

Kevin Dohmen  
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**Review of**  
***Robert Bergman: Portraits 1986-1995***  
National Gallery of Art  
Washington, DC

11 October 2009 – 10 January 2010  
West Building, Ground Floor

This exhibit consists of thirty slightly larger than life size, closely cropped, color inkjet prints selected from among ninety portraits anonymously donated to the National Gallery in 2006. (The National Gallery's website states that there are thirty-three pieces in the show, but there are exactly thirty.) The images are all of people whom the artist met on the street in various American cities over the course of ten years. There seems to be no particular order to the images. They are not chronological, not organized by sex, or by age, by location, or by any other apparent scheme. None of the images is titled. The only information provided for each photo is the year. The only information given about the show is in three short paragraphs on the wall. Included are the artist's name and an explanation that the absence of any context or other description of the images is to make sure that the viewer is reacting to the art and not to information about the art. In one interview he says, "I don't want you to have any escape from simply reacting to the art" (Trescott). One reviewer described Bergman's style as, "a new artistic genre: anonymous portraiture" (Mattick, in Levi Strauss, et. al).

The somber mood of the photos is dominant. The images all display expressions of sadness or thoughtfulness. Some appear to be people of middle class. Some appear to be homeless or injured (like one woman with facial scars that look like knife wounds and cigarette burns) or to have some kind of deformity (like one woman whose

forehead is misshapen). In the second room is a photo of a person who could be male or female, whose sunken skeletal face, wildly filthy hair, and bright, insane eyes almost physically push one backwards. One photo of a man looks uncannily like Abraham Lincoln. One woman looks very much like pop star, Madonna. All seem to be in a state of suffering or sadness or mistrust or fear.

The dark mood of the images is accentuated by Bergman's technique and vice-versa. Each of the images is beautifully lit with only available light and shot with a wide aperture that blurs the gritty background of the surrounding street scene. He somehow even makes the unflattering green light of a fluorescent sign serve to emphasize the dignity in one woman's dirty and emaciated face. In some magical way Bergman manages to make the ugly beautiful and the beautiful ugly.

Amazingly, this is Bergman's first solo show. For the past forty-five years Bergman, now age 65, has been working at his photography and supporting himself with odd jobs and with some money from his mother (Trescott). His first break into the art world was a 1998 book entitled *A Kind of Rapture*, consisting of fifty-two untitled, uncaptioned color portraits, some of which are displayed in the National Gallery show (Yau, in Levi Strauss, et al.). The foreword to the book was written by Nobel laureate, Toni Morrison, who said,

Occasionally there arises an event or a moment that one knows immediately will forever mark a place in the history of artistic endeavor. Robert Berman's portraits represent such a moment, such an event. In all its burnished majesty his gallery refuses us unearned solace and one by one by one each photograph unveils *us*, asserting a beauty, a kind of rapture, that is as close as can be to a master template of the singularity, the community, the inextinguishable sacredness of the human race (quoted in The Art Appreciation Foundation).

Art historian and critic, Meyer Shapiro, in the afterword of the book called Bergman's photos, "masterful revelations" and "a new and moving experience of photography as art" (quoted in Dobrzynski). Bergman has a similar show opening at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art this month.

Is Bergman successful in forcing us to directly confront his art and the subjects portrayed by it? My initial reaction was that Bergman's talent was wasted by his choice of subjects, his focus on ugliness and suffering. I viewed the entire show in about ten minutes and nearly ran from the building. But I could not get the images out of my mind. The next day I found myself making the drive back into the city to look again. The more I looked, the more I found myself staring into the eyes of the portraits, as if trying to get a sense of who each person is, to understand each story. Bergman does succeed, I think. By showing us the suffering of these people, his images evoke a sense of empathy that unites "us" with "them."

## Works Cited

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