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SFMOMA PRESENTS DIANE ARBUS RETROSPECTIVE

Major Exhibition Highlights the Artist's Full Career

From October 25, 2003, through February 8, 2004, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present the groundbreaking exhibition *Diane Arbus Revelations*. Co-organized by guest curator Elisabeth Sussman and Sandra Phillips, SFMOMA senior curator of photography, the exhibition will consist of approximately 200 of the artist's most significant photographs—making it the most complete presentation of her work ever assembled. The prints will be drawn from major public and private collections throughout the world and will include many images that have never been exhibited publicly.

The artist's working method and intellectual influences will be revealed through the display of contact sheets, cameras, letters, notebooks and other writings, as well as books from Arbus's personal library. Benefiting from new research into her career, *Diane Arbus Revelations* will explore the roots of her prodigious influence on contemporary artistic practice, enrich the understanding of the breadth and consistency of her unique vision, and illuminate its enduring impact on the way we see the world and the people in it.

Diane Arbus Revelations is sponsored by the Evelyn D. Haas Exhibition Fund and Charles Schwab & Co., Inc. After opening at SFMOMA the exhibition will travel nationally and internationally to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (February 29–May 30, 2004); the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (June 27–August 29, 2004); the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (February–May 2005); Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany (June–September 2005); the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (October 2005–January 2006); and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (July 9–October 8, 2006).

Diane Arbus (1923–1971) found most of her subjects in New York City, a place that she explored as both a known geography and as a foreign land. She was primarily a photographer of people she discovered in the metropolis and its environs during the 1950s and 1960s. Her “contemporary anthropology”—portraits of couples, children, carnival performers, nudists, middle class families, transvestites, people on the street, zealots, eccentrics and celebrities—stands as an allegory of postwar America, an exploration of the relationship between appearance



Diane Arbus, *Two ladies at the automat, N.Y.C., 1966*;
© 1980 Estate of Diane Arbus, LLC

and identity, illusion and belief, theater and reality. Some of her best known images—identical twins in New Jersey; a “Jewish giant” slouching to fit in a living room scaled to his diminutive parents; and a young couple on Hudson Street whose demeanors evoke both early adolescence and late middle age—have become photographic icons.

At the same time, Arbus was committed to photography as a medium that is obliged to tangle with facts. She had no interest in improving upon the reality she confronted or in creating images that mirror a preconceived view. Many of her subjects face the camera in implicit awareness of their collaboration in the portrait-making process. Her photographs render the encounter between photographer and subject as a self-conscious meeting, one that becomes a central drama in the picture. The result is a body of work that penetrates the psyche with all the force of a personal encounter and, in doing so, broadens our understanding of ourselves and those around us.



Diane Arbus, *A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970*; © 1971 Estate of Diane Arbus, LLC

Diane Arbus (born Diane Nemerov in New York City in 1923) first began taking pictures in the early 1940s. While working in partnership with her husband Allan Arbus as a stylist collaborating in their fashion photography business, she continued to take pictures on her own. She studied photography with Berenice Abbott in the 1940s and with Alexey Brodovitch in the mid-1950s. It was Lisette Model’s photographic workshop, however, that inspired her, around 1956, to begin seriously pursuing the work for which she has come to be known.

Her first published photographs appeared in *Esquire* in 1960. During the next decade, working for *Esquire*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and other magazines, she published more than 100 pictures, including portraits and photographic essays, some of which originated as

personal projects, occasionally accompanied by her own writing.

In 1962—apparently searching for greater clarity in her images and for a more direct relationship with the people she was photographing—she began to turn away from the 35mm camera favored by most of the documentary photographers of her era. She started working with a square format (2 1/4-inch twin-lens reflex) camera and began making portraits marked by a formal classical style that has since been recognized as a distinctive feature of her work. *Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C. 1962*, *Retired man and his wife at home in a nudist camp one morning, N.J. 1963*, and the virtually unknown work, *Girl on a stoop with baby, N.Y.C 1962*—all on view in the exhibition—are each triumphant examples of Arbus’s technique.

She was awarded Guggenheim Fellowships in 1963 and 1966 for her project on “American Rites, Manners, and Customs.” She augmented her images of New York and New Jersey with visits to Pennsylvania, Florida and California, photographing contests and festivals, public and private rituals. “I want to photograph the considerable ceremonies of our present because we tend while living here and now to perceive only what is random and barren and formless about it,” she wrote. “While we regret that the present is not like the past and despair of its ever becoming the future, its innumerable, inscrutable habits lie in wait for their meaning.... These are our symptoms and our monuments. I want simply to save them, for what is ceremonious and curious and commonplace will be legendary.”

Although her work appeared in only a few group shows during her lifetime, her photographs generated a good deal of critical and popular attention. The boldness of her subject matter and photographic approach were recognized as revolutionary. In the late 1960s, Arbus taught photography at Parsons School of Design, the Rhode Island School of Design and Cooper Union and continued to make pictures in accordance with her evolving vision. Notable among her late works are the images of her *Untitled* series, made at residences for people with developmental disabilities between 1969 and 1971. These images echo in many respects a number of works produced earlier in her career: *Fire eater at a carnival, Palisades Park, N.J. 1956*; *A child in her nightgown, Wellfleet, Mass, 1956*; *Bishop by the sea, Santa Barbara, Cal 1964*; *Two ladies at the automat, N.Y.C. 1966*. In 1970 Arbus made a portfolio of original prints entitled “A box of 10 photographs” which was to be the first of a series of limited editions of her work. She committed suicide in July 1971.

Thirty years have elapsed since her first major museum retrospective, organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 1972, and the work of Diane Arbus demands a rigorous reinvestigation. At the time of her death, Arbus was already a significant influence—even something of a legend—among serious photographers, although only a relatively small number of her most important pictures were widely known at the time. Even today, the work on which her reputation rests represents only a small fraction of her achievement. Although superficial elements of her style and subject matter have been widely imitated, the fundamental preoccupations of her art remain elusive. Her imagery has permeated the culture, but the riveting impact of her pictures remains as powerful and controversial today as when the pictures were first seen.

Diane Arbus Revelations will provide the viewer a unique and long-awaited opportunity to explore the breadth and depth of Arbus’s accomplishments. Contemplating many of the lesser known, but often equally significant works in the context of the iconic images will serve to illuminate them both and reveal, within a complex vocabulary of expression, a remarkably original and consistent vision.

Arbus’s gift for rendering strange those things we consider most familiar continues to challenge our assumptions about the nature of everyday life and compels us to look at the world in a new way. By the same token, her ability to uncover the familiar within the exotic enlarges our understanding of ourselves. Her devotion to the principles of the art she practiced—without deference to any extraneous social, political or even personal agenda—has produced a body of work that is often shocking in its purity, in its bold commitment to the celebration of things as they are. Her refusal to patronize the people she photographs is in fact a tribute to the singularity of each and every one of us and constitutes a deep and abiding humanism.

In conjunction with *Diane Arbus Revelations*, Random House will be publishing a 320-page, fully illustrated book featuring an essay by Sandra S. Phillips and an extensive chronology by Elisabeth Sussman and Doon Arbus based on documents in the Arbus archives, including many excerpts from the artist’s writings.

Additional support for *Diane Arbus Revelations* has been provided by Carla Emil and Rich Silverstein, Randi and Bob Fisher, Prentice and Paul Sack, Linda and Jon Gruber, Carole and Robert Lieff, Harvey S. Shipley Miller and Robin Wright. Support for the exhibition catalogue is provided by the Koret Foundation.

Museum Hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 9 p.m.; summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day) 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day.

Admission prices: Adults \$10; seniors \$7; students with ID \$6. SFMOMA members and children twelve and under are admitted free. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free. Thursday evenings, 6 to 9 p.m., admission is half price.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by MUNI, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans and Caltrain. Hourly, daily and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415/348-0971.

Visit our Web site at www.sfmoma.org or call 415/357-4000 for more information.

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