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JUDITH JOY ROSS: PORTRAITS OF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS 1986-87

February 1 – April 29, 2017

An exhibition of photographs by Judith Joy Ross (American, b. 1946), one of the most highly renowned and influential portrait photographers of our era, opens at Deborah Bell Photographs on Wednesday, February 1, and will be on view through April 29. The exhibition will feature the portraits that Ross made in 1986 and 1987 of members of the United States Congress in their Capitol Hill offices. Ronald Reagan was President of the United States at the time; Tip O'Neil was Speaker of the House; and the Iran-Contra hearings, the testimony of Oliver North, and the wars in El Salvador and Afghanistan were raging.

Ingeniously, Ross proposed an exhibition of portraits of members of Congress to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia even before she made the pictures, suggesting that the show could be held in celebration of the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution. This plan also helped her gain access to the politicians she wished to photograph. With the financial support from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship she had received in 1985, Ross embarked upon the project and proceeded to set up appointments with 117 members of Congress and their aides. The resulting exhibition, *Portraits of the United States Congress*, was held at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1987 and travelled to the Lehigh University Art Galleries in Bethlehem, PA in 1989. Twenty of the photographs were shown last fall at Tops Gallery in Memphis. The photographs have not been shown as a group in New York since they were exhibited at James Danziger Gallery in 1991.

Ross explained her motivations to Emma Kennedy and Brendan Wattenberg in an interview published in the November 1, 2016 issue of *Aperture*:

I made *Portraits of the United States Congress, 1986-87* to deal with authority figures on my own terms. When I was photographing at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1983-84, the Capitol was visible in the distance. I wanted to know who these people were who were in our government, the people who were running our lives. They didn't look real to me in the media except for on the MacNeil/Lehrer show (now PBS NewsHour), where the masks were off.

I figured out who to photograph with the help of the wonderful *Almanac of American Politics* published by the National Journal. It is a 1,591-page compendium of information about the Members of the House and the Senate, with detailed information on exactly how they voted and who they represent. I picked people I disagreed with and people I agreed with. This was very inspiring.

Susan Kismaric states in her admirable book, *American Politicians, Photographs from 1843 to 1993* (1994), 'Ross had gone to Washington with a mix of emotions – hoping that the camera would objectify her subjects and in turn identify some truths about them, and simultaneously wishing that her previously held ideas about who was "good" and who was "evil" would be confirmed. To her surprise, instead of an either/or record of good or evil,

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she came away with a series of portraits of very human beings. Her subjects appear to suffer the same complicated lives we all do.' Was I always fair or accurate? No I wasn't. This is a group portrait of us as a nation, including the fact that we are squired in favor of white male representation.

Ross used an 8-by-10-inch view camera, mounted on a tripod, and photographed in available light. "I had 15-minute appointments: five minutes to set up the camera; 10 minutes to shoot and leave. Having little time to shoot is good as it helps you give your all."

Ross acknowledges that she has been inspired by the 19th-century American photographers Southworth and Hawes (active 1843-1862): "The overwhelming power and nobility of those faces, especially the portraits of Lemuel Shaw, were my guide to making those congressional portraits." She also cites her continued admiration for the great German photographer August Sander (1876-1964). As Ross declares, "I am interested in our ordinariness, our flaws and strengths." The transcendent directness Ross achieves with her large-format view camera is further enhanced by the exquisite tonal range of her gold-toned, gelatin-silver contact prints made on printing-out paper.

Among the former members of Congress whose portraits will be shown are Pat Schroeder (D-CO), Claiborne Pell (D-RI), Robert C. Byrd (D-WVA), Strom Thurmond (R-SC), Helen Delich Bentley (R-MD), James A. Traficant (D-OH), George W. Crockett Jr. (D-MI), Morris K. Udall (D-AZ), Dick Dickenson (R-AL) and William V. Roth, Jr. (R-DE).

Ross has received wide acclaim for her earlier series of photographs: Visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC (1983-84); her tender and insightful portraits of children frequenting the public parks and streets of Weatherly, PA (1982) and Easton, PA (1988); U. S. Army Reserves on Red Alert (1990); Portraits of the Hazelton Public Schools (1992-94); Protest the War (2006-07), and The Devil Today and Reading to Dogs (2011).

Judith Joy Ross was born in Hazelton, Pennsylvania in 1946. She graduated from the Moore College of Art in 1968 and earned a Master's Degree in Photography in 1970 from the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, where she studied with Aaron Siskind. Monographs and exhibition catalogues of her work have been published internationally. Her photographs are included in numerous institutional collections, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Addison Gallery of American Art; Allentown Art Museum; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum Folkwang, Essen; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Die Photographische Sammlung, Cologne; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; among others. Ross lives and works in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Gallery hours for the exhibition are Tuesday-Saturday, 11-6. For further information please contact Leigh Blanchard at 212-249-9400 or by email at info@deborahbellphotographs.com. High-resolution scans are available to the press.

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DEBORAHBELLPHOTOGRAPHS.COM

16 EAST 71ST STREET, SUITE 1D

NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10021

212-249-9400

INFO@DEBORAHBELLPHOTOGRAPHS.COM