



# Many Gates Unfastened

*Niki Berg fuses her life and her art*

BY CAROLE KISMARIC

**I**t was 1978. Photography was the hot new medium. Across the country, students were flocking to schools to learn about a “new” democratic form of communication. The visual culture we have all come to take for granted was exploding, and photography was the vehicle of self-expression. Niki Berg, a young wife and mother, picked up on the excitement. From the beginning, Berg was smart, determined and brave enough to trust her intuition. She discovered early on that making pictures of what she knew best—her family—might speak to other people. She took a class and studied monographs that explored the accomplishments of the best photographers.



“Sacrifice I”  
1992,  
12 x 12 inches

Mike Disfarmer and August Sander stopped her in her tracks with their willingness to let the beauty of what it means to be a human being come through in simple, unvarnished photographs of everyday people. Berg’s heart started to open up to the human condition when she saw Disfarmer’s pictures of his Arkansas neighbors from the early 1940s and Sander’s monument to the German people on the brink of a devastating human debacle—World War II.

Berg cut to the chase. After making pictures about her grandmother, she settled on a tougher project about someone she knew even better—her mother. For a year, she probed her own feelings, using photography to reveal the emotions she felt compelled to recover. She explored the separation that exists between the self and the mother. She asked questions: Who gets nurtured in life’s basic bond? Who gives? Who takes? Is it possible for nurturing to be mutual? Quietly, thoughtfully, she was learning about herself and waking up to life’s potential, including the curves that life delivers, ready or not.

With each new project, she looked deeper into herself. Even the weddings she photographed to earn a living gave her a chance to examine family dynamics unfolding.

Berg began to grasp that the subject matter she had chosen for her life’s work was the cycle of life. Twenty years passed, full of family, friends, work.

In the spring of 1992, she was feeling lousy—tired and achy—and thought there might be something wrong with her, maybe Lyme disease. She decided to revisit the project she’d begun 10 years earlier with her mother. She telephoned her, suggesting they pick up where they’d left off. But suddenly, Berg’s life took a decisive turn. Within the same month, while driving her car, she blacked out, crashed into a tollbooth, and almost ended up in the morgue.

After she awoke in the hospital and finally looked in the mirror, she was terrified. A bruised, frightened face stared back. To help herself understand what had happened and why, she started photographing from her hospital bed, right there, the day after she could have died. It was not until she looked at the first prints that she felt the fear of the death she’d barely avoided.

Aside from injuries suffered in the accident, the doctors gave her a clean bill of



## Berg photographed to understand.



"Amazon"  
1993,  
12 x 12 inches

"Union"  
1993,  
12 x 12 inches



health. But why had she blacked out? A week later, during an exam, her internist found a lump in her right breast.

After she was diagnosed with cancer, Berg continued to photograph herself. A dynamic fueled her creative process—one that alternated between the will to stay alive and make images of her experience and the knowledge that death looms over each of us. That energy, funneled into her illness, gave her a strength that moved her through treatment and recovery. Over time, her photographs brought her back to life.

Berg was ready to let her strongest feelings, and her desire to use them as the subject of her art, emerge—and merge—into a series of photographs that tracked her journey as a woman with breast cancer. All along, she had been listening to herself, but now she was hearing more acutely. In the process, she experienced a new freedom, almost orgasmic in its intensity, that blasted her into a life that was truly creative.

*A Gate Unfastened* is the evidence of what Niki Berg felt. The series emerges as a coherent, moving body of work because it is a truthful record of a life lived, a life palpable in pictures. By the time Berg finished the series, some nine months after her accident, she had emerged on the other side of fear—freer, more alive.

When she looks at these photographs now, she still feels connected to the person pictured, but Berg knows she's grown immeasurably beyond a fearful heroine. "I am still moved by the pictures, but from a different perspective. It's a kind of out-of-body experience, as though I am looking at someone else going through very sad things. I feel the sadness. And when I realize that the person is me, that deepens even more the experience of looking. It's amazing." 🍷



**"Sacrifice II"**  
1993,  
12 x 12 inches

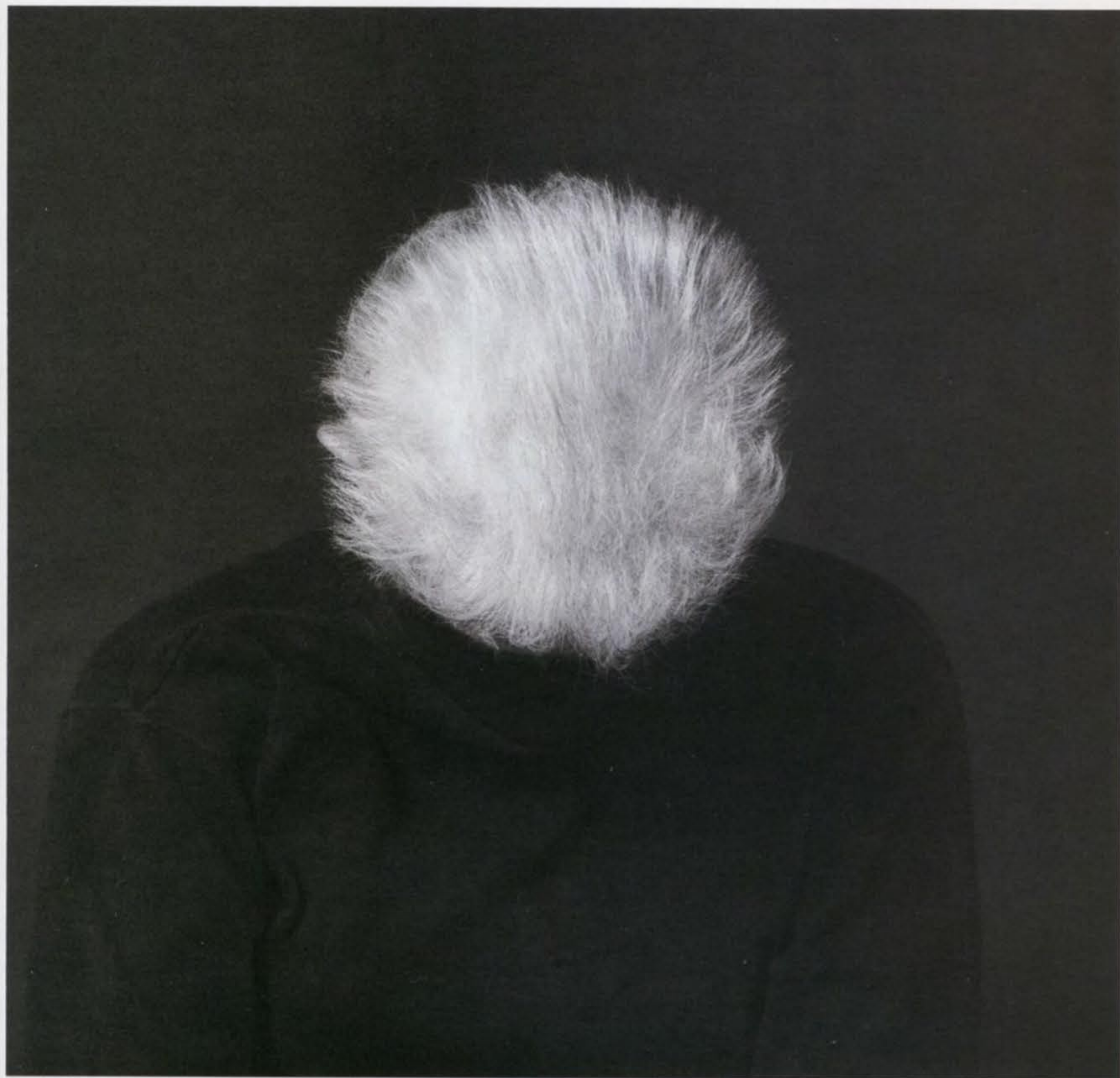


The work is a truthful record of a life lived, a life palpable in pictures.



**"Home"**  
1992,  
12 x 12 inches

**"Veil"**  
1993,  
12 x 12 inches



**"Chemotherapy"**  
1992,  
12 x 12 inches

At this time in your life



**"Emerging"**  
1993,  
12 x 12 inches