March 11, 2005 PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW | **'DIANE ARBUS REVELATIONS'**
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The Profound Vision of Diane Arbus: Flaws in Beauty, Beauty in Flaws By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

A TEENAGER in a straw boater, with big apricot-shaped ears, thin lips and matching bow tie, gazes out from the photograph, whose date is 1967. He is standing beside, and perhaps he's holding (his hands are out of the frame, so it's hard to tell) an American flag. He wears a bowtie-shaped flag pin, too, with buttons affixed on each lapel. "Bomb Hanoi," one says.

Presumably the audience Diane Arbus imagined for this picture would have regarded the boy, if not as another of her "freaks," then as somebody different from them. Arbus once said that she wanted to photograph "evil," about which her daughter, Doon, ventured that what Arbus really meant was that she wanted to photograph what was "forbidden." "She was determined," Doon Arbus explained, "to reveal what others had been taught to turn their backs on." Or you might say she wanted to find the humanity in people that others shunned.

A contrarian, Arbus could do the opposite - she could revel in flaws in the admired and celebrated. But this boy's gentle, open face, his obvious vulnerability, convey the tenderness and bittersweet melancholy that are Arbus's finest modes of expression, the emotions that reveal themselves after her best pictures leave their first impression, which is often alarm, distrust or unease.

"Everybody has this thing where they need to look one way, but they come out looking another way, and that's what people observe," she wrote. "You see someone on the street, and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw." While spotting the flaws, much of the time Arbus transformed them into gifts.

Her powerful and moving retrospective, the first full-dress overview in more than three decades and, with the cooperation of the Arbus estate, the most extensive ever organized, has finally arrived at the Metropolitan Museum. It opened more than a year ago at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, trailing in its wake the expected arguments about her work. Last year a separate exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery proffered some of Arbus's commercial work, for Esquire magazine; it included a cache of previously unseen pictures she shot for an affluent Upper East Side family on commission. Tendentious but instructive, that comparatively smallish event revealed what Arbus did when she didn't have her heart in her work. Arbus without heart was heartless.

By contrast, this retrospective proves that her memorable work, which she did, on the whole, not for hire but for herself, was all about heart - a ferocious, audacious heart. It transformed the art of photography (Arbus is everywhere, for better and worse, in the work of artists today who make photographs), and it lent a fresh dignity to the forgotten and neglected people in whom she invested so much of herself. In the process, she captured a moment, the anxious 1950's and 60's, and - this probably applies as much to Arbus as to any other photographer of the second half of the last century - she captured New York.

Appropriately, she is given the royal treatment at the Met. Put together by Sandra S. Phillips and Elisabeth Sussman in San Francisco, the exhibition is here laid out with leisurely amplitude by Jeff Rosenheim, an associate curator at the Met. Photographs sprawl through huge galleries that on earlier occasions featured Ingres and El Greco. Rooms are specially set aside for letters, cameras, books and other Arbus memorabilia - chapels of relics, maddeningly dark, dense and theatrical but implying the extent to which her photography was connected with her interests in literature, history, art and the photographic traditions that encompassed figures like August Sander, Walker Evans, Weegee and Arbus's teacher, Lisette Model (a Model show is now at Ricco/Maresca in Chelsea).

With more than 175 pictures, the Met retrospective fleshes out that limited core of Arbus photographs canonized by the landmark show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972, a year after her suicide, at 48. By that time she had become a kind of legend and the debate had polarized: Arbus as a compassionate champion of the neglected versus Arbus as exploitative, a narcissist of morbid eloquence. Or as Susan Sontag infamously put it, the photographer of "a single village": "only, as it happens the idiot village is America."

Arbus could be both, in retrospect. In another photograph from 1967, she turns a different patriotic young man brandishing his flag into a rabid, pimply fool, leering into the merciless glare of her camera's flash. But even that cruel picture, with his intense, almost otherworldly expression, has an intimacy that breaches the customary space separating subject and viewer, insisting that the people who look at it confront, close up, somebody whom they might not otherwise have met or wished to meet.

This was Arbus's project from the beginning. Her work derived partly from Sander's sweeping chronicle of German society but was narrower in scope and less documentary. Arbus looked for secret worlds and the uncanny. Her ambition was both novel and also novelistic. She became a kind of magic realist of photography, and it's no wonder, early on, that she photographed the inside of movie houses with their smoky projector beams and glimmering screens, casting the audience in silhouette - dream palaces where light became fiction.

At around the same time, she was sneaking her camera, as Evans had done in the subway, onto a sundeck at Coney Island to photograph naked women sunbathing. She caught a mother in a park carrying her young son, a ready-made Pietà, and she snapped a woman on the street with her eyes closed, like Cartier-Bresson's Spanish boy tossing a ball in the air, as if enraptured. A girl in a cap stares out at us from yet another picture, with the urgency we read into the expression of the woman in "Bishop by the Sea," who looks possessed in her shiny gown and cheap tiara.

If the proper word isn't spirituality then it's grace. Arbus touches her favorite subjects with grace. It's in the spread-arm pose of the sword swallower, in the tattooed human pincushion, like St. Sebastian, and in the virginal waitress at the nudist camp, with her apron and order pad and her nicked shin. And it's famously in the naked couple in the woods, like Adam and Eve after the Fall.

Above all it's in the young Brooklyn family going for a Sunday outing, a heartbreaking photograph, which nearly harks back to Velázquez's "Meninas" or Goya. Mother and father are Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean impersonators, she looking haunted, he staring warily ahead, gently cupping the hand of his retarded son. As Arbus said, everybody concocts versions of themselves for the world, which the world sees through, and in the end we see ourselves in how we see each other.

Therein is the delicate tonal balance necessary for Arbus's sensational art to elevate her subjects. She was a tonal craftsman, we're reminded. She achieves phenomenal elegance with the elderly woman in a turban - it's her version of a Rembrandt - the woman in half-shadow, crosslegged on her couch with a dangling cigarette, light pouring in from windows on either side.

Likewise, look at what she manages with the familiar triplets in their bedroom: at the periphery, the dizzy pattern of the wallpaper playing against the pattern of the bedspread; the girls physically linked, and our vision slowed down, as we focus on the center of the picture, by the continuous black and white swaths of matching skirts and blouses and by the equally calm but slightly different expressions on the faces.

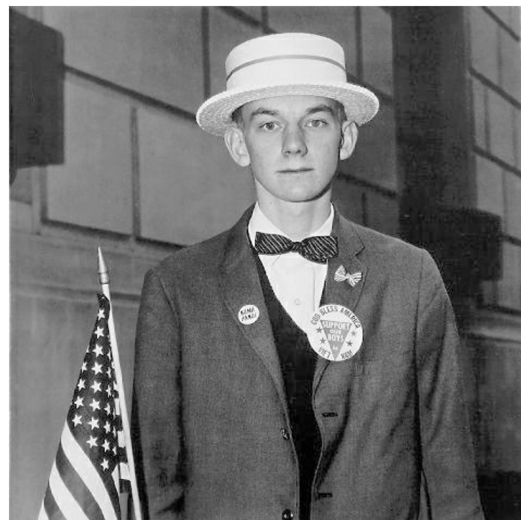
And then there is the naked man being a woman, a Madonna turned in contrapposto, flanked by parted curtains, with his penis hidden between his legs. The curtains are stained, the marks from his brassiere and panties, which he has clearly just taken off, still show; a Schaefer beer can is on the floor and his bed is heaped with junk.

But he seems at ease with himself and with Arbus, enough to have let her into his home. "The farther afield you go, the more you are going home," Arbus also wrote. It is, she added, "as if the gods put us down with a certain arbitrary glee in the wrong place and what we seek is who we had really ought to be."

Her subjects, like that naked man and the circus performers, had already "passed their test in life," she added. "Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks are born with their trauma. They're aristocrats."

Which explains her notorious late photographs of women at a home for the mentally retarded. Everybody notes Goya, of course. But these are loving pictures, and discomfort with them is not shared by the women, who clearly enjoy themselves. The world is full of wondrous things, if our eyes are open enough to recognize them, these photographs imply, and in the end we are all drawn together by our different flaws.

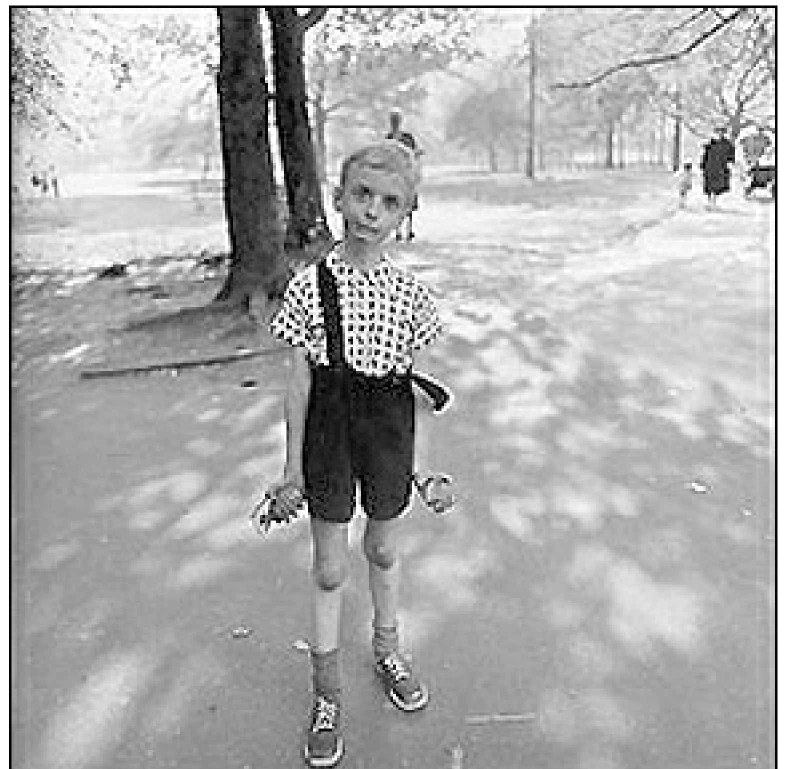
"The world is a Noah's ark on the sea of eternity containing all the endless pairs of things, irreconcilable and inseparable," Arbus said in a letter to a friend. "And heat will always long for cold and the back for the front and smiles for tears and mutt for jeff and no for yes with the most unutterable nostalgia there is."



Young Brooklyn couple on a Sunday, 1966

Jewish Giant at Home with His Parents

Diane Arbus



Painterly Photographs of a Slyly Handmade Reality **By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN**

A DOZEN years ago, Thomas Demand, whose generally stellar midcareer retrospective opens today at the Museum of Modern Art, was studying in London, at Goldsmiths College, then the hotbed of the British art scene. He hit upon the idea to make life-size reconstructions of scenes, often ones he came across in photographs.

The reconstructions were meant to be close to, but never perfectly, realistic so that the gap between truth and fiction would always subtly show. Mr. Demand's strategy was to photograph his reconstructions, producing the glossy, cinematic color prints also used by photographers like Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky. Fellow Germans, they, like him but a little earlier, had trained at the art academy in Düsseldorf, although he studied sculpture, not photography. Their photographs had paintinglike presence, which Mr. Demand was after.

But unlike them, he was not photographing real places and, as in Mr. Gursky's case, then occasionally fiddling with the images. Nor, for that matter, was he imitating Gerhard Richter, who inspired so many artists of Mr. Demand's generation, by making paintings that suggested blurry photographs. Mr. Demand insisted on being a straight photographer, albeit of sly re-creations - or really, he was a sculptor, making models of places, to produce something that had the quality of painting.

Except that his medium was photography.

Still with me? If so, you should appreciate the cunning of Mr. Demand's deadpan but lush panoramas, which at their best are hypnotic.

At a studio in Berlin, working just with colored cardboard and paper, Mr. Demand built the stairwell of a school, a hotel bathroom, a kitchen in the hut where Saddam Hussein hid out, a stadium with a swimming pool and a platform diving board, the inside of a neighbor's house, a television studio, an airport security checkpoint, a copy shop, a thicket of trees - nearly all full-scale models of places, more or less mimicking what he saw in newspapers or magazines but sometimes based on private memories, and always unpeopled, stripped of affect, and strangely pregnant.

Mr. Demand's pictures owed something to the wry, prosaic snapshots of banal and vernacular places by Ed Ruscha. Except they were devoid of detail and weightless. The photographs provoked a double-take after the inevitable first assumption that the scenes might be real. Then, on closer inspection, other issues revealed themselves.

Those issues included more than just photography's inherent unreliability, its slipperiness as truth. Mr. Demand's works are drily vexatious, like Chinese boxes. A patch of grass that he photographed turns out to be a laborious paper reproduction of a patch of grass, made blade by blade, which brings to mind a photograph by Mr. Gursky of a gray patch of carpet, itself devised as an ironic riff on Gerhard Richter's all-gray paintings, which harked yet further back to Jackson Pollock's drips. You can recognize this string of connections or not, but either way, the picture retains its flat-footed eloquence, with its unnatural swath of bright green nature, painstakingly made, implying, if not something obvious, then something.

Mr. Demand's show, 26 works, some of them seen before in New York, and handsomely organized by the Modern's curator, Roxana Marcoci, begins with "Drafting Room." Tape, paper and T-squares rest on three long tables, neatly lined up in a white room. It is an architect's spare studio, with windows to one side, opened to let in air and light. The room, silent, is constructed of a grid of slender pillars, which intersect in the photograph with the row of tables to make an allover geometry out of the picture - a clean, basically white-on-white, modernist image. Color is confined to a rectangle of pale blue paper tacked to one wall and to tiny touches like a red dispenser of Scotch tape on the farthest table.

"Drafting Room" is inspired by a photograph of the studio of Richard Vorhölzer, the architect who was in charge of much urban planning for postwar Germany. Mr. Demand's photograph reconstructs as a model in his own studio a studio where models were made for the reconstruction of Germany.

The grid of the photograph and the design of the room evoke the Bauhaus aesthetic to which Vorhölzer subscribed, revived by progressive planners like him after the Nazis had vilified the Bauhaus. The cliché of light through the windows implies the optimism of the Bauhaus, rooted as it was in a kind of ethical, pragmatic utopianism. But the light, and so by implication the optimism, is an illusion, like everything in Mr. Demand's work.

It turns out that Vorhölzer designed the post office in Schäftlarn, a town near Munich, where Mr. Demand grew up. "One's experience of public architecture develops partly because of such seemingly insignificant places as post offices," Mr. Demand has said. "For me, as a child, observing that place was highly instructive." His "Staircase" recreates, as he remembered it (incorrectly, he later discovered), the stairwell of his secondary school. The school was another example of postwar reconstruction architecture. Mr. Demand's memory having been corrupted by other information, his stairwell in fact most immediately summons up Oskar Schlemmer's "Bauhaus Stairway," the 1932 painting in the Modern, minus the people.

Reconstruction and memory. Born in 1964 into the West German boom, Mr. Demand is old enough to remember the 1972 Munich Olympics, when Israeli athletes were murdered, and the terrorism of the Baader-Meinhof group, culminating in its botched airplane hijacking and the deaths (coroners called them suicides) of jailed gang members in 1977. Mr. Demand also knows Mr. Richter's famous Baader-Meinhof series of paintings, based on forensic photographs and magazine illustrations: images intentionally aloof and, like the truth, sometimes hard to make out.

Mr. Richter painted his series in 1988, as it happens a year after a German politician, Uwe Barschel, was found dead in a hotel bathroom in Geneva. A magazine photograph of his body in the tub, akin to the news shots of the dead Baader-Meinhof members, raised public doubts about the verdict of suicide. In the show, Mr. Demand's "Bathroom," adapted from that photograph, suggests a tawdry version of Jacques-Louis David's Marat, hard light falling on the blue tiles of the tub, the murky water and bath mat.

Mr. Demand has also reconstructed, from photographs, the blown-up room where plotters failed to kill Hitler; the New York hotel room where L. Ron Hubbard spent two years writing; and the studio of an artist whom Baader-Meinhof members assaulted in order to blow up the house of a prosecutor who lived next door. Many of Mr. Demand's pictures, not coincidentally, entail studios - places where artists or architects or engineers or actors build models or simulate actions. "Studio" derives from a photograph of the

1970's television set for the German "What's My Line?" - a program about truth and fiction. "Barn" adapts one of Hans Namuth's photographs of Pollock's Long Island studio, emptied and dark, light shining through windows and between the wooden slats, making an allover, mysterious pattern of white on black.

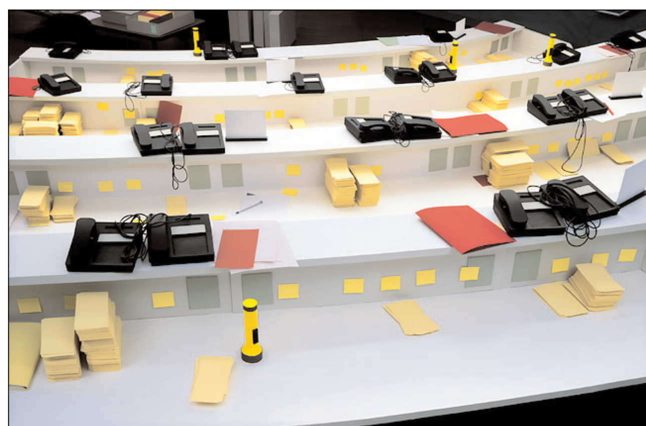
"Studio" and "Barn" are stunning. Mr. Demand is best when his work proffers a kind of strict, modernist opulence amid the sense of loss. That's the case with the garish color bars of the vacant television studio, a kind of readymade Ellsworth Kelly, set off, rhythmically, against the four chairs and three panels on the legs of the table. And with the red banister, a near-horizontal jolt underlining the cool geometry of "Staircase." And with the louvered shades in "Window."

And also with the gray and yellow Post-it notes, diminishing into depth, in "Poll," which Mr. Demand based on a photograph of a Florida election recount station. The receding tables, like interlocking arcs specked with color, mimic Bauhaus design.

W. G. Sebald, the great and gloomy German writer of postwar memory, once claimed that his favorite haunt in England was the Sailors' Reading Room in Southwold, because it is "almost always deserted but for one or two of the surviving fishermen and seafarers sitting in silence in the armchairs, whiling the hours away." Sebald knew the eloquence of empty places. There is also a reconstruction by Mr. Demand of Leni Riefenstahl's film archive: an empty room with shelves supporting identical gray boxes, hinting at Riefenstahl's regimental pageants glorifying the Nazis, simultaneously alluding to Donald Judd and Andy Warhol, suggesting that in this clash of cultural aesthetics may be the condition of modern history.

I mentioned London at the start because it was where Mr. Demand, after his training in Düsseldorf, said he had found an appreciation for spectacle for its own sake. "Clearing" is his version of a forest, made up of 270,000 individually cut leaves of green paper, cinematically lighted, based on a spot in the Public Gardens in Venice. Sublime landscape, a German Romantic tradition, is shown to be just another illusion.

But the photograph is uplifting anyway. It's a laborious sculpture and also a labor of love. Mr. Demand evidently couldn't help his own attraction to the subject, which transcends its artifice. In the end, the art suggests, even the elusiveness of reality can have its visceral pull.



Top row, left to right: **Bathroom** (German legislator's murder scene), **Gate**, **Poll**
Middle row: **Room** (L. Ron Hubbard), **Staircase** (his middle school), **Studio**
Bottom: Window