

CULTURAL CONTEXTS: The Work of Ruth Morgan and Jim Goldberg

By Jean McMann

"Something's wrong," Ruth Morgan is discussing the system that produced San Quentin State Prison, where she photographed for two years. The statement could as well describe Jim Goldberg's view of the system that underlies his photographs of the rich and the poor. Both photographers, with the bravery one admires in all documentarians, have invaded alien territory, bringing in not only cameras but penetrating social concerns as well.

Morgan's concern began with her undergraduate education in sociology. Now, at the San Francisco County Jail she runs an arts program sponsored by the California Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts. From making portraits of her inmate-students at the jail it was a logical step, she says, to "find out more" by going into San Quentin. "To me, it is the epitome of a prison. As a microcosm of society, the scene there fascinated me."

Ruth and Barbara Yaley, a writer-historian, negotiated for months before they were able to convince the warden to let them in. "I think he thought this would put him on the map, make him famous. And of course it helped that we were two women. The access he gave us was incredible. When he left, his successor was stuck with us. As soon as he could, he kicked us out.

"While I was there," she says, "I could go anywhere. Even on the first day no one escorted me." She came into the yard where fifteen or twenty prisoners were hanging out. Although counselors and other outsiders come in routinely, it was fairly unusual to see a woman with a camera, tripod and the requisite photographer's baggage. I was nervous, of course," she remembers, "but at no time when I was working inside did I feel my life was in danger." Because she needed to make a connection right away, Ruth started talking about her documentary project to the first men who approached. "I think it was clear from the very first that I took my responsibility to them very seriously, that I wasn't trying to rip them off.

"I took a few pictures just to calm myself down, and when I came next time, I gave them the prints. I got myself in trouble because it's totally illegal to hand anything to a prisoner, but it definitely helped build rapport. That was critical."

Having a relationship with her subjects was indeed critical, Morgan recalls, because "each picture was an incredibly long collaboration. Even with the few grab shots I took, permission was implicit if not explicit. The seriousness with which I worked, the caring and the legitimizing of who they were,

were all extremely important." Because of this rapport, Ruth traveled easily within the segregated walls: "tiers of black, tiers of white, tiers of Chicano."

Her ease of access may also have had something to do with the fact that she was a woman, Morgan speculates. One of the themes she says she wanted to develop was that of a woman photographing in a man's world. "I was very intrigued with that at the beginning. But as I put the images together, it became an important underlying element, but not the main issue."

The main issues, according to Ruth, are confinement and survival. "The prison is a cultural microcosm. Each cell represents the personal level, each tier with its institutionalized racism is a cultural group. The prison as a whole reflects our society. Individually, the photographs are portraits. But I'm more interested in the work as a documentary series, as evidence. I hope that it distills the prison experience.

"I hate overexplaining, but certainly it's astonishing that society puts people in these cells, day after day, often for twenty-four hours a day, year after year, and then releases them expecting them to come out better than when they went in. I don't have the answer to how it should change, but something's wrong."

Jim Goldberg would agree. A "very unfair if not perverse" social system is the dominant element in the work he began in San Francisco in 1977 as a student at Lone Mountain and later at the Art Institute. Goldberg is interested, he says, in "how people think; the stories that are put out by the media, the government, the military. Why do we think the way we do? Why, for instance, do we continue to be racist?"

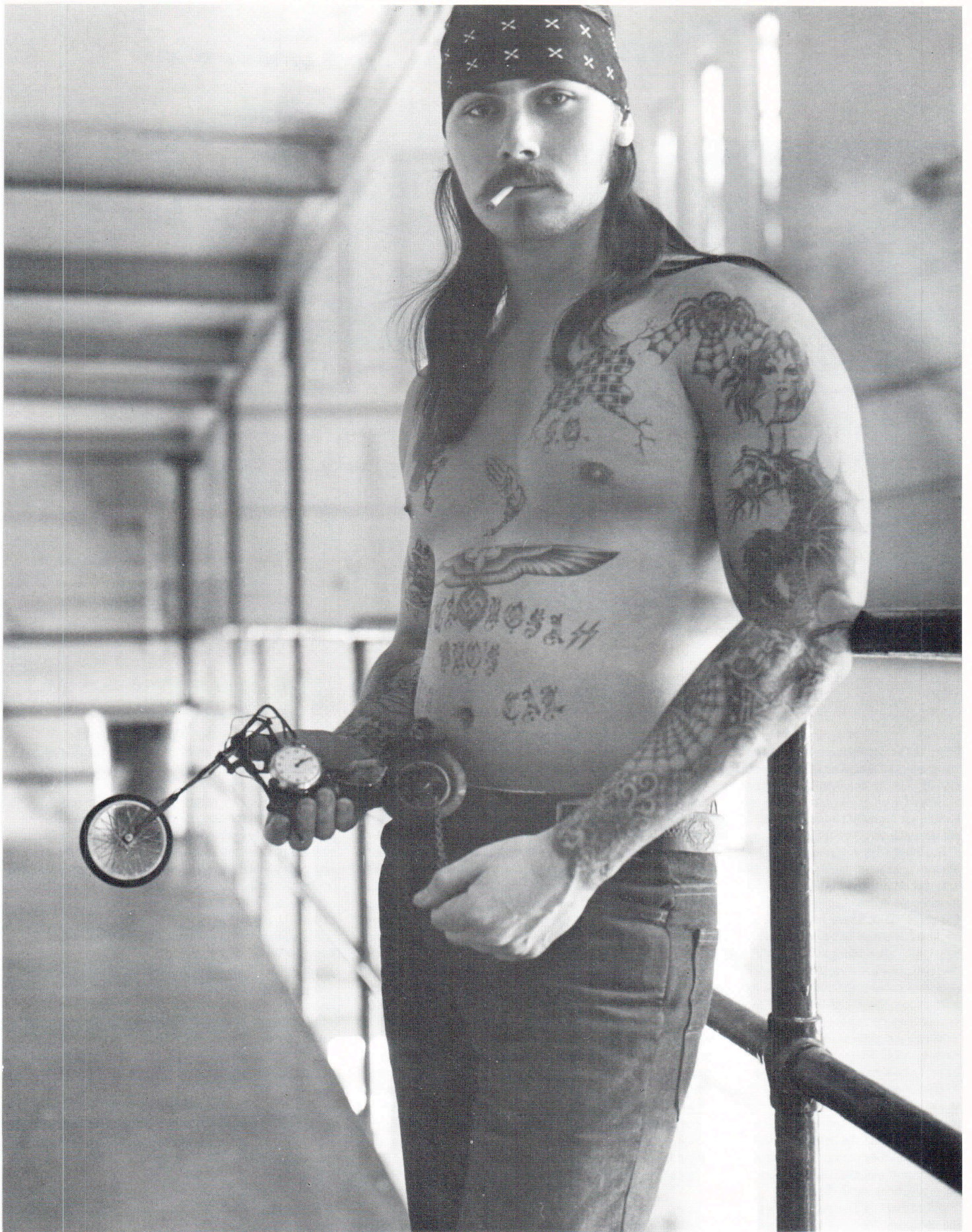
Ten years ago Jim was much less political. Discussing his portraits of the poor in San Francisco, he states: "I was naive. I felt at the beginning that my work would help these poor people. Maybe it was because of my theology background. I felt that the spirit of the people I photographed had to be changed before their economic situation would change. I thought of my work as being a deep psycho-theological relationship with these people that could somehow encourage them to get out of the poverty. As time went on, I realized that was an unrealistic expectation. Most of these people were really stuck. By the time I finally went back to them after photographing the wealthy, I knew we were talking class. It's not, as some people want us to believe, that these people 'choose' to be poor.

"What I projected onto the poor people was what I wanted to be for myself. I wanted to be strong, so I projected strength onto them. I wanted to have

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Ruth Morgan: *San Quentin - Maximum Security*, 1982-83







Ruth Morgan: *San Quentin - Maximum Security*, 1982-83



LOOK AT ME . . .
I HAVE NOTHING TO HIDE

I'm Fuckin lonely & INSECURE
I'm STUCK IN THIS HOTEL
I NEED A DRINK --
TO FORGET
TO MAKE ME FEEL SECURE

William H. '82

Jim Goldberg: *William H.*, 1981-84

Jim Goldberg: *Mitzi Cohen*, 1981-84

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hope, so I projected hope. I wanted not to feel stuck, so I projected that. And at the beginning I took the classic 'social documentary perspective.' As an outsider I was going into another world, bringing back what I saw to you, the viewer, and somehow enlightening you. I don't feel that way now at all."

Goldberg says that now he has no idea how the photographs work for the viewer. He's concerned with the enormous variety of responses the pictures could evoke. "Some of those reactions have the potential to scare me, to tell you the truth. I might be accused of being voyeuristic. That would upset me, even though I probably helped create that response because of the nature of the work. Or someone could react and say, 'Ah, rich people and poor people, they're all the same.' I don't want that kind of response either."

After seeing the work on the simplest level, Jim says, a viewer would probably notice photographic issues, class issues, and "the issue of my hand in it." The photographs take a definite form, according to Jim: "very simple, almost head on. And the writing gets to the point very quickly. That was my hand. We worked until the statement fit onto the paper and fit what they thought of themselves and what I thought of them. My role is an integral part. That's an important issue to deal with."

Asked how he thought his subjects viewed him, Jim answers: "When I went in to the poor people,

they may have seen me as someone middle class, which is how I grew up—lower middle class. So the poor tried to project a better image of themselves for me. At other times I thought they saw me as one of themselves or simply as a photographer. Of course, I also was concerned with how the wealthy saw me because they're the ones with power. I think they saw me as an artist, and they like to be around the people who create the commodity they collect.

"At first I felt more comfortable working with the poor. After I got used to the wealthy, I felt less comfortable with the poor. Now I don't feel very comfortable with either group. It's so easy to romanticize them. When people see my work, I don't want them to romanticize either poverty or wealth or to avoid the issues of class and power. Nor do I want to play the poor off against the rich or reinforce the usual stereotypes. I want the people to speak for themselves."

Both Jim Goldberg's and Ruth Morgan's subjects do speak for themselves, despite each photographer's palpable presence. In Ruth's photographs the prisoners fill the compressed, claustrophobic space. Though they often look directly, even intensely at the camera, they remain partly shuttered, as motionless as if they were bound.

Unlike the powerfully taut connection Morgan forges, Goldberg's tie is fluid, varied. He says that when he photographs, "it's a dance." His subjects move and gesture in a variety of spaces, each one's

choreography and calligraphy uniquely telling.

In contrast to the intimate scale of Goldberg's work, Morgan's photographs are four feet by four feet, nearly the exact width of a prison cell. She remembers struggling with the question of format. "I had a sense that I wasn't doing justice to the subject with my very pretty ten inch square prints. They seemed too precious. My whole experience of the place was violated. It was really exciting when I finally blew them up large because then the work became my experience. That was the way it had to be."

Although the form each artist's work takes is markedly different, there are many similarities in the artists' points of view. They have in common a direct and personal approach in working with their subjects. They also share a high level of commitment and a deep conviction that their work has the potential to influence social awareness.

This fall the University Art Museum in Berkeley will show Ruth Morgan's San Quentin photographs as part of the Matrix program curated by Constance Lewallen. Jim Goldberg's work will appear this fall as a book to be published by Random House. He is also the recipient of a 1985 Guggenheim Fellowship in Photography.

JEAN McMANN is a Bay Area writer, photographer and video producer.



It feels so good to be in my private world. The world out there is scary. There are so many problems.

I guess my life is a bit isolated - but in my world there are problems too.

Poorer people's lives are less complicated. They do not have to worry about running such a big house, the boot needing constant repairs or the servants wearing spotless white uniforms.

Our lives are paralleled however when it comes to the pursuence of health, happiness and family fulfillment.

From wherever one stands ones problems always seem important.

Mitzi Cohen