Dona Ann McAdams

Some Women
This catalogue was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Dona Ann McAdams, Some Women*, November 1 to December 11, 2009 at the Opalka Gallery, The Sage Colleges, Albany, New York.

Curated by Jim Richard Wilson, Director, Opalka Gallery
Co-curated by Fabienne Waring, Exhibition Coordinator, Opalka Gallery

The Opalka Gallery is grateful to Brad Kessler for his insight, editing assistance, and general wisdom.

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Cover image: Geary Street, San Francisco, 1974, gelatin silver print

--For Peggy
Dona Ann McAdams grew up in that particular time and place that was the 1960s on Long Island, NY. At the time of her rearing Long Island was dominated by former urban dwellers who had moved to the suburbs to provide their children a less hectic environment, relative safety, clean air, green grass and good schools. The part of Long Island where McAdams grew-up was very much a littoral zone. Lake Ronkonkoma was between the overwhelming suburban sprawl of Western Long Island and the bucolic fields and farms of Eastern Long Island. The train to Manhattan took under an hour and the drive out to Southampton about the same. The photo of her family's living room (Lake Ronkonkoma, 1976) informs us of modest comfort and apparent normalcy. Noting the plastic slip cover on the couch and the accumulation of tchotchkes we also can understand some of her urge to escape.

McAdams left home in 1973 heading to the West Coast. Within a year of arriving in San Francisco she purchased her first Leica camera. Photography provided McAdams a means to be a specific part of significant things, to preserve their appearance and to present them to us as part of her experience that insinuates into our perceptions. Her work grew directly out of the traditions of documentary and street photography. She shot with Gary Winogrand and Henry Wessel Jr. She knew the work of Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, and Tina Modotti. In Geary Street, San Francisco of 1975 we can already see the influence of her mentors being surpassed by her own sensibility.

Dona Ann McAdams is an activist and a woman – these are the core which informs all of her work. When she mentions her Leica as a weapon she is referring to both its handiness “…on the side of someone's head” as well as a tool for creating persuasive images. McAdams is deeply knowledgeable of the history of photography and especially as it was transformed by individuals embracing the fluidity of the Leica camera. Her work does not create a new language, but reinterprets a photographic language developed and practiced mostly by men. Her grammar may be masculine, but her vocabulary is decidedly feminine.

McAdams is a passionately engaged participant and recorder. She recognizes something as significant, frames it and presents it to us in a manner in which it seems natural and deeply human. The person or action in the photograph is significant in its own terms, not wholly reliant on its appearance in the photograph. This is central to the power of her work and particularly evident in her performance work. McAdams seeks to convey experience in the world not of the world. She is a participant as well as an
observer. She is bearing witness such as when she shows us a woman on the street because her place of employ, a bordello, has been demolished. Writing of McAdams’ Olympic City series Gary Hesse noted that she is “the consummate archivist.” She often mediates the voyeuristic aspects of street photography by giving us the perspective from a central figure’s viewpoint. Sometimes the sense of being in the scene rather than observing the scene is conveyed more subtly.

McAdams carefully composes her images and the formal qualities of her work are always evident. Film and silver prints are essential to her work connecting it to the tradition, to our history, and ensuring a lasting presence. The photograph is insistently a sensual visual experience, an independent art object, and a document. This complexity is part of the nuance of McAdams’ work. However, it is her engaged sensibility that gives these photographs their specific resonance.

Some Women emerged as a title for this exhibit for a number of reasons. One was the era of the earliest mature work – it was the era of the Rolling Stones’ Some Girls. The decision was reinforced by admiration of Alice Munro’s work and the appearance of her story “Some Women” and in counterpoise to both Winogrand’s “Women are Beautiful” and Mapplethorpe’s collection of the same name. Mostly, it was the result of realizing that McAdams empathic depiction of women is an umbilical through the decades of work.

Jim Richard Wilson September 2009

Jim Richard Wilson is Director of the Opalka Gallery and Art History Lecturer for The Sage Colleges. He has been consultant to and lectured for numerous arts organizations and museums and was Director of the Peter S. Loonam Gallery in Bridgehampton NY for ten years prior to relocating to the Capital District of New York State. Wilson has been curating shows and writing on art for more than three decades. Among his writings on art and culture are; New York School: Another View, George Hofmann: Inner Life Articulated, Wimberley’s Mode (exhibition catalogue essays), Style and Appearance: Alex Katz at the New York State Museum (a version of which appeared in Chronogram), Bridging the Gaps; The Nature and Responsibility of Visual Arts Writing (Apollo, ASLA), and Cuneiform Currency (included in Toward A Second Dimension: A Sociology Reader, ed. McGuire & Purtusati, Kendal/Hunt Publishers).
How does the camera see? The camera is a machine, of course, but one guided by a human being. Over the years, the debates about photography's status have been shaped by this apparent paradox. Is photography an art, a technology, or a craft? Is it subjective or objective? Is it merely, in Walter Benjamin's formulation, a mechanical means of reproduction or is it capable, as Roland Barthes suggested, of capturing the hidden truth of an individual or moment, preserving as a relic that which will never come again?

The fact that we can talk about a photographer's style and recognize the products of his or her distinctive eye sways the argument toward art and subjectivity. The lack of evidence of the artist's hand and the sense that (at least prior to the arrival of digital manipulation), a photograph is a slice of pre-existing life sways it in the other direction.

The photographs of Dona Ann McAdams feed into this debate. She has spent the last three and a half decades producing series after series of remarkable photographs that capture the essence of various scenarios and individuals. Yet, she practices a modest self-effacement, letting her subjects appear to speak for themselves as she cultivates the illusion that the formal decisions that underlie their presentation are effortless and natural.

In McAdams works, such details as a significant exchange of glances, the juxtaposition of a figure against an architectural backdrop or a telling relationship between figures in the foreground and the background, appear to have just happened, passively captured by the camera lens. It is only when one sees a number of works together that it becomes clear that McAdams is carefully framing and shaping the images that we see. A street scene featuring an old woman shielding her face with a newspaper would not be nearly as effective without the striped foreground that sets her off as if on a proscenium stage. Nor would a long shot down a diner counter without the open wallet of a cropped foreground figure that half obscures the face of the little girl at the far end.

The range of McAdams subjects is immense. She has photographed elder farmers in rural West Virginia, people living with mental illness in a facility on Coney Island, socialites in the Winner's Circle at the Saratoga Race track, cheerleaders in Los Angeles, avant-garde performers at Performance Space 122 in New York City, sex workers in Barcelona, and nuclear activists at American nuclear power plants. Other series reflect her activist efforts on behalf of issues like women's rights, feminism, gay rights, and AIDS. Her camera has recorded the young and old, the rich and poor, the famous and obscure.

Many of McAdams' photographs are the outcome of a sustained relationship with her subjects. To produce the series The Last Country, she lived off and on near the elder farmers of Greenbrier County for four years. The Garden of Eden photographs are the outcome of fifteen years of photography workshops she conducted with the mentally ill under the auspices of Hospital Audiences, Inc. For
Olympic City, McAdams traveled frequently to Barcelona between 1988 and 1992 documenting a shadow world that was about to be swept out of sight by the 1992 Olympics. For twenty four years, between 1983 and 2006, McAdams served as the house photographer of P.S.122, resulting in a cache of images of soon to be famous (or notorious) avant-gardists like Karen Finley, Eric Bogosian, Holly Hughes, Ann Magnuson, Meredith Monk, and Ethyl Eichelberger. A number of early staged self-portraits with nuclear cooling towers as a backdrop were the outcome of activist efforts on behalf of nuclear disengagement.

Other works are more serendipitous. They reveal McAdams’ ability to seize “the decisive moment”, to use a term coined by French photographer Henri Cartier Bresson. A master of street photography, Cartier Bresson maintained, “There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture. Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera...Once you miss it, it is gone forever.”

One such decisive moment is evident in McAdams’ photograph of a pair of little girls playing above a sidewalk grate in a nearly deserted sidewalk café in Madrid. As their billowing skirts inflate the image becomes a witty homage to the iconic photograph of a similarly upswept Marilyn Monroe. A similar humor underlies a photograph taken on New Orleans Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras. Here McAdams focuses, not on the obvious exhibitionists, but on a group of eager young men who peer skyward at a young woman who is flashing her stuff just out of camera range.

Such images reveal that McAdams acumen as a storyteller. Her black and white images are rich in wit, poetry and human interest. Even when her works recall the approaches of other photographers, they remain distinctly her own. For instance, a series of photographs taken during a series of road trips through California and the Southwest suggest the expectant vacancy of the landscape and inhabitants of the American West, but resist the clinical cruelty of Richard Avedon’s version of this subject. Several images, for instance of a pensive young woman alone in a cavernous airport, or another girl in a gingham dress standing alongside a motorcycle, bear a startling resemblance to Cindy Sherman’s staged ingénues. The difference, of course, is that McAdams hopeful young subjects are real people. And her portrayals of the mentally ill or weather beaten farm women may bring to mind the voyeuristic freak shows of Diane Arbus, but McAdams presents her worn or troubled subjects with a heartbreaking sympathy that comes from her close association with them.

McAdams came to photography through the doing of it. Very much a free spirit, she partook of the freedom of the 1970s to assume an experimental attitude toward life. Raised in modest circumstances in Long Island, McAdams did not originally consider art as a potential career. However, while working as a dental assistant in San Francisco, she began to monitor art classes at the San Francisco Art Institute. Here she discovered an affinity for photography, culminating in the purchase of her first Leica camera in 1974.
A peripatetic existence followed, as McAdams pursued her romantic and political impulses to various far-flung locations, all the while teaching herself what she needed to know about photography. She finally landed back in New York, where she assumed the position of performance photographer at P.S. 122 just as the culture wars were ramping up. A number of her subjects, and the photographs she took of them, became primary evidence in the right wing battle against “amoral” artists. Eventually the nasty battles with the religious and conservative right inspired her to return to school. McAdams earned her BFA from Empire State College in 1990 and her MFA from Rutgers University in 1994. At Rutgers she studied with Martha Rosler, an activist/artist who shared her outlook on the world and encouraged her to persist in regarding photography as a medium that both records and influences the social world. The years since have been equally nomadic. Currently McAdams maintains a studio in New York City but spends the majority of her time in Vermont where she raises dairy goats and makes cheese with her husband, novelist Brad Kessler. Sometimes an activist, sometimes a chronicler, sometimes a poet, in her recent works McAdams has focused on animals, engaging in a search for unexpected beauty.

This exhibition offers only a taste of McAdams work. It is organized around some of her images of women – not her sole subject certainly, but one which appears frequently in her work. Cutting across her many series, McAdams’ photographs of women reveal the validity of the notion of the gendered gaze. Here is a woman looking at women – she observes and records them with an immense empathy – capturing the awkward exhibitionism of prostitutes in the back streets of Barcelona, the weary calculation of a mental patient, or the weary resignation on the deeply lined face of an elderly farm woman.

Never objectified, these women retain their humanity and offer us a glimpse of complex inner lives. One suspects that for McAdams, the camera offers a kind of second sight. In these images we see that it guides her as much as she guides it, leading her, and hence us, into otherwise inaccessible worlds.

Eleanor Heartney is an independent cultural critic and author residing in New York City. Currently, she is contributing editor for Art in America and Artpress and co-president of AICAUASA, the American Section of the International Art Critics Association. She has written for most major cultural publications including Art News, New Art Examiner, the Washington Post, Sculpture, and the New York Times. She was the 1992 recipient of the College Art Association’s Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism and has also received grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts (1993) and the Asian Cultural Council (1995). Heartney’s books include a collection of Heartney’s essays published in 1997 by Cambridge University Press under the title Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads; Postmodernism published in 2001 by the Tate Gallery Publishers; Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art published in 2004 by Midmarch Arts Press and Defending Complexity: Art Politics and the New World Order, published in 2005 by Hard Press Editions.
1: Turkey Point, Miami, Florida 1981
2: Carrer San Ramon, Barcelona, 1988
3: Madrid, 1988
4: Carrer de les Tapies, Barcelona, 1988
5: Melbourne, Australia, 1979
6: Sausalito, California, 1976
7: Fiji, 1979
8: Coney Island, New York, 1995
9: Brooklyn, New York, 1979
10: Fiji, 1978
11: Gay Pride, New York City, 1989
12: Reno, Nevada, 1975
13: Brooklyn, New York, 1979
14: Meredith Monk, PS 122, New York City, 1994
15: Elko, Nevada, 1977
16: Placa del Pi, Barcelona, 2000
17: Georgie Hurd, West Virginia, 1998
18: Naples, 2009
19: Carrer San Ramon, Barcelona, 1988
20: New York City, 1984
21: Pro Choice Rally, New York City, 1994
22: Saratoga, New York, 2005
24: Sacramento, California, 1976
25: Rome, 2008
26: Los Angeles, 1975
27: Modesto, California, 1977
28: Carnival Knowledge, New York City, 1984
29: Barcelona, 1988
30: Geary Street, San Francisco, 1974
31: Lottie Christian, West Virginia, 1997
32: Jane, Frank and Martha, Coney Island, 1984
33: Irene, Coney Island, 1994
34: Lake Ronkonkoma, New York, 1976
35: Amy on Of All Times, Saratoga, New York, 2006

All works are gelatin silver prints.

5 Questions for Dona Ann McAdams

1: Within a year of your arrival in San Francisco you bought your first Leica. What transpired so quickly to bring you to acquiring this emblematic camera?

I was sitting in on classes at the San Francisco Art Institute. I didn’t have a camera. I was learning about shooting by just looking at work. Then I tried an Olympus half frame. I shot 26 rolls of film and realized the format didn’t work. I bought the Leica in the end because my hands are small and the camera is small and it’s a quiet camera. It was the camera of the Art Institute.

2: Your portfolios are very diverse and often socially engaged. How did you choose the specific topics which your work addresses?

When I moved back east from San Francisco I no longer had the light or open skies or topography that I liked working with, so I decided to shoot industrial landscapes—particularly nuclear power plants. I first shot the Indian Point nuclear plant in Peekskill, New York, because it was a train ride away. But several months later, on March 28th 1978, Three Mile Island in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, changed the way I worked. Before I wanted to make potentially interesting or beautiful photographs, but after I wanted to do the same, and create social commentary or discourse. My work became socially engaged.

As for the rest of my portfolios, circumstance has dictated, and continues to dictate, what I’ve focused on. Usually I don’t pick the topics, they pick me.

3: In an apparent mediation of the inherent voyeurism of photography, you’ve always immersed yourself in your subjects. Why did you choose to not be an ‘impartial observer’? How does that intimacy affect your work?

I don’t immerse myself in my subjects, I become part of them, or part of the community they’re in, or part of their family. I need to understand who I’m working with before I begin to shoot. I’m usually invited or asked by someone. My photographs need to be more than just formal exercises. And so there’s often, if not always, a collaborative aspect to the work, and it belongs to both myself and the subject. I’m not exactly sure how this affects the work, but I feel my primary responsibility is to the subject, not the image.
4: You’ve said you are an activist. Yet, you compose your shots carefully, shoot film, and make gelatin silver prints. Clearly you are making sensuous visual objects. How do you negotiate these very different aspects of your work? How do you mediate this dialectic?

I love photography. I’m interested in making a beautiful photograph, but not at the expense of the subjects—if I can help it. It’s a big conflict. Sometimes I just stand there unable to shoot. Sometimes I shoot. It will always be a conflict.

5: You have now spent a significant amount of time reviewing your work of the last 35 years while continuing to make new work. What has been most striking to you in looking back? How do you feel your work has significantly changed? Where is your work heading?

My visual narrative has basically been the same since I started shooting. Same camera, same enlarger, same obsessions and visual traps, and I’m still a sucker for the same light. When I was younger I shot before I felt. Now I feel before I shoot. Sometimes I wish I could work with the innocence I once had. But then, maybe I’ve made some contributions to the communities I’ve engaged with. As to where my work is heading, I have no idea. I never really know. It’s always the way I’ve worked.
Dona Ann McAdams: Biography

Dona Ann McAdams has been making photographs for over thirty years. Her work has been exhibited and collected widely, nationally and internationally, at places such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the International Center for Photography, and the Bibliotheque Nationale. Her monograph, Caught in the Act, was published by Aperture, and her many awards include a Bessie Award, an Obie Award, the Dorothea Lange Paul Taylor Prize from Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies, and Mid-Atlantic grants for her work in communities.
Epilogue

For the past three years that this exhibit has been in development, Dona Ann McAdams has been letting the horse come to her. She has been hard at work at the Saratoga race track – with a lead shank in one hand and her Leica in the other. She has been hot walking, assimilating, feeding, looking, riding, shooting…nurturing both her newest project and the horses and people that surround her.

This exhibit was nearing the halfway point in development when I stepped into working on this project at the Opalka Gallery. As the first of three studio visits approached, I knew that editing and manipulating several existing bodies of documentary work, all which speak very different on their own, into an art exhibit not labeled as a retrospective would be a delicate process. I had been viewing Dona’s work from both that of a photographer’s and a curatorial vantage point, and constantly battled with finding a balance for this exhibit. In its new context, was this the work of an artist or an activist? It wasn’t until my final visit with Dona that I saw her work for this exhibit how I should have from the beginning - from that of a woman’s perspective. When studying the photograph Amy on Of All Times, Saratoga, 2006, I realized that this was what I should have been doing all along. This image, says McAdams, “is a comma in the middle of my sentence”. I needed to let the horse come to me, so to speak.

Some Women bestows us with a rare and re-contextualized view into several portfolios of Dona Ann McAdams. With Dona allowing us to pull work from her initial intentions, these photographs are no longer labeled as positives of institutionalized schizophrenics, PS 122 performance artists, prostitutes or nuns. Here, they are images of women – gesturing, arms outstretched, shielding their eyes, angry, protected, implied, curious or peaceful. Here, the content of the images can be viewed without inherent vice.

These photographs are made not only by an activist, raising the consciousness of change in social climate, or an artist, capturing light and time within the four borders of a frame, but by a woman - one who decided to be an artist and an activist. “I just want to make the work…make beauty”, says Dona, as she holds down the phone to scream multiple obscenities at a low-flying police helicopter that is scaring her tribe of goats, “that’s all”.

Fabienne Waring
September 2009