

Portrait John Bernhard, d'Onex à... Houston, Texas

Le parcours du photographe américano-suisse illustre la face éclairée du rêve américain.

Charaf ABDESSEMED

Il parle le français avec un étrange mélange d'accents américain et... genevois. Sans compter les quelques mots d'anglais qui ça et là - de moins en moins au cours de la conversation -, viennent clarifier, préciser son propos. «Je ne joue pas à Vandamme, s'excuse-t-il avec un sourire. Mais je parle tellement peu le français...»

Et pour cause, depuis plus de vingt ans, John Bernhard vit et travaille à Houston, Texas, l'Etat même d'où est originaire George W. Bush. Comme son patronyme ne l'indique pas, Bernhard est né suisse, de parents suisses, à... Onex. «Plus précisément dans les HLM d'Onex», tient-il à ajouter.

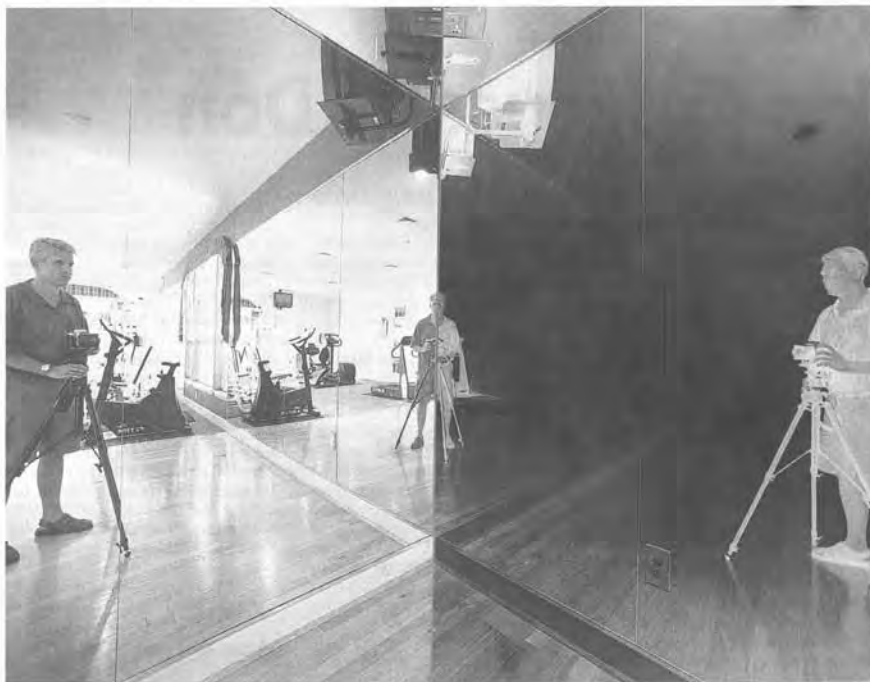
Une précision qui n'est pas superflue. Car rien a priori ne prédestinait ce modeste fils de chauffeur poids lourds et de factrice à devenir l'une des valeurs montantes de la photographie d'art aux Etats-Unis... Rien, si ce n'est son prénom, franchement prédestiné: John. «Mon père, à ma naissance, voulait m'appeler Johnny.

Le curé n'a pas voulu, et a proposé Jean ou... John: c'était la fin des années 50, et tout le monde était fasciné par John Wayne...»

Vocation

Un prénom, mais aussi une vocation, très tôt ressentie, sous la forme d'une fascination pour tout ce qui est visuel, assortie d'un irrésistible besoin de dessiner, griffonner... Photographe aussi avec son premier appareil, reçu alors qu'il n'avait que 6 ans. Besoin de voyages également, suscité par les innombrables cartes postales envoyées par son père, des quatre coins de l'Europe...

En 1978, le jeune John s'envole vers l'Amérique du Nord, pour un an de pérégrinations en sac à dos entre le Canada et les Etats Unis, où il découvre pour la première fois le Texas, dont il tombe aussitôt amoureux. Le retour à Genève est morne, la Suisse dès lors perçue comme «étouffante»... Quelques mois plus tard, il s'installe définitivement au Texas, attiré par «cette mentalité ouverte à l'immigrant, ouverte à la nou-



Dualité et métamorphose: deux thématiques chères à John Bernhard, illustrées dans cet autoportrait. (Photo J. Bernhard/DR)

veauté». Mentalité conquérante aussi, tant «en Suisse, on part perdant d'avance!»

Sans le moindre diplôme spécialisé en poche - il avait entamé à Genève un apprentissage de chauffagiste -, et sans même parler couramment l'anglais, il trouve un premier travail d'illustrateur chez Exxon, avant d'entamer des études au New York Institute of Photography.

Succès

Définitivement installé à Houston, il monte sa propre boîte, travaille comme photographe et graphiste professionnel, et commence à exposer dans les galeries du Houston Center for Photography. «Les débuts n'ont pas été faciles, se souvient-il. Ma première chambre noire était dans... mon placard. Primé lors d'un concours, j'ai même dû emprunter

pour acheter les cadres sur lesquels monter mes photos!»

Vingt ans après ses débuts, John Bernhard s'affirme peu à peu comme un des valeurs sûres dans le cercle très fermé de la photographie d'art. Les expositions se succèdent, les soutiens affluent et certaines de ses photographies se vendent déjà à plusieurs milliers de francs. «Aujourd'hui, je gagne environ 40% de mon revenu grâce mes activités artistiques», avoue-t-il avec une simplicité et une franchise si propres aux Américains.

Fidélité

Aussitôt que possible, il a demandé et obtenu la nationalité américaine, pour pouvoir «s'exprimer librement sur l'Amérique sans être traité d'étranger», adhérant à sa nouvelle patrie sans réserves. «Toutes les

barrières sont tombées dès mon arrivée aux USA. Ce que j'ai fait là-bas, je ne l'aurais jamais fait ici!» reconnaît-il sans amertume, mais non sans cultiver sa dualité. «J'ai tenu non seulement à conserver mon passeport suisse, mais aussi à le transmettre à mes enfants. Une manière de rester fidèle à mes origines...»

Fidélité qui s'exprime aussi lorsque, de passage à Genève pour le vernissage de son exposition, l'homme se réjouit en premier lieu d'avoir eu l'occasion de... «revoir ses copains d'enfance».

«John Bernhard, un Photographe suisse en Amérique», jusqu'au 12 décembre. Musée des Suisses dans le Monde, Château de Penthes (Chemin de l'impératrice 18, Pregny-Chambesey). Tj de 10h à 12h et de 14h à 18h, sauf le lundi. Rens. 022.734.90.21.

Sensualité

ChA Parfois déroutantes, souvent envoûtantes, toujours évocatrices, les photographies de John Bernhard interpellent. Tourneé vers une quête intime et personnelle, jamais militante, mais marquée par une forte dimension sociale, l'œuvre de John Bernhard exprime une sensibilité artistique à fleur de peau, fruit probable d'une pudique mais réelle lucidité sur sa propre histoire

personnelle. Fasciné par la femme, le corps féminin et le thème de la «transformation», le photographe multiplie des clichés de nus d'une sensualité à couper le souffle. A ne pas manquer également, la série «Diptych» qui, formalisant un dialogue formel entre des photographies prises à des époques et des lieux différents, met en résonance des sujets distincts.

Museums

Swiss Style



Plate 42, *Millennium Baby*, 2000 & *Houston Zoo*, 1999

John Bernard A Swiss photographer in the US

*Museum of the Swiss Abroad,
Geneva
to 12 December*

The Museum of the Swiss Abroad (Musée des Suisses dans le Monde) is presenting a very interesting exhibition of the photographer John Bernard, a contemporary Swiss artist who gained recognition abroad but is, however, less well known in Switzerland. Born in Geneva in 1957, he left Switzerland for the United States in 1980, where he graduated from the New York Institute of Photography in 1984. He lives in Houston, Texas and works as a professional photographer and graphic designer.

John Bernard's work reminds us of artists such as Man Ray and René Magritte. His photography fluctuates between dream and reality, between reflection and emotion, a duality expressing itself in a kind of transformations—which all humans undergo.

Six intriguing themes characterize this current exhibition—which should not be missed:

- "Nicaragua, a Journey to Remember"—Bernhard's first serious series taken during the revolution in Nicaragua;

- "American Spirit - Western Experience"—a series on urban cowboys, the quintessence of the American Dream and a living relic of America's pioneer past;

- "Diptych - a Work Made up of Two Matching Parts"—photographs in pairs, repetitions, analogies and duplicities;

- "Nudes Metamorphs - the Phantasm of the Transformation"—different visions in a single image, elements of earth over the female body;

- "Evanescence - A Spiritual Journey, Divine Passage, Reverie and Transition"—the essence of the soul and the inner turmoil of the body;

- "Transformation - Mystics Apparitions, the combination of the Metamorphs and the Diptych series"—a collaboration with nature, evolution, time and the change of our bodies and minds. © 2000

TRIBUNE DE GENÈVE

RIVES-LAC

John Bernhard expose ses photos en noir et blanc à Pregny

Le Musée des Suisses dans le Monde est à l'origine de cette rétrospective.

QUAN LY

Disons le sans détour, l'œuvre de cet artiste – né à Genève en 1957, et parti vivre son «American dream» à Houston – est d'une originalité à nulle autre pareille. Elle interpelle, suscite des émotions, voire subjugue. Les quelques 70 photographies choisies par John Bernhard place le monde et l'homme, la femme surtout, forcément «fascinante», au centre d'une quête passionnée et débutée, peut-être, dès l'âge de 6 ans, lorsqu'il reçut son premier appareil. Le photographe, qui cherche toujours à «capturer un moment dans le temps» et à exprimer des émotions, met en

scène les images en jouant sur la dualité, le parallélisme, la juxtaposition, la transformation et la contradiction des modèles, des formes, et des corps.

L'exposition, qui s'étend jusqu'au 12 décembre, constitue une première rétrospective du travail de ce Genevois texan, une occasion unique pour le public genevois et suisse de le découvrir. Et la rencontre entre cet homme et le Musée des Suisses dans le Monde – qui ouvre ses portes à des artistes suisses contemporains, vivant à l'étranger – ne pouvait que se placer sous le signe de la symbiose. En effet, l'œuvre duale de John Bernhard illustre parfaitement la philo-

sophie du Musée qui souhaite provoquer une rupture esthétique en distinguant clairement exposition temporaire, dédiée à l'art contemporain, et exposition permanente, consacrée à l'histoire des Suisses dans le monde. Passé et présent se côtoient, se superposent donc dans ce lieu fixe qui accueille des voyageurs, par définition en mouvement. Éternels Ying et Yang dans un cercle harmonique. A noter que les photos serviront à illustrer le spectacle de et avec la comédienne Nathalie Pfeiffer, consacré à des textes extraits des *Métamorphoses d'Ovide*; les dimanches 14, 28 novembre et 12 décembre à 16 h. ■

Musée des Suisses dans le Monde,
Château de Penthes, chemin de l'Impératrice 18, tél. 022 734 90 21. Site:
www.penthes.ch



John Bernhard. Switzerland, 1981.



John Bernhard. U.S.A, 1985.

Article in SWISS REVIEW, the official magazine of the Swiss Abroad

TEXAS

The eye of an artist

From his bedroom window in the Swiss Alps, the little blond boy captured the image of the mountain

He returned to his country with more than memories. He returned with a Texan wife and started a



Two photos, one impression: pictures from the new series "Diptych"

range with the eyes of an artist. Now years later, John Bernhard is capturing the world through the lens of a camera.

"I was only 6 when my mother gave me a little Kodak Brownie, and I loved it immediately," he said. The tiny camera sits among others in his collection on a shelf in the three story loft style house that he designed and built himself. That was after designing and building his dream studio/gallery combination located adjacent to his home near downtown Houston.

Swiss by birth, Texan by choice, the internationally recognized photographer first came to this country with a backpack and a spirit for adventure. "I had always wanted to come to America," he said. "So in 1978, I took eight months and backpacked through 43 states learning about the people and the culture."

secure job in Geneva. The draw of the U.S. tugged at his mind until, against the advice of everyone he knew, he quit his job and returned to pursue the American dream.

It was the middle of the oil boom and without speaking much English, Bernhard got a job with Exxon as a draftsman/illustrator. Deciding to follow his heart, he eventually left the corporate world and opened his own business and even today he has kept Exxon as a client. A commercial photographer and graphic designer, he amazed clients from the corporate world while simultaneously beginning to make a living with his fine art.

"At first, I had a darkroom in my closet and worked out of my small apartment," he said. "Within eight years, I was grossing three-quarters of a million dollars."

His passion for photography resulted in a collection of nudes so unique that they were captured

in the book *Nudes Metamorphs* published by Emco Press in 1999. With this work he has taken the human form in a thought-provoking approach, and the viewer must strain to recognize the forms in his works as people. Aesthetically beautiful, the series captures the artist's gentle quality of simple elegance found throughout these photographs. Using images superimposed on the nudes, Bernhard creates visual metaphors that can sometimes be compared with those of the surrealists movement.

His newest work is in actuality part of a collection of photographs taken throughout his career, combined to create a feeling for the viewer. Titled *Diptych*, the series is comprised of two matching parts and incorporates the correlation of the two images. Whether alike in composition or subject matter, the artist has managed to go beyond

unique, offering the public something different than they have ever seen before."

Bernhard has authored four books including "Nudes Metamorphs" a compilation of seven years' work, "Polo Watercolor Series" a compilation of thirteen years' work, when he was the official photographer for the sport of Polo in Houston, "United Dominion" a real estate portfolio showcase of 168 pages, and "Nicaragua-A Journey to Remember", a reflection of John's travels to the country of Nicaragua depicting his strong social concerns. A new book on his diptych series is currently in the works.

It was that curiosity that sent him to Nicaragua to see first-hand the effects of war on the country's children. The new book, "Nicaragua A Journey to Remember," is the result of a fact-finding mission



Snow-covered mountains in Switzerland



Petrochemical plants of Pasadena, Texas

Both also from the new series "Diptych"

merely a visual image to make a statement.

His fine art which has flourished over the years, hangs in galleries and museums in the U.S. and Europe and is included in the collection of the Museum of Fine Art, Houston, Musée de L' Elysée, Lausanne, Switzerland, and the Akron Art Museum, Ohio. He has been included in a major exhibition "Body Work" at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. His work has most recently been acquired as part of the permanent collection of the well known Danish Museum - Museet for Fotokunst.

"Anyone can take great pictures, that is not hard," he said. "To be successful, I knew my photographs would have to be

that took the artist south of the border in the war zone back in the eighties to gain insight into the country's political situation. All of the book's proceeds will go to help the children of Nicaragua.

"Art comes from within. I am not fulfilled if I am not doing something creative. It is my passion; it is who I am. And I have been lucky enough to support myself doing something that I love in a country that I love."

Excerpts from an article by K. Pica Kahn

For more information contact Bernhard Associates
218 Westcott, Houston, TX 77007
phone: 713) 869-2345
e-mail: johnny@bernhardpub.com
www.bernhardpub.com ■



"Untitled" from the Nude Metamorphs series

COMMUNITY

'Swiss-Texan' stages photo exhibit

By K. PICA KAHN
Chronicle correspondent

As he swings open the ornate metal gate, his smile beckons visitors from the busy street into his private world of photography.

For more than 20 years, John Bernard has been capturing images through his camera lens.

After numerous exhibits and books, the self-professed "Swiss-by-birth, Texan-by-choice" photographer is a featured player at this year's FotoFest. His new series of work titled *Diptych* will run through April 1 at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

Known for his series of nudes, Bernard has broken his own mold with this new exhibit. Meaning a work made up of two matching parts, the word "diptych" dates back centuries to the old masters.

Each piece in the exhibit finds two of the artist's photographs developed side by side in one framed picture. Whether alike in composition or subject matter, the artist has managed to go beyond merely a visual image to make a statement.

One piece finds two similar images of smoke billowing in front of horizontal structures. The picture on the left is of the snow-covered mountains of Switzerland peeking through a haze of clouds, while the picture on the right shows the plants of Pasadena hidden behind the clouds from smoke stacks.

While looking through his files, he discovered that, though taken years apart, many of his photos were consistent in composition.

"There were two photos, portraits really, taken the same year that were exactly the same in form, and it raised a question in my mind. I asked myself if this was a coincidence," he said. "I started to go through other photos and found the same thing happening. It was like a kind of *deja vu*."

"I saw a photo of a woman whose hand was cropped off while the other hand was in the frame and she had this ecstatic look on his face. It was taken in Brazil during carnival. The other picture was a man in a ghetto with his hand cropped off in exactly the same position but in two very different worlds."

Making the correlation that his eye saw the same thing over and over again, he realized the emotional impact photographs had on his life. He hopes those who look at his work will also feel something.

"I decided that my new direction photographically would be to evoke something in my audience. I believe that in photography, we are bombarded with images," he said. "There are thousands of good photographers. But I believe that photographs need to go beyond just pictures hanging on a wall. I want my work to be almost interactive. The viewer needs to be drawn into the work. It is very intricate, and I want it to raise



K. Pica Kahn photo

John Bernard looks at a photo from his exhibit, *Diptych* will run through April 1 at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston as part of FotoFest 2002.

people's curiosity."

Bernard believes he wouldn't have seen this in his work a decade earlier, that realization of the photos' dichotomy has come from his own maturation.

He is an artist through to his soul and his artistic eye is seen throughout his life. He designed and built both his studio/gallery De Frog Gallery and his home located behind it. His attention to detail has made both into show-cases.

There are very few square rooms, which draws the eye to different points.

Unwilling to live with a concrete post in the middle of his studio, he has fastened driftwood interspersed with moss to the post, almost bringing the structure to life.

More than just an art photographer, Bernard has worked commercially for large companies including many oil companies. He continues today to work commercially, although his fine art takes up more and more of his time.

He has shown his work in exhibits around the world and continues to compete with today's top photographers.

Before his *Diptych* series, he was perhaps best known for his series of nudes.

He has continued that series, documented in a book called *Nudes Metamorphs*, in differing forms.

"I have used a projector to project images on the nudes, creating an entirely different effect," he said. "My nudes represent seven years of work."

One is a picture of a nude on the sidewalk with a picture of the sidewalk projected on to the form. This makes the woman look like she is part of the sidewalk. The images are powerful — often haunting and, as with much of his work, they are quite thought-provoking.

None of his work is more poignant than his documentation of children living in a war-torn country.

Curious about life there, he was horrified with the situation in Nicaragua. On a fact-finding mission with an American group, he traveled to the country and returned with pictures of Nicaraguan children, which was also made into a book.

"I did that in the mid '80s," he said. "I was very socially and politically active then. I couldn't believe what was happening there, so I decided to go and see for myself. It was so evil."

"The pictures of the children tell the story. I was happy with the way I documented the pain and suffering and what was going on there at the time. Now I am doing something different. Man goes through stages in life, and as you get older you get re-focused."

His *Diptych* series will be featured in his next book, which he hopes to complete in the near future.

"I think I have evolved into this new series. I have often wondered what makes us click the button of a camera at a certain moment and why the repetition. I believe we work with one side of the brain and I think we do things according to this principle."

"I hope people will see these images and connect with something inside themselves," he said. "I hope that it will be like a guided tour into my mind while at the same time it will be introspective to the viewer as well."

Bernard was just 6 when he received his first camera, a gift from his mother. He still has it tucked away on a shelf with other cameras.

"I loved it immediately," he said. "I had an eye for it. I tell a story with my camera."

"I would love for people to see something in themselves when they look at my work. I hope that I evoke emotions in people. To believe that people have been moved or touched by my work — well, that would be great."

For information, call 713-869-2345.

The Official Newsletter for the Houston Arts

Art Gallery

February 15 / March 15 2002

FotoFest Exhibition

Photography show reveals the diptych venue as a means of further enhancing a past experience

Defrog Gallery, will inaugurate its spring season on March 1st with an exhibition of photographs, John Bernhard, the DIPTYCH series. It is Bernhard's second FotoFest show in the gallery and will remain on view through April 1st.

John Bernhard a Houston resident will show his most recent work and indicates an important and innovative new direction to his familiar Nudes Metamorphs series.

The artist calls this forthcoming exhibition a work made up of two matching parts and incorporates the correlation of two images. It brings out a visual duplicity of resembling forms, an intellectual encounter to a reflection on the readability and the meaning of its subjects. "I utilize the diptych venue as a means of further enhancing a past experience or a "deja vu" perception, making it a new emotional and enlightening experience."

The subject matter touches a variety of themes; nature, abstract forms and people's interactions. In some of the photographs, forms become intimate and images become connected. They convey a feeling of discovery and gratification. But in others, the photographs give a sense of tension as if the subjects are in opposition. The interaction of the two images often produces ambiguous feelings.

"I propose a visionary adventure of the creative recording process, - a unique world - a guided tour of the artist introspective inspiration."

"In the creation of an image, I believe that we react in a field of association with repetitions, analogies and duplicities. In any given situation - from time to time, place to place, and subject to subject - the image maker will subconsciously encounter similar approaches to a situation. In the vast relation of things, the intuitive action brings out the affinity of the subject matter based on idea, theme, vision, and emotion to a new level of significance."

The equation is composed by two extractions of reality that have been destined to be married into a unique visual statement. This series of diptychs constitutes an excellent demonstration of the repetitive - be it visual or in content - where the subjects have an analogous mood. Bernhard's work is included in numerous museum and private collections around the country and Europe.



KATALOG

BODY is REQUIRED

Finn Thrane

Distillates and fossils

The art history tradition of working with the naked body in paintings and sculptures left deep traces on the history of photography from the earliest stage. These imitations and paraphrases are not an issue here. Under the heading 'distillates and fossils' the idea is to look at some of the experiments with artistic elaborations on the alluring theme of the body in the museum's collection, sometimes with the representation of reality intact, sometimes without. As mentioned, one of the pioneers of this kind of thinking was Imogen Cunningham. She was able to work with the nude model so that its soft feminine forms could be exhibited under the angular title "Triangles" (1927), thus matching the age's preoccupation with abstract art. Some fifty or sixty years later, in 1984, it is the Dane *Lis Steincke* who experiments with the nude model, deforming the male torso in a water bath and allowing it to re-emerge in a strongly coloured triptych with individual conceptual titles like "Crapule", "Matematique" and "Nationale". The visual artist *Niels*

Nedergård also worked in stages. He used the camera to freeze phases in the patterns of movement of his models, so that he could later stylize them into cut-outs in plywood – which were in turn photographed as underlays for new experiments. His "Shots of reliefs" (from the 1970s) are steps in this rolling process. Brand new in the collection is the Swiss-American *John Bernhard*, who has been working for some years with myths of metamorphosis as a subtext for his model photography. The titles include allusions to the material by which the models are absorbed or into which they disappear during the work of the photographer with the transformation. As observers we feel like Apollo grasping at Daphne's supple body and embracing the hard laurel tree. In Bernhard's interpretation the dream is materialized even more brutally than in the Greek myth ("Nudewood", 1994). And in the example from the series "Stoned" (#3 from 1997) the cycle's loss of life and eros to death and destruction is an indisputable fact.



John Bernhard, Switzerland/USA
Stoned #3, 1997
27.0 x 37.0 cm
MFF purchase 2002

National advertisement in Black & White magazine



Bernhard, *Untitled*, 1994, 11" x 14"



Dater, *Imogen and Twinka*, 1974, 10" x 8"



Stano, *Sense*, 1992, 21" x 17"



Millea, *Nude Landscape*, 1986, 11" x 14"

S E N S E

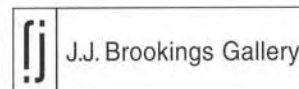
JOHN BERNHARD
JUDY DATER
TOM MILLEA
HOWARD SCHATZ
TONO STANO

October 5 until
November 9, 2001

RECEPTION WITH THE ARTISTS
5:00 PM - 8:00 PM
Friday, October 5, 2001



Schatz, *Nude Body Nude #1273*, 2000, 20" x 16"



669 Mission Street San Francisco 94105 415.546.1000 fineart@jjbrookings.com

Art, Photography, and *the Human Body*

Twelve photographers interpret the nude.

By Christian A. Peterson



Bill Brandt (English, 1904–1983)
Untitled, 1953
Gelatin silver print
Kate and Hall J. Peterson Fund

IN DECEMBER 1946, *Camera* magazine reported that photography of the nude was now legally recognized as a legitimate art. The report stated: “The broad general principle that photography of the nude is as proper an art medium as sketching, painting, sculpture, and other forms of art endeavor has been established under a decision handed down at

Albany, by New York State’s highest tribunal, the Court of Appeals.”

This news would have surprised the great American purveyor of art photography, Alfred Stieglitz, who had died just a few months earlier in New York City. Stieglitz and his cadre of pictorial photographers felt they had convincingly made the case for artistic photographs—including nude subjects—nearly a half century earlier. Working around the turn of the twentieth century, photographers such as Anne W. Brigman made images that sufficiently idealized the nude to make the subject palatable to most people. Her 1909 image *The Source*, for instance, is typical of the sensitive and poetic way she integrated the nude into the landscape. Like

other pictorialists, Brigman used symbolic props, obscured the identity of the model, and shrouded the image in mystery. These techniques resulted in photographs that resembled prints, drawings, and paintings, paving the way for their acceptance as independent works of fine art.

From August 26, 2000, to January 7, 2001, visitors to the Institute can view the exhibition “Body Work: Photographs of Nudes,” which includes work by Brigman and eleven other creative photographers who have placed the unclothed figure

before their cameras. The exhibition, drawn largely from the Institute’s permanent collection, spans more than one hundred years of nude photographs, from Eadweard Muybridge’s sequential images of the 1880s to John Bernhard’s light projections of the 1990s.

Nudes have a long tradition as an important subject in art. The male form was highly idealized in the art of the ancient world and in Europe until the early nineteenth century, when the female nude began to dominate. By the time photography was invented in 1839, most artists preferred women models over men, and photographers followed suit. As a consequence, most nude photographs made over the last century and a half feature the female form.

Eadweard Muybridge demonstrated a notable exception to this prefer-

Review article published in the museum magazine



Anne W. Brigman (American, 1869–1950)

The Source, 1909

Photogravure

Gift of Julia Marshall

unclothed body only with sex.

“Body Work” contains nude photographs from most of the major movements in the history of the medium. Edward Steichen crafted moody and atmospheric images early in the twentieth century. Working around 1912, E. J. Bellocq sensitively documented prostitutes in the New Orleans red-light district. Modernists Edward Weston and Bill Brandt each made sculptural nudes with their cameras, one emphasizing detail, the other creating distortions. Later pictorialists such as Max

of the medium. While their motives have ranged from the prurient to the pure, those photographers guided by aesthetics have produced the most fulfilling and lasting images. “Body Work” contains pictures by twelve of these dedicated workers, whose collective output affirms the enduring worth of the nude in creative photography.

Christian A. Peterson is Associate Curator of Photographs at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

“Body Work: Photographs of Nudes”

August 26, 2000–January 7, 2001

Harrison Photography Gallery

ence in his extensive study of human locomotion, which included hundreds of male subjects. Working at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1880s, Muybridge photographed both men and women in action, from leapfrogging to boxing. To better show the way the muscles and limbs worked, most of his subjects were unclothed. Muybridge, a heavily bearded and healthy specimen in his fifties, even went so far as to picture himself in a number of studies.

Kenneth Clark’s widely cited distinction between the nude and the naked in art pertains to photography as well as to the other arts. He defined the naked figure as a body stripped bare, defenseless and vulnerable. The nude, on the other hand, was a purified ideal, balanced, well proportioned, and confident. Others have pointed out that the nude is a natural state of the body—virtuous and healthy—and that those who object to it often wrongly equate the

Thorek and Wellington Lee created flamboyant nudes in fabricated studio settings. Reflecting the freedom of the 1960s, Roger Merten revealed his fantasies of love and light, and Thomas Weir essayed the nude as a symbol for Mother Earth.

Contemporary photographers Judy Coleman and John Bernhard further the journey of the nude into artistic subjectivity. While Coleman submerges her figures in deathly decay, Bernhard illuminates his with images of organic texture.

Photographers have aimed their cameras at the human form since nearly the beginning

Judy Coleman (American, born 1944)

Repose, 1989

Gelatin silver print

Gift of David J. Parins



12 September 1, 2000, Star Tribune

ART

MUSEUMS • GALLERIES



Photography show reveals many ways of looking artfully at the naked body.

By Doug Hanson
Special to the Star Tribune

Maybe we're all naked in the same way, but the artistic nude exists in as many varieties as there are artists — as attested by an exhibition of nude photography at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

This overview of the past 120 years is somewhat random, no doubt because organizer Christian Peterson was restricted to selections from the museum's permanent collection. Peterson, the institute's associate curator of photographs, has assembled a thought-provoking mix of about 75 pictures by 12 photographers.

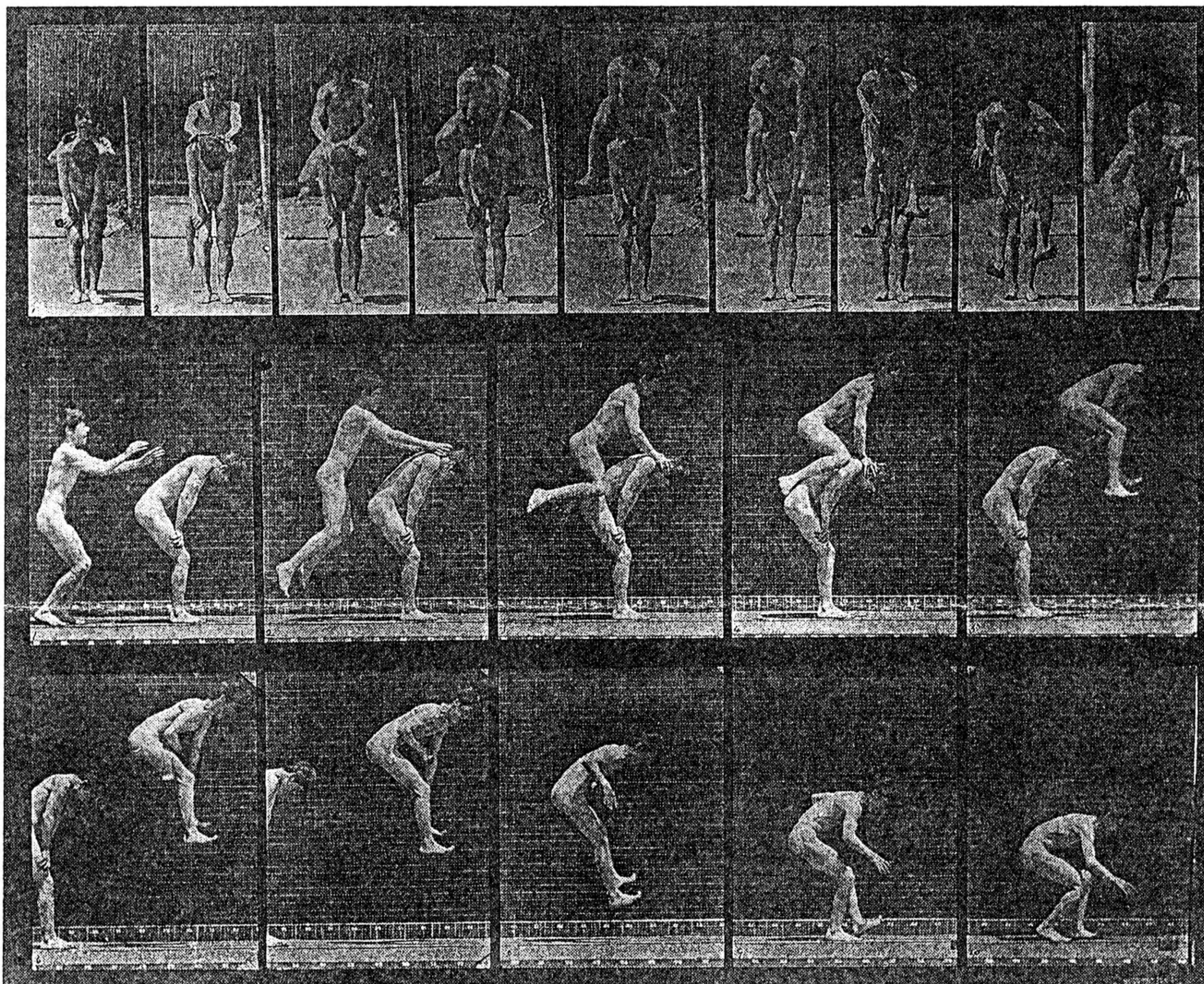
The earliest nudes are anatomical motion studies done in the 1880s by Eadweard Muybridge. In serial sets of 10 to 12 small photos, Muybridge records the movements of naked men and women as they play leapfrog, climb steps or belabor a rowing machine. These studies were touted as an aid to artists striving for accurate representation of the body — ironically, on the eve of modernism's rejection of realistic style.

Bill Brandt's 1952 untitled work throws a nude into stark relief.

Photo provided by MIA

changes of nude

The exhibit's earliest works are studies in anatomical motion by Eadweard Muybridge, photographed in 1887. The studies were touted as an aid to artists striving for accurate representation of the body.



Turn-of-the-century pictures by Edward Steichen typify the pictorialist movement then dominant in artistic photography: soft-focused, retouched, dark-toned, trying their best to resemble paintings. These pictures seem Victorian and puritanical: The models turn from the camera and cower gracefully in the shadows, as if ashamed.

In a similarly dim and staid format, Anne W. Brigman's photos from about 1910 blow away puritanism with California open air and nymphlike females who crouch by streams, inspect rock clefts or discover subterranean ponds. Her nicely composed pictures have a kitschy but genuine fairy-tale magic. They feature Brigman or her sister as models and were taken during annual camping trips into the Sierra Nevada.

Remarkable for their frank mixture of humanism, voyeurism and art are eight photographs by E.J. Bellocq taken in the early 1910s in the Storyville red-light district of New Orleans. His prostitute subjects seem at ease with him as they pose playfully or with wobbly pride in bordellos amid worn dressers, Victorian knick-knacks, peeling wallpaper and rickety iron beds. The touching humanity and resilience of these women in such a setting trans-

forms them into a metaphor of human persistence in our innocent hopes and denials, despite life's harsh compromises.

A MATTER OF DETAILS

By the 1920s, "straight photography" had come to stress crisply detailed, unaltered photos with a minimum of staging. Edward Weston's models are shot entire as they sprawl on sand dunes, or in fragments as studies of volume or light. Either way,

their identities and meaning remain cloaked in an art-for-art's-sake inquiry.

The German-born Englishman Bill Brandt once said that he really wanted to photograph empty, "nude" rooms but realized he'd get more response with human nudes. By the 1950s, his wide-angle lens was throwing close-up foreground objects into bizarre distortions. One overexposed rear end appears to sprawl across stones like a bleached, beached whale.

In a nice touch, curator Peterson includes two photographers whose work was neglected because it continued with pictorialist ideas after their vogue had passed. Max Thorek's pictures from the 1930s put humor and melodrama into what look like murky sendups of Hollywood publicity stills. And in the 1950s, Wellington Lee dropped sleek cheesecake models into upended, surreal sets.

The 1960s are represented by Roger Mertin and Thomas Weir. Mertin, now of Minneapolis, contributes small images of women wrapped in plastic or reflected in mirrors. He wants to explore the commodification of women, and some of his subjects do seem tossed into their natural settings like beer cans.

Weir's wide-angle, wrap-around California visions show a long-haired woman sprawled in the tall grass before grandiose

romantic landscapes. An old-fashioned process much like that used for blueprints, gives Weir's pictures scintillating detail, and the unique result unites the "Summer of Love" with the landscape aesthetic of the late-medieval Flemish masters.

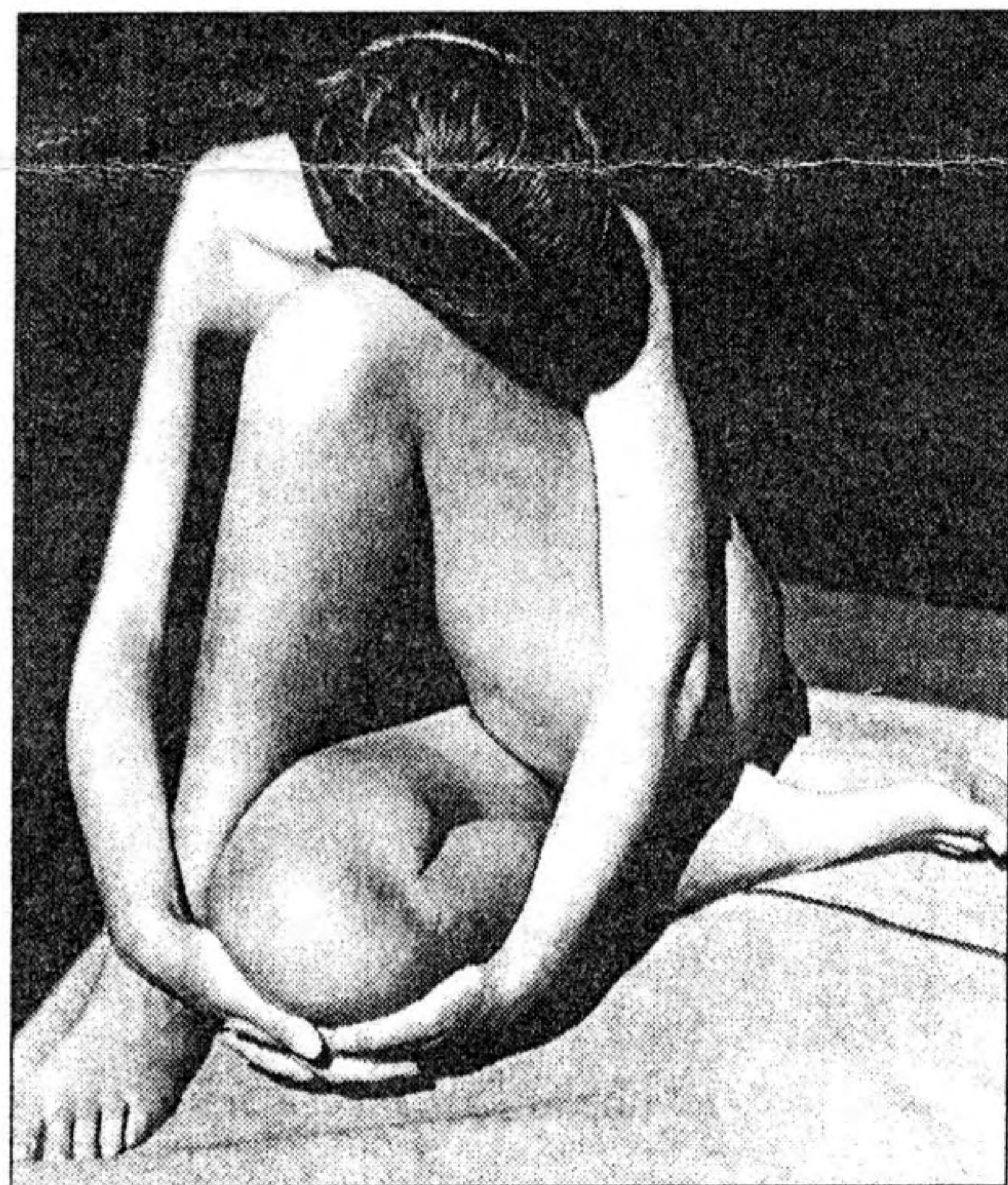
A mystical blending of the female form into nature inspires Los Angeles-based Judy Coleman's photos from the late 1980s. Through complex layering and superimposition, she erodes her own image into a busy cocoon of what look like cobwebs, fossils and earth. These mesmerizing self-images decompose into nature in ecstasy or death.

Today's artists like to recast past styles, and that tendency is exemplified here by Houston's John Bernhard, whose surrealism harkens back to Man Ray. He superimposes images of brick, stone or wood over female forms so that the women's bodies appear made of these materials. "Stoned #10" impressively transposes cascading fieldstone over a forward-tumbling body.

It's anyone's guess whether the novelty and technical mastery of these images will guarantee their longevity, but the endurance of the nude as artists' inspiration is not in question.

— Doug Hanson is a Minneapolis freelance writer.

This model's identity remains cloaked in Edward Weston's crisply detailed 1936 shot.



Photos provided by MIA

John Bernhard superimposes images over the femal body.

BODY WORK: PHOTOGRAPHS OF NUDES

What: A thought-provoking 120-year survey of how we've seen our bodies, exemplified in the work of 12 photographers.

When: Thru Jan. 7.

Where: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2400 3rd Av. S.

Tickets: Free. 612-870-3131.



John Bernhard Transforms Terrain of the Human Body

John Bernhard, who calls himself "Swiss by birth and Texan by choice" is a photographer with a unique approach to the nude figure. He endeavors to go "beyond

mere beauty and eroticism" in his outstanding solo exhibition at World Fine Art Gallery, 443 Broadway, from October 1 through 29.

To Bernhard the human body is an unexplored terrain. He approaches it with the eye of an adventurer, discovering new possibilities at every curve and turn, infusing the figure with new meaning. Like the late Robert Mapplethorpe, Bernhard is a stunning technician. Unlike Mapplethorpe, however, who tended to focus only on the erotic aspects of the human form, Bernhard is a poet who creates visual metaphors that can sometimes be compared to those of the painter Rene Magritte for their imaginative manipulation of anatomical anomalies. In one of Bernhard's most startling pictures, for example, the naked torso of a blond model, her face partially in shadow, metamorphoses into a configuration of piled-up stones. Yet, the sensual contours of her body remain, and there is even a suggestive crevice where her genitals would normally be. This extraordinary image suggests the Pygmalion myth in reverse.

In a color photograph that Bernhard calls "Prairie Fire," the legs and torso of a reclining female nude are enlivened by brilliant orange and yellow hues, as well as interior images of trees and foliage that merge with her pubic hair. The image is at once surreal and erotically charged, suggesting how the body does indeed turn into a mysterious terrain when traveled by the kisses and caresses of an ardent lover.

In yet another imaginative photograph, the silhouetted legs of a woman in high heels cast a long shadow on an intricately paved street on which a nude figure of indeterminate gender lies prone, its back, arms, and buttocks covered by the patterns of the paving stones. This darkly evocative picture suggests the emotional imprisonment of sexual idolatry every bit as effectively as the erotic

drawings of the Polish writer and illustrator Bruno Schulz.

Equally unusual in another manner is Bernhard's black and white image of a muscular male nude, decapitated by the abrupt cropping of the composition, with a shadowy profile emerging from his upper torso. Other photographs focus on voluptuous naked women, their bodies variously shadowed and overlaid with patterns that suggest all manner of intriguing visual metaphors. One of the most evocative is "Nudewood," in which a figure reclining on a wooden floor is covered by granular patterns that suggest a carved mermaid on the prow of a ship.

Through the play of light and shadow, as well as the superimposition of various incongruous images over his nude subjects, Bernhard does indeed take the human body beyond mere beauty and eroticism, adding an ethereal aesthetic element to his pictures that suggests spiritual transcendence. Even while celebrating the bounty of the flesh with their loving delineations of sensually rounded contours and their warm tones and colorations, the photographs of John Bernhard transform the human body into a vessel of the sacred. His images of the body-as-terrain remind us with great poetic force that the flesh is transitory, and all that we desire is destined to return to the earth.

Sidney Gilbert



"John Bernhard"



"John Bernhard"

Houston Chronicle

Wednesday, May 25, 1994

51

PICTURE THIS

Photographer portrays body as nature

By **K. PICA KAHN**
ThisWeek Correspondent

As he stood in the tiny photographic studio, his salt and pepper hair was reflected in the black and white photographs that lined the walls.

It was obvious to see from the Spring Branch resident's collage of his works that he had a knack for capturing the spirit of people through his camera lens.

Swiss by birth, Texan by choice, John Bernhard, a 36-year-old graphic designer and photographer has recently finished a collection of photographs that take the human form and present it as landscapes.

Resembling the soft curves of sand dunes lying quietly on a deserted beach, his photographs are hauntingly reminiscent of a dream just beyond the reach of memory.

Departing from his usual photojournalis-

tic approach, the artist concedes that his new collection represents a turning point in his career.

"I have done everything from logos to technical illustrations to corporate images," he said. "But now I have found a technique and a medium to express myself in a way no one else can."

The owner of Bernhard and Associates, a graphics design and photography firm in the northwest Houston area for the past 10 years, his works have been seen in Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report and L'Illustre Houston Style.

Clients include Theater Under the Stars and the Houston Polo Club.

Although Bernhard does some of his graphics work on computers, it is with his camera that he excels.

"I prefer the camera because with it, I am



Suzanne Rehak photo

John Bernhard is a local graphic designer and photographer who has finished a collection of photos that present the human form as landscape.

See PHOTO on Page 4.

From the front

Photo

Continued from Page 1.

able to paint the picture with light," Bernhard said.

Receiving his first camera at the age of 6, he first realized the power of images when as a child he read National Geographic Magazine.

"My mom gave me a little box camera, and I loved it immediately. I still have that camera."

Upon graduating from the EPSIC Technical College in Lausanne, Switzerland, the photographer backpacked through the United States and Canada in 1978 vowing to return.

After studying photography at the Ecole Des Arts Decoratifs de Geneve, he returned in 1980 when, without speaking a word of English, he began working for Exxon designing offshore drilling platforms and graphics.

Other than his work, his one passion is his 5 year-old blond-haired hazel-eyed daughter, Angelique.

The single dad takes great pride in cooking and caring for the child when she is with him. The tiny Francophone accompanies her father to his native Switzerland every summer.

"If I had one legacy to leave her it would be the acceptance of other ethnic groups. I want her to want to smile at whoever is next to her," he said.

"Having traveled since I was a boy, I think that is what has helped to form my image of the world. I want to teach her to celebrate people's differences."

His love of children is evident in his work, and his photographic collection of children in war-torn Nicaragua is among his best.

"I went on a fact-finding mission

with a group called Witness for Peace, who study the effects of war on people," Bernhard said. "The adults were aware of my presence, but the children were real and gave their true feelings.

"You can see it in their faces. They are the ones who are hurt. War is a game for adults."

His favorite photograph is one of a child clad in red with a basket of tobacco leaves on her head. The words VIVA imprinted in red on the wall behind the child signify revolution.

The child with the deliberate and frightened eyes faces a wall, reinforcing in images the trapped and desperate feeling of the situation.

His newest collection has been on display at the Millioud Gallery as part of Photography Houston Spring '94.

"I am very proud of this exhibit. In the past I have taken pictures of the homeless and of abused children to donate to agencies because I wanted to document the pain," Bernhard said. "But no one wants to hang a picture in their living room of a starving man or a child on a dog leash."

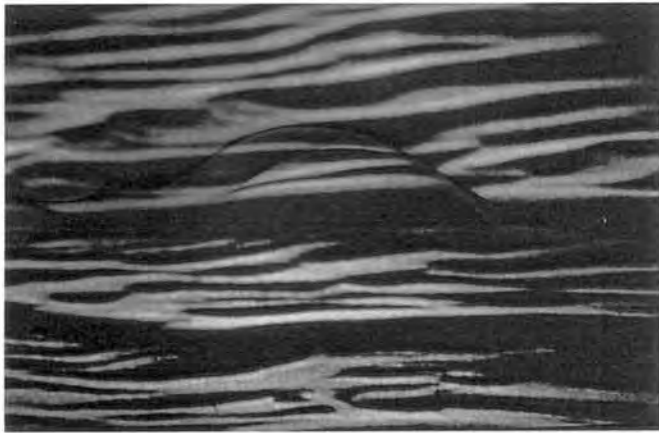
All of the photographer's works are thought provoking, and the viewer must strain to recognize the forms in his new works as people.

Aesthetically beautiful, the new series captures the artist's gentle quality, which is combined with a simple elegance found throughout his photographs.

He will be returning to his home in Geneva this summer, where his work will be on exhibit.

"I left a good job and apartment to come here, and everyone thought I was crazy," he said. "It will be great to go back a success." However, there is no doubt that Bernhard will return to his adopted home town of Houston.

VISIÓN



ABSTRACTA

John Bernhard da vida a la diversidad de formas y a la interpretación imaginativa del cuerpo femenino. Su expresión personal en la exploración del desnudo fotográfico despierta nuestros sentidos y aumenta nuestra curiosidad más allá de la simple belleza y del erotismo. Después de investigar y desarrollar una nueva técnica, John Bernhard, se ha visto recompensado encontrando nuevas variaciones en los desnudos fotográficos, nunca vistas hasta ahora. A menudo la interpretación de una imagen, en su total y absoluta belleza, puede transportarnos a otra dimensión. "Lo que persigo es el juego entre luz y sombra descubriendo líneas sensuales y sugiriendo visiones oníricas. Quiero llevar el ojo de la mente a una nueva representación del cuerpo femenino". John A. Bernhard nació y creció en Ginebra, Suiza y se graduó en el "EPSIC Technical College" de Lausanne. Siguió estudiando arte y fotografía en la "Ecole des Arts Decoratifs" de Ginebra antes de emigrar a Estados Unidos en 1980. También se graduó en el "New York

Institute of Photography". Es presidente de "Bernhard Associates Inc.", una empresa de comunicaciones formada en 1984 y especializada en diseño gráfico, publicidad y fotografía, con muchos clientes locales, nacionales e internacionales.

PURSUIT OF AN ABSTRACT VISION

Diversity of its form and the imaginative interpretation of the female body are brought to life by John Bernhard. His personal expression in exploring nude photography pushes your senses and raises your curiosity, extending it beyond mere beauty and eroticism. After searching and developing a new technique, John Bernhard has been rewarded with finding new variations of nude photography as never seen before. Often the interpretation of an image, with its sheer beauty, can transport you into another dimension. "It's that play of light and shadow unveiling sensual lines suggesting dream like visions that I am pursuing. I want to bring the mind's eye a new representation of the female body."

John A. Bernhard was born and raised in Geneva, Switzerland and graduated from EPSIC Technical College in Lausanne.

He went on to study art and photography at the Ecole des arts Decoratifs de Geneve before immigrating to the United States in 1980. He is also a graduate of the New York Institute of Photography. John Bernhard is President of Bernhard Associates, Inc., a communication firm he established in 1984. The firm specializes in graphic desing, advertising and photography for a vast array of clients locally, nationally and internationally.



Article in Huy newspaper, Belgium

ARTS - PASSIONS • Huy, Hôtel de ville et Eglise Saint-Mengold

V.A le 18/01/2000

Vision cosmique de la femme

Dans les photos de l'Américain John Bernhard, le corps humain se prolonge poétiquement dans le cosmos. À voir jusqu'au 8 février à Huy.

UNE petite vingtaine de photos, réparties dans les deux lieux d'exposition, suffisent à illustrer le remarquable traitement du corps féminin par cet artiste du Texas.

Il nous dit vouloir emmener le spectateur « au-delà de la beauté et de l'érotisme. » Le tout, évidemment, est de s'entendre sur le mot beauté.

Il est vrai que Matisse déclarait : « Si je rencontrais dans la rue les femmes que je peins, je m'enfuirais, épouvanté. Mais ce que je fais, ce n'est pas une femme, c'est un tableau. » Ce que John Bernhard nous propose d'admirer, ce ne sont heureusement pas des femmes, aux membres distordus et atteints par quelque gangrène, mais des photos, et elles sont très belles.

Un mystère nommé femme

C'est essentiellement dans sa nudité, que la femme est sollicitée. Et il y a toute une interprétation en profondeur de ce que peut être la beauté du nu, qui réside dans son mystère. Une des photos exposée s'intitule « Créature ». On y devine une femme en train de se dénuder. En supprimant le voile du vêtement, elle nous permet d'accéder au mystère de sa féminité.

Et c'est ce mystère qui la crée en tant que femme, justifiant le titre : Créature. Il y a du surréel, dans ces photos, des paysages fantastiques, créés à la faveur des contrastes puissants entre le blanc et le noir. Le commentaire affiché à l'exposition fait explicitement allusion à une « sensation de surréalisme ».

Il n'est donc pas oiseux de nous rappeler qu'un Magritte, également hanté par l'image de la femme, cherchant lui aussi à dépasser un érotisme littéral, définissait toute sa démarche comme une quête du mystère. Chez le peintre, il était suggéré, non seulement par des associations absurdes, mais par la présence obsédante du ciel et de la mer, débouchant sur une dimension cosmique que nous retrouvons éminemment dans les photos de John Bernhard.

La femme prolongée par le monde

Constamment, nous passons la frontière entre l'homme et le mon-



John Bernhard (Texas) ne chosifie pas le corps de la femme, mais il suggère son rapport intensément poétique avec les choses. À découvrir à l'Hôtel de Ville de Huy ainsi qu'à l'église Saint-Mengold. (Photo John BERNHARD)



de. Sous le titre « Cosmic fragment », justement, les plis d'une draperie pourraient passer pour les anneaux de Saturne, ou des dunes de sable ourlées par le vent. Dans « Black and wit », la femme noyée dans l'ombre, levant la tête vers le ciel blanc, se confond avec la naissance d'une aube.

L'ambiguïté la plus fréquente ici se joue entre la femme et le monde minéral. Nous pouvons souvent nous interroger. Est-ce que la femme se change en pierre? Ou est-ce la pierre qui devient statue de femme? Vaine question. Le sentiment qui nous est inspiré est qu'il n'y a pas solution de continuité entre le corps humain et la pierre, et à travers elle, bien sûr, avec l'immensité du cosmos.

On songe aux « Grandes baigneuses » de Cézanne, qui semblent jaillir de terre, semblables à des rochers ou des collines. Ou à ces pages où Jean Giono se sent tout à coup solidaire de la colline, s'identifiant à elle au point que le troupeau de moutons qui gravit les pentes est perçu comme montant à l'assaut de son propre corps.

John Bernhard ne chosifie pas le corps de la femme, mais il suggère son rapport intensément poétique avec les choses.

Jacques HENRARD

❶ Conciergerie de l'hôtel de ville et église Saint-Mengold pendant les spectacles, jusqu'au 8 février, du lundi au vendredi de 10 à 12 h 30 et de 14 à 17 h. Samedi, de 14 à 17 h. Fermé les jours fériés.

EXPO Huy

Visions de femmes nues

Quand le corps féminin et la nature se confondent...

Jusqu'au 5 février, les photographies de John Bernhard font escale à Huy. Ses oeuvres en noir et blanc sont visibles à la conciergerie de l'hôtel de ville et à l'église St-Mengold.

Cet artiste est originaire de Genève, Suisse, où il a fait ses études au Collège technique EP-SIC et à l'Ecole des Arts, avant d'immigrer aux Etats-Unis où il a obtenu son diplôme de photographe. Après avoir travaillé pour de nombreux magazines, il est devenu le représentant de la World Fine Art Gallery de New York.



● Une photo de John Bernhard exposée à Huy.

John Bernhard a publié une compilation de 6 années de travail intitulé «Nudes». Depuis 1984, il réside à Houston où il a sa propre société de communication. Celle-ci est notamment spécialisée dans la photogra-

phie, le graphisme et le design.

Les nus féminins de John Bernhard dévoilent une image tantôt surréaliste, énigmatique dans laquelle se décèle la forme sensuelle d'un corps soit aisément reconnaissable ou au con-

traire dissimulé dans un amalgame de formes, et mettant notre imagination à l'épreuve. Un mur lézardé, une profusion de galets, des structures boisées se confondent avec une silhouette, un fragment de corps.

Figées sur fond sombre, la femme s'inscrit lumineuse, éblouissante, aux courbes vaporeuses où statiques telle une statue de pierres. Ces images étranges jouent le noir et le blanc, la sensualité de la nature, la problématique du corps et l'histoire s'aborde grâce à l'imagination de chacun. L'artiste nous offre ses libertés et ses étonnements, car son but nous dit il c'est tendre vers une interprétation imaginative du corps de la femme, dans l'espoir d'emmener son audience au-delà de la beauté et de l'érotisme.

M.H

*La Meuse
25 Janvier 2000*