

LENS

The Transformative Nature of the Photographs of Diane Arbus

Diane Arbus's portfolio "A Box of Ten Photographs" was pivotal in the acceptance of photography by the art world. A book published by Aperture and the Smithsonian American Art Museum examines the portfolio and its impact.



By **James Estrin**

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John P. Jacob first saw Diane Arbus's work in 1980 while taking a college photo class to help him in his chosen career of architectural preservation. The effect of her images was so powerful that he dreamed about them every night for the next week. He then decided to dedicate his life to photography, eventually becoming the curator of photography at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Neil Selkirk was a young photographer assisting Richard Avedon on a portrait shoot of Anjelica Huston at her father's London apartment when he first encountered one of Ms. Arbus's images on the wall. He was unaware of her at the time — 1969 — but he was "completely devastated" by the image of three overweight nude people in a field. It transformed how he looked at the world.

Her images brought Mr. Jacob and Mr. Selkirk together in the making of "Diane Arbus: A Box of Ten Photographs," published recently by Aperture and the Smithsonian American Art Museum to accompany an exhibition at the museum. Mr. Jacob wrote the essay for the book and curated the exhibition, which runs through January. Mr. Selkirk, who is the only person to have printed Ms. Arbus's negatives since her death in 1971, was a source for Mr. Jacob.



“A woman with her baby monkey, N.J. 1971.” The Estate of Diane Arbus

The book recreates the experience of Ms. Arbus’s limited edition portfolio, “A Box of Ten Photographs,” which she began in 1969.

Housed in a clear Plexiglass container, the original portfolios included 16 x 20 inch black-and-white prints, separated by Vellum sheets with Ms. Arbus’s handwritten descriptions of her subjects. The photos included some of her best-known images, like the identical twin girls, the Jewish giant and a young man in curlers. The portfolio was a limited edition of 50, but she had printed only eight and sold four before her death. Mr. Selkirk printed the remaining editions for her estate.

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Although Ms. Arbus is among the most famous photographers of the 20th century and many of her images are familiar, Mr. Jacob said her work was still difficult to encounter. It's not because her subjects included people on society's margins, but because we approach them burdened by the details of her troubled life and suicide at the age of 48.

An original portfolio. The Estate of Diane Arbus

“It's hard to really see Diane Arbus's work because of all of the baggage we carry with it,” Mr. Jacob said. “The book and show are about really looking and reexperiencing the pictures that we know really, really well but remain unfamiliar with in some way.”

The original portfolio was priced at \$1,000, a somewhat outrageous amount because no real market for photographs existed and prints by the biggest names routinely sold for less than \$100. But it was pivotal to the recognition of photography as a valid and viable art form, Mr. Jacob said.

In May 1971 she became the first photographer to be featured in the prestigious Art Forum magazine. Philip Leider, the magazine's editor, was unsure if photography merited coverage, but when he saw the portfolio he decided to publish it and put Ms. Arbus's photo of a boy in a straw hat at a pro-war parade on the cover.

She died two months later.

Diane Arbus at a Rhode Island School of Design seminar in 1970.

Stephen A. Frank, Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery

In 1972 it was featured at the Venice Biennale, the first time an American photographer was exhibited there. This led to Hilton Kramer writing in The New York Times that of the six Americans exhibited, "it is the late Diane Arbus, a photographer, who has made the greatest impact." He continued, "Her extraordinary pictures of human oddities, in their unexpected combination of frankness, precision and sympathy, are at once both highly dramatic and strongly affecting, and nothing else in the American show can compete with them."

For Mr. Jacob, the experience of working with Ms. Arbus's edition of the portfolio — which is in the museum's permanent collection — was “like coming home to something I knew really well” and an opportunity to tell a new story about the portfolio.

“The photographs are no less stunning and moving and shocking than the first time I saw them,” he said. “The photographs are still incredibly powerful documents of a moment.”

Mr. Selkirk first met Ms. Arbus when he moved to New York to assist the photographer Hiro. He studied with Ms. Arbus and gave her technical advice. When she died, he volunteered to help her family and was pressed into service printing the remaining portfolios as well as the posthumous Aperture monograph and her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972 that cemented her reputation.

He knows her negatives better than anyone and he said they provide important insights about her intent.

From the Art Forum issue that featured 5 images from “A Box of Ten Photographs.”
The Estate of Diane Arbus

“She had a staggering independence from all the conventions and was oblivious to everything that the vast majority of photographers took for granted,” he explained.

By using contrast she “gleefully” suppressed details in pictures that most photographers struggled to show, he added.

Mr. Selkirk painstakingly reproduced her complicated developing and printing methods, including her different ways of presenting the border of her images. While she pioneered the use of irregular black borders around the edges of images, for the box of 10 photographs she placed cardboard pieces over the negative in the enlarger to make fuzzy borders that seemed to dissolve into the paper's white areas.

In more than four decades since Mr. Selkirk first encountered Ms. Arbus's work, he has become intimately familiar with the images that pushed the boundaries of social convention and forged a place for her — and her medium — in the art world.

“The whole thing was about her wanting you to see, to share her experience of the moment and the significance of what she had witnessed, and that was a just completely different approach from any other photographer I'd ever been aware of,” Mr. Selkirk said. “They're trying to make a picture. She couldn't give a damn about that as the motivating idea. It was to present a document of something she had experienced.”

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James Estrin, the co-editor of Lens, joined The Times as a photographer in 1992 after years of freelancing for the newspaper and hundreds of other publications. @JamesEstrin