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Examining Identity, Gender Image by Gender Image

By KERRI MACDONALD



Chuck Samuels

"After Avedon." From the series "Before the Camera," 1991.

I am the girl. He is the boy.

That's what the young girl in a frilly white dress, her hands clasping its edges, seems to be saying in a Mary Ellen Mark photograph from 1987. In the background, the child's brother works a punching bag (*Slide 5*). The girl is an active participant in Ms. Mark's commentary on gender roles.

The image is among those included in "The Gender Show," an exhibition that showcases a range of images from the [George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film](#) in Rochester, N.Y. The show, curated by Alison Nordstrom, the museum's senior curator of photographs, and Jessica Johnston, assistant curator of photographs, launches Friday evening.

Dr. Nordstrom, 63, and Ms. Johnston, 42, have been preoccupied with the question of gender in photography over the past couple of years.

But "The Gender Show" isn't only about gender. "It's really a show about how much we love photographs," Dr. Nordstrom said from Rochester, where the exhibit will run through Oct. 13 before it begins traveling.

"And," Ms. Johnston added, "it's also a show about the collection at Eastman House."

The curators are interested in the performance aspect of gender, particularly in front of the camera, and have been examining how gender roles are represented in images ranging from 19th-century vernacular photographs to contemporary art.

"The notion of representing sex and gender from photography has been with us from almost the very beginning," Dr. Nordstrom said.

Most of the 157 photos in the main exhibition come from the George Eastman House collections, including images by Ms. Mark, Edward Steichen, Richard Avedon, Robert Frank, Julia Margaret Cameron, Lewis Hine, Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman and Chuck Samuels. Additionally, [Bruce Barnes](#), who became the museum's director in October 2012, curated a selection of contemporary art photographs, almost none of which are part of the museum's collection.

"Contemporary art photography has not been a focus of what we've done here," Mr. Barnes said. "And because gender is such an important topic in contemporary art photography, it was a perfect fit."

The third arm of the show is a smaller exhibition of 16 photographs from the series "[My Pie Town](#)" by the Rochester-born photographer [Debbie Grossman](#).



Debbie Grossman

Jessie Evans-Whinery, homesteader, with her wife Edith Evans-Whinery and their baby. From the series "My Pie Town."

The museum purchased five photographs by Mr. Samuels, a Canadian photographer, specifically for the exhibition, and four appear. These images, Dr. Nordstrom said, "make it clear that it's about photography, not specifically about gender."

In his series "Before the Camera," Mr. Samuels comments on how gender is portrayed photographically by using his own body to reinterpret famous portraits of women (*Slide 11*). His photographs are among the more contemporary, and purposefully critical, ones shown from the Eastman collection. Few of the images included were meant explicitly to explore the theme of gender.

That is part of what makes the show work. The content ranges widely, including advertising images and theatrical cabinet cards, which were made in the late 1800s to promote performers.

"It would have been a completely different show if we had left out things like advertising," Dr. Nordstrom said. "We're not an art museum. We have a lot of art — and certainly gender has been an interest and a concern in the world of high art, especially in the last 20 years — but we are very taken with the way our collection is the collection of the history of photography."

Like Ms. Mark's photo of the young girl in the white dress, many of the photos included in the exhibition show gender as learned behavior. A tintype and a daguerreotype from the 1850s, for instance, show a man smoking a pipe and a woman knitting.



Photographer unknown

Elderly woman knitting, circa 1855.

"I've never seen a daguerreotype of a man knitting or a woman smoking a pipe," Dr. Nordstrom said. "But it seems to be that all of these kinds of photographs are somewhat more performative than contemporary work, partly because they took a little bit longer to make."

Images from years later — like those in [Lewis Hine's](#) "The Ethical Culture Schools NYC" series, which were taken in or around 1935 — show little boys learning to cook (*Slide 17*).

One of Mr. Barnes's favorite images from the contemporary portion of the show is Catherine Opie's photograph of her son, "Oliver in a Tutu." Cross-dressing and role playing have a long history in art forms, he said.



Catherine Opie

"Oliver in a Tutu." From the series "In and Around Home," 2004.

The difference, Mr. Barnes said, is that in more recent work — Cindy Sherman's, for example — the artist is often a participant, rather than just an observer.

Dr. Nordstrom and Ms. Johnston looked for contemporary images from the George Eastman collection that conveyed the idea of self-representation, like a self-portrait by Jessica Todd Harper, who shows herself standing uncomfortably in the middle of a sitting room as her fiancé and his parents gaze in her direction (*Slide 19*).

"We, as viewers of the photograph, become part of that judgmental audience," Dr. Nordstrom said. "And you have to think, 'Will she be an appropriate bearer?'"

But for all the questions it asks, "The Gender Show" is meant to have a lighthearted tone over all. "It was important to include photographs that would make people smile," Dr. Nordstrom said.



Victor Keppler

"Carter Corsets," December 1938.