

Celebrating the life and work of Diane Arbus

London's Hayward Gallery is currently hosting an exhibition showcasing the work of influential American photographer Diane Arbus. Focussing on the first half of her career (1956-1962), Diane Arbus: in the beginning displays the artist's work at its most powerful and provocative.

Arbus' early career Arbus was born as Diane Nemerov in 1923 to wealthy parents in New York. As an adult, she distanced herself from her 'privileged' roots and in 1941, at aged 18, she married Allan Arbus. They worked together in fashion photography until 1956, when she began to focus on her own work, transforming herself into an independent artist. Arbus studied for a time under notable street photographer Lisette Model, finding her place and artistic voice among the outsiders and the marginalised. She didn't just capture her subjects from afar; she got up close and involved. The result is a body of work that is bold, confrontational and sometimes even a little disturbing.

Arbus' continued influence Arbus died in 1971 at age 48 by her own hand. However, she remains a highly relevant and influential figure in the world of street photography, which is still a largely male domain. Her work has been recognised as innovative and at the forefront of documentary photography. A year after her death, Arbus was the first photographer to be featured at the Venice Biennale art exhibition and she received a retrospective at the New York Museum of Modern Art which then toured North America, to be seen by around seven million visitors. Her name is always included in discussions on the most influential street photographers, joining the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Garry Winogrand, Walker Evans and Lee Friedlander. She is also among a wider group of female photographers, such as Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman and Sally Mann, whose challenging work focuses on equally confrontational subject matter.

Indeed, while she has received much acclaim, both during her lifetime and posthumously, Arbus was a controversial artist, who continues to spark debate and evoke extreme opinion today. One question often asked of her work is whether it sympathises with and champions her subjects or exploits them and exposes them to ridicule. By their very nature, many of the images are voyeuristic and expose the dark corners of society where many never venture, inviting the viewer to stare. Ultimately, Arbus' work remains open to criticism because she pushed boundaries and confronted taboos. Her images are not always comfortable to view, but they are always hard to look away from.

The Hayward Gallery's current exhibition provides a valuable opportunity to celebrate a photographer whose body of work is unique, polarising and as revealing of the artist herself as of her subjects. Organised by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the exhibition is extensive, featuring over 100 images and filling two rooms. The images are displayed simply on individual pillars, allowing the viewer to appreciate each one in isolation. The fact that the exhibition includes many images that have never been shown before in Europe offers an exciting opportunity to enter Arbus' world and spend some time with those she chose to document.

The exhibition also offers the chance to see some of her more culturally important images. One such image is the famous Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, NYC 1962. To fully appreciate this image, and many others in the collection, it is important to place Arbus' work in the context of the period in which she worked. America in the 1960s was a turbulent and violent time; not least due to the ongoing Vietnam war and the growing opposition to it. It is within this turmoil that Arbus places Boy with a Straw Hat Waiting to March in a Pro-War Parade, 1967, which depicts an image of a young boy off to a pro-Vietnam war rally, wearing

a small badge that simply reads 'bomb Hanoi'. Again, this image takes on additional meaning as it was taken at the height of the war, which reached its bloodiest in 1968, but would then last for a further seven years. Violence juxtaposed with youth makes another appearance in *Kid in a Hooded Jacket Aiming a Gun*, NYC 1957. Arbus often captured her subjects at particularly vulnerable moments in their lives, such as in *Old Woman in a Hospital Bed*, NYC 1958, which depicts a subject who is clearly close to death. Arbus takes this a step further with the graphic, *Corpse with a Receding Hairline and Toe Tag*, NYC 1959.

While many of Arbus' subjects are suburban families, her most striking works are those that capture the marginalised. She shot many of her subjects in New York City but Arbus' photographic journey also included spending time in Coney Island and on Long Island, capturing carnival performers, strippers and female impersonators. There are many such examples on display, including *Female Impersonator Holding Long Gloves*, Hempstead, LI 1959.

It's hard to look at some of Arbus' images without thinking of cinema. For example, *The Backwards Man in His Hotel Room*, NYC 1961 brings to mind a character that might pass through a David Lynch movie, while *The Madman from Massachusetts in an Empty Bar*, NYC 1960 takes us into Coen brothers territory. Indeed, the exhibition is even interspersed with still images Arbus captured of feature films as they played.

Throughout the exhibition, what is particularly striking is how Arbus' diverse subjects react to her lens. The expressions captured range from indifference and curiosity to defiance and anger. Throughout, we are invited to react and respond to the subjects, as the photographer herself did.

While Arbus' work focusses largely on human subjects, there are also images that depict the absurdity and poignancy of life away from humanity. For example, the obscure *Rocks on Wheels*, Disneyland 1962 and the Edward Hopper-esque *Empty Snack Bar*, 1957. The exhibition departs from Arbus' early career to display her 1970 *Box of 10 Photographs*. This was put out as a limited-edition portfolio, taking the audience into the domains of the marginalised and the suburban to offer a 'snapshot' of her more startling and thought-provoking images.

Arbus was once quoted as saying, "I really believe there are things nobody would see if I didn't photograph them", and the breadth of the Hayward Gallery exhibition certainly gives visitors a broad perspective on this unique artist.

diane arbus: in the beginning continues at the Hayward Gallery until 6 May 2019.

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