

HIDDEN MESSAGES

the camera i: Photographic Self-Portraits from the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection. Co-published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993

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A lavishly printed, visually appealing book, *the camera i: Photographic Self-Portraits from the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection* springs from the exhibition of the same name presented by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art following the couple's 1992 donation. This coffee-table book is comprised of 148 photographs, a biographical sketch on each artist, and an insightful essay by Deborah Irmas, photohistorian and daughter of Audrey and Sydney Irmas, and another dense, theoretical essay by Robert A. Sobieszek, curator of photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The images of the Irmas Collection were acquired beginning in the early 1980s and include works by nineteenth and twentieth century photographers. Deborah Irmas states that her parents' acquisition philosophy "[was] often determined by what was generally considered within the 'photographic community' (i.e., market, publishing, institutional) as worthy." Choices regarding the types of images chosen were also based on "particular yet personal notions of beauty and attraction. We made many quixotic and idiosyncratic choices, records of the changes in our taste over time."

Within the collection are many famous, and widely-reproduced photographs such as Edward Steichen's *Self-Portrait with Brush and Palette*, Paris, 1901; Robert Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait (female persona)*, 1980; Bernice Abbott's *Portrait of the Author as a Young Woman*, c. 1930; and Joel-Peter Witkin's *Portrait of Joel*, 1984. [Work by Ansel Adams is not included in the volume though the inside flap synopsis mentions him.] A number of self-portraits refer to the artist's overall body of work through the inclusion of their models—William Wegman and Man Ray, Hans Bellmer and La Poupée (the doll), Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Lucy Belle Carter. There are also self-portraits that are an integral part of the artist's life work including those by Duane Michals, Cindy Sherman, Edward Muybridge, and Lucas Samaras.

Not unlike music played at perfect pitch, some of the images chosen have a clarity of purpose and vision going beyond the material object and collecting images of the famous and the infamous. Artist Paul Klee said "Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible." And *Self-Portrait*, 1944, Man Ray (Emmanuel Rudnitsky) is a poignant example. As the viewer examines the image one finds in the left bottom corner a hand touching what is now understood to be a mirror image. Man Ray longingly touches his own reflection. The solitude implied is almost painful. The image seems to be a confession of the soul and a concentration of the artist's entire psyche. An equally timeless and eloquent self-portrait is Edward Sherriff Curtis' *Self-Portrait*, 1899 from the series "The North American Indian," 1907-30. His characteristically dignified gaze in soft



Paul Outerbridge Jr., *Untitled (Test Shot for 4 Rose Advertisement)*, circa 1938

focus with a tonal range as rich as chocolate and smooth as silk is breathtaking. Another example of the beauty within the collection is Ralph Bartholomew, Jr.'s *Self-Portrait*, 1940s. His eyes are closed while he holds up a metal tray of flashlight powder that has just been ignited. He appears to offer up a victorious torch of spiritual inspiration. Bartholomew's engaging self-portrait is well-chosen for the book's cover.



Joel Peter Witkin, *Portrait of Joel*, 1984

Lighthearted and whimsical self-portraits resonate equally as the more serious and pensive. Henri Cartier-Bresson photographs his torso and foot while laying by the side of a road in *Italy*, 1932. A person walking down the road in the distance appears to be walking on top of Cartier-Bresson like the *Lilliputian* tying down *Gulliver*. Andy Warhol's serious mugging in a sequence of four Woolworth-type photobooth snapshots (*Untitled*, 1964) brings a nostalgic and knowing grin to the viewer's face. Louise Dahl Wolfe's awkward bending over to get underneath the viewing cloth of her camera, *Self-Portrait*, 1935 reveals a charming, self-deprecating sense of humor.

While the images presented are historically important, there is still a sense that something is missing. Perhaps it is that a vital part of the history of photo-

graphy, albeit contemporary photography, is missing. There are few images that address the body politic. Those included in the collection are the safely unsafe images of men dressed as women by Mapplethorpe and Pierre Molinier and the youthful nude bodies of Diane Arbus and Judy Dater.

With the exception of the exclusions mentioned above, the Irmas Collection does achieve the importance Deborah Irmas ascribes to it. She writes, "Individual works have a greater relevance within the context of the collection than they might have separate from it. Patterns emerge, similarities are noticed, and the subjects

appear again and again." Patterns and similarities are easily understood by the trained knowledgeable eye of one fortunate enough to hold various images side by side as Irmas has. However, the reader must flip back and forth between images and then back to the biographical information at the end of the book to actually find the image and to hopefully gain the same insight. It is a frustrating process because the images are

Self-Portrait in Mirrors, 1931 seem to be reproduced opposite one another solely because both photographers are looking through the lens and into a mirror. Lou Stoumen's *My Feet and Shoes*, Saylor's Lake, PA, 1935 and the Mehemed Fehmy Agha *Self-Portrait*, 1935 seem to be next to each other because they both have feet in them. In both pairings the emotional tone and content are discordant. It is perplexing since Irmas and Sobieszek spend so much effort discussing inter-connections across time and throughout the history of photography. Whether strictly chronological or based on conceptual relationships, a clear and consistent method of organization seems absent.

Deborah Irmas' essay is thought-provoking in its questioning. She asks, "What 'stories' do self-portraits tell us about the people who made them? Why are they dressed in 'costume?' If we know the photographer's larger body of work, does a self-portrait tell us something more? Something else? Can we gain insight into the character of the photographic activity (in the nineteenth or twentieth century) from self-portraits? And, are there perhaps other histories of photography different from the 'official' histories that might emerge from looking exclusively at self-portraits?" The answers are only hinted at in her text and the curator's text.

Unfortunately Robert Sobieszek's ideas about the nature of self-portraiture mostly float in a sea made turbid by a seemingly endless stream of quotations. Perhaps more effort could have been made to provide additional background information that might answer the interesting questions Irmas poses. Sobieszek's theme of "comprehending the 'I' in self-portraiture is truly comprehending an 'other'" takes on a unintentional meaning for several of the self-portraits within a group. For example in Paul Outerbridge, Jr.'s *Untitled (Test Shot for 4 Rose Advertisement)* there are three men posing as cornseed salesmen. Outerbridge could be any one of them. One might guess he is in the center. However, only from previous knowledge that Outerbridge has a mustache and dark hair is he recognized standing to the left. Like a loud reference to an inside joke, the lack of information here is pretentious. The biographies, too, could have been helpful here but their simplicity would likely be dissatisfying to both the specialist and the casual observer.

"Even as we have become skeptical of photography's truth-telling capabilities, we still tend to believe its smaller truths, its particular details as if they were hidden messages," Irmas writes. In the case of *the camera i* maybe the message is a bit too hidden in uninspired sequencing, tedious format, and incomplete background information to excite the quest for discovery of both the smaller and larger truths. This is regrettable for such a beautifully-produced book, interesting subject and significant photographic collection.

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organized in chronological order (somewhat) while the biographical information is organized alphabetically. Though this is due to the use of the traditionally accepted format of an exhibition catalog, it still doesn't explain why the information next to the image can't include the title and date of the image along with the artist's name.

The images within the book could also have been organized in different and perhaps more satisfying ways both intellectually and aesthetically. Juxtaposing Bernice Abbott's *Portrait of the Author as a Young Woman*, c. 1930 with Nancy Burson's *Catwoman*, 1983 is one example of the possibilities. Irmas mentions the relationship of the images in her essay. The vaguely chronological order seems half-hearted and often obtuse. For example, Louise Dahl Wolfe's *Self-Portrait*, 1935 and Ilse Bing's