill Brandt. It is difficult to think of a combination of photographic techniques and vitality made since then. Until the appearance of these great nudes (made since 1971) by the Frenchmen.

It would perhaps be true to say of these pictures (or of some of these pictures) that they are the most beautiful, unreservedly candid descriptions of other people's bodies that serious photography has produced. But it would be necessary to add that these bodies need to be described with remarkable distinctness, that they are described, that is, without being invested with any programmatic quality that might limit their future freedom of meaning.

In this sense, the pictures are typical of "photography's" work, which has aimed not to define but to expand the territory within which the body might live. The qualities of openness and openness, and the habit of continual expansion - of logical extension - are embodied by an unending and only - have produced pictures that persuade us not that the world is simpler and neater than we thought or feared but that it is more richly and awfully complex. In the present remarkable case we have produced nudes that are almost exclusively casual and friendly.

John Grawford