

MoMA PRESENTS THE WORK OF PHOTOGRAPHER JOANN VERBURG IN AN EXHIBITION THAT SURVEYS HER 25-YEAR CAREER

Exhibition Includes Some 60 Photographs Highlighting Verburg's Diverse Subject Matter and Personal, Intimate Approach to Portraits, Still Lifes, and Landscapes

Present Tense: Photographs by JoAnn Verburg

July 15—November 5, 2007

Special Exhibitions Gallery, third floor

NEW YORK, July 10, 2007—*Present Tense: Photographs by JoAnn Verburg* is an exhibition of the work of American photographer JoAnn Verburg (b. 1950), comprising approximately 60 works that survey her 25-year career. Verburg often works simultaneously on different series of photographs, with subjects ranging from portraits to composed and “found” still lifes to landscapes. They are frequently presented in diptychs and triptychs that demonstrate how the content of a picture can be enriched by using more than one photograph at a time. Her use of a large-format camera and her radiant color palette make her photographs pleasurable balancing acts that intimately describe the physicality of her subjects while deftly exploring time and space.

Present Tense: Photographs by JoAnn Verburg is organized by Susan Kismaric, Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, and is on view from July 15 through November 5, 2007, in the Special Exhibitions Gallery on the third floor. After its showing at MoMA, it will travel to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis where it will be on view from January 13 to April 20, 2008.

Ms. Kismaric explains, “Verburg’s work is lyrical and sensuous, and, most compellingly, it is grounded in an attention to human interaction—between the people in her pictures, and between her work and its audience—which keeps both artist and viewers perpetually approaching a threshold between searching and finding. Verburg follows her idiosyncratic impulses about what to photograph. She works in alternating series, and nurtures intuitions and ideas.”

The exhibition is organized in a loosely chronological fashion, following Verburg’s diverse investigation of different series over long periods of time—many of which are still in progress. The exhibition progresses through Verburg’s various series, from life-size portraits and images of swimmers made during the 1980s, to still lifes in domestic settings from the 1990s, to a recent series of Italian olive groves.

Early Years and Influences

Verburg was born in 1950, in Summit, New Jersey, and she now lives and works in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Spoleto, Italy. She began taking photographs at age six, in part due to her father's encouragement. He worked as a chemist and then as an executive for Ansco (GAF), the American manufacturer of photographic papers. After graduating from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1972 with a Bachelor's degree in sociology, Verburg worked at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1972-74). During this period, she met many artists working in mediums other than photography—including Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg—and was inspired by the 1972 monograph and exhibition of photographer Diane Arbus that was organized by MoMA.

Verburg earned a Master's in photography from Rochester Institute of Photography in 1976, the thesis for which was an exhibition she curated at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester. Titled *Locations in Time*, it featured 19th- and 20th-century photographs and included the work of such contemporary artists as John Baldessari, Robert Cumming, and Jan Groover, juxtaposed with that of earlier artists such as Antonio Giulio Bragaglia, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Otto Steinert. The exhibition addressed photography's ability to articulate issues of time through serial frames and time-motion studies, ideas that have strongly informed Verburg's own work throughout her career.

While Verburg was interested in the way that performance artists of the 1960s and early 1970s, such as Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke, integrated photography into their work as a means of documentation, Verburg came of age in the 1970s among a group of photographers—Rineke Dijkstra, Nicholas Nixon, Judith Joy Ross, and Stephen Shore among them—who shared an enthusiasm and curiosity about the process of photographing realistic subjects and settings, generating new ideas by viewing the real world through the photographic lens.

In 1977, Verburg, along with photographer Mark Klett and photography historian Ellen Manchester, launched the Rephotographic Survey Project, one of several photographic surveys sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts in the 1970s. The project retraced the steps of several 19th-century landscape photographers of the American West, such as William Henry Jackson and Timothy O'Sullivan, and attempted to make photographs from the precise vantage points that their forebears had used, providing then-and-now views for a book, called *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project*, and an exhibition. This project prompted her initial interest in multiple-frame works—diptychs, triptychs, and larger serial works.

In 1978, the Polaroid Corporation asked Verburg to launch its visiting-artist program in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Among the 30 or so photographers who Verburg invited to participate in the program—and to take 40 exposures each on Polaroid's 7-foot-high, 300-pound, 24-by-20-inch camera—were Chuck Close, Jim Dine, Olivia Parker, and William Wegman. Verburg closely observed these artists working, a process through which she gained a new perspective on her own work. She used the camera to make portraits of these artists on the side, including one of Andy Warhol that is now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery. During her three years at

Polaroid, Verburg kept an 8-x-10-inch camera set up with Polaroid film and taught herself to photograph using color film.

Portraits

In 1981, Verburg became a visiting artist at the Minneapolis College of Art. Among her first works there was a series of multipanel portraits of life-size heads. Her consecutive portraits of groups of people, in which they appear in different combinations, suggest connections made, lost, and regained, and examine how people define themselves in relation to others. The three-part work *With Michael and John in Minnesota* (1982) is typical of this series and is one of the most successful pieces in it, due in part to the highly controlled arrangement of the subjects in each frame. The two figures are the artists Mike Kelley and John Miller, and Verburg herself appears in the third frame. In 1983, Verburg settled in Minnesota permanently, and her focus shifted to the personal. The three frames in *3 x Jim* (1989) form a neat description of a seemingly ordinary moment imbued with a pensive overtone. The work's gravity lies in the existential idea that people are fundamentally alone as individuals, not knowing what each other thinks or feels from moment to moment, and it is made all the more poignant by the vulnerability of the subject's naked shoulders.

Verburg also made pictures of swimmers in which she exerted less control over her subjects, relying more on serendipity and accident. She asked her friends to pose in a swimming pool in nondescript swimsuits, so as not to suggest any particular culture or time, and set her camera's tripod perilously close to the edge of the water, with the camera directed straight down. An image of a couple, *Untitled (Sally + Ricardo)* (1982), clearly describes the intense vulnerability of the woman, leaving the man in shadow, his attention elsewhere, out of the frame. The subject's expression verges on the anxious, and she seems to look to the camera for help.

In 1984, Verburg and her husband, the poet Jim Moore, visited the Italian town of Spoleto. In Italy, Verburg was able to further explore her interest in paintings by Giotto. A work in the swimmers series, *After Giotto* (1983), makes formal references to a fresco in the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi that depicts Isaac rejecting Esau. The facial expression, hand gesture, and apprehensive demeanor of the subject in Verburg's diptych resembles that of the woman in Giotto's work.

Still Lives

In the early 1990s, Verburg began to work exclusively with color film. This move allowed her to render the world in what she saw as more convincing terms, especially the three-dimensionality she felt came with color. She began making series of "found" still lifes and domestic views with newspapers, focusing on the intimate spaces of personal life, as shown in a series that depicts her husband reading or sleeping.

Secrets: Iraq (1992), a tabletop still life featuring a cup of coffee and that day's *New York Times*, has been fractured into two views and rejoined as a diptych. Domestic tranquility has been rendered, but it is disrupted by the newspaper, which is a reminder of the violent world outside the photo frame—happening simultaneously, but silent, and visible to most people only through the picture. Frequently the still lifes depict newspapers reporting stories of destruction and loss, as with *WTC* (2003), in which Moore sits on a sunny porch with potted flowers and reads the disastrous front-page news of the September 11 strikes on the World Trade Center.

Similarly, in *Still Life with Serial Killers* (1992), commercial postcards of women's faces, from paintings by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Édouard Manet, Georges Seurat, and Paul Gauguin, are propped against a wall next to a waterless vase which contains a rolled newspaper that shows images of Charles Manson, the mastermind of several brutal murders, and the infamous serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. The harsh reality of the current events featured on that day's newspaper reach into the serene setting of the picture.

Landscapes

Around 1995, Verburg began a series of photographs depicting the olive groves in the countryside surrounding Spoleto and its neighboring towns. She was impressed with the power and solidity of the trees, and also with the restorative solitude of nature that they signify. She also photographed the sacred woods of Monteluco, south of Spoleto, which were once a site of pagan worship and where holm oaks—believed by the ancient Romans to be the first tree created by God—make the forest mysterious and magical. Shot at dawn and twilight, in beautiful, rapidly changing light, these works often offer more than one frame of a section of the groves—as many as six in works like *Thanksgiving* (2001), which measures 15 feet across. Verburg aligns the pictures in this series by their horizon lines so that the experience of viewing them is akin to walking off the road and into the orchard.

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition is supported in part by Monini Extra Virgin Olive Oil.
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PUBLICATION:

A publication of the same title as the exhibition, *Present Tense: Photographs by JoAnn Verburg*, has been published by The Museum of Modern Art. The book includes an essay by Ms. Kismaric that discusses Verburg's unique multipanel works in photography's common genres—the portrait, the landscape, the domestic view—and the way the works investigate the passage of time and the intimate spaces of personal life. The book contains 111 illustrations. It is sold in the MoMA Stores and is available to the trade through Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P.) in the United States and Canada, and through Thames & Hudson outside North America. Clothbound: 9 x 10.75 in.; 184 pages; 70 color and 41 duotone illustrations. Price: \$50.00.

PROGRAMS:

Adult and Academic Programs will accompany the exhibition *Present Tense: Photographs of JoAnn Verburg*.

Present Tense: A Lecture by JoAnn Verburg

Monday, October 22 at 6:30 p.m.

The Celeste Bartos Theater

The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building, 4 West 54 Street

JoAnn Verburg gives a lecture on her photographs, which include composed and "found" still lifes, portraits, and landscapes. Afterwards, Susan Kismaric, Curator, Department of Photography, and organizer of the exhibition, moderates a discussion.

Tickets: \$10; members \$8; students, seniors, and staff of other museums \$5.

Brown Bag Lunch Lectures

On Monday, September 24, and Thursday, September 27, Ms. Kismaric will give a Brown Bag Lunch Lecture in Classroom B of The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building at 4 West 54 Street, from 12:30 to 1:15 p.m. Attendees may bring their own lunches. Tickets are \$5; for members, students, and seniors \$3.

Tickets for programs can be purchased at the lobby information desk, at the Film desk, or in the Cullman Building lobby. Tickets are also available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern.

MoMA AUDIO:

In conjunction with this exhibition, the Museum will offer a MoMA Audio program on which JoAnn Verburg speaks about 11 works in the exhibition. It also includes a short introduction by curator Susan Kismaric. Free with Museum admission, courtesy of Bloomberg, MoMA Audio is also available for download at www.moma.org/audio and on the MoMA Audio podcast on iTunes.

TRAVEL:

The exhibition will travel to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where it will be on view January 13 through April 20, 2008.

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For high resolution images, please visit our online press office Web site: www.moma.org/press. Please call for user name and password.

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019

Hours: Wednesday through Monday: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Friday: 10:30 a.m.-8:00 p.m. Closed Tuesday

Museum Admission: \$20 adults; \$16 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$12 full-time students with current I.D. Free for children 16 and under. Free for members. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs)

Target Free Friday Nights 4:00-8:00 p.m.

Subway: E or V train to Fifth Avenue/53rd Street

Bus: On Fifth Avenue, take the M1, M2, M3, M4, or M5 to 53rd Street. On Sixth Avenue, take the M5, M6, or M7 to 53rd Street. Or take the M57 and M50 crosstown buses on 57th and 50th Streets.

The public may call 212/708-9400 for detailed Museum information.

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