

The Museum of Modern Art

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NEW DOCUMENTS
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Wall Label

Most of those who were called documentary photographers a generation ago, when the label was new, made their pictures in the service of a social cause. It was their aim to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right.

In the past decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy -- almost an affection -- for the imperfections and the frailties of society. They like the real world, in spite of its terrors, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value -- no less precious for being irrational.

This exhibition shows a handful of pictures by three photographers of that generation. What unites them is not style or sensibility: each has a distinct and personal sense of the uses of photography and the meanings of the world. What they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.

The portraits of Diane Arbus show that all of us -- the most ordinary and the most exotic of us -- are on closer scrutiny remarkable. The honesty of her vision is of an order belonging only to those of truly generous spirit.

Lee Friedlander, standing at a greater emotional distance from his subjects, reconstructs our world in precise and elegant metaphors, showing its people in and through their most valued environments: their homes and offices and shops and pageant grounds.

Garry Winogrand's jokes, like those of Rabelais, are no less serious for being funny, and, in the best sense, vulgar. His taste for life, being stronger than his regard for art, makes him equal even to the task of confronting the comedy of his own time.

These three photographers would prefer that their pictures be regarded not as art, but as life. This is not quite possible, for a picture is, after all, only a picture. But these pictures might well change our sense of what life is like.

John Szarkowski