



# VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University  
VCU Scholars Compass

---

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

---

2005

## The Photographer's Wife: Emmet Gowin's Photographs of Edith

Mikell Waters Brown

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

© The Author

---

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/4501>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

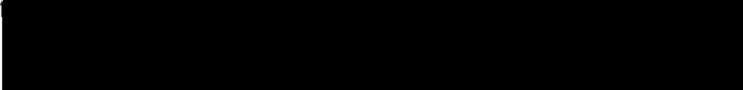
**School of the Arts**  
**Virginia Commonwealth University**

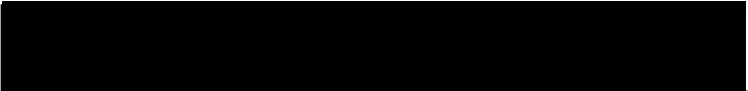
This is to certify that the dissertation prepared by Mikell Waters Brown entitled "The Photographer's Wife: Emmet Gowin's Photographs of Edith" has been approved by her committee as satisfactory completion of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

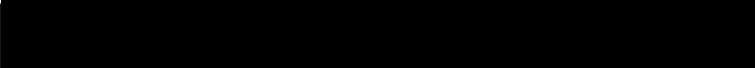
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Robert C. Hobbs, Director, Department of Art History, School of the Arts


  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Eric Garberson, Reader, Department of Art History, School of the Arts

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Fredrika Jacobs, Reader, Department of Art History, School of the Arts


  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Michael Schreffler, Reader, Department of Art History, School of the Arts

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Kerry Brougher, ~~Outside~~ Reader, Chief Curator, Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Eric Garberson, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Art History, School of the Arts

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. James Farmer, Acting Chair, Department of Art History, School of the Arts

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Richard E. Toscan, Dean, School of the Arts

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. F. Douglas Boudinot, Dean, School of Graduate Studies

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date May 16, 2005

©Mikell Waters Brown 2005  
All Rights Reserved

The Photographer's Wife:  
Emmet Gowin's Photographs of Edith

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Mikell Waters Brown,

B.F.A., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1981

M.A., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1991

Director: Robert C. Hobbs, Ph.D.  
Rhoda Thalhimer Endowed Chair of Art History

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
May, 2005

## Acknowledgment

The author wishes to thank several people who have greatly contributed to “The Photographer’s Wife.” First, I would like to acknowledge the members of my committee. The topic of this study emerged from a seminar led by Dr. Robert Hobbs and if it were not for his continued guidance and encouragement as teacher, friend, and dissertation director, this project would never have reached completion. Throughout the entire process, Dr. Hobbs’ knowledgeable feedback, his persistent belief in the abilities of this writer, and his commitment to excellence were crucial to its success. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Eric Garberson, who provided direction in the dual roles of reader and graduate advisor. This work benefited from his incisive editing and his grasp of current scholarship in areas critical to the subject. I am also greatly indebted to Drs. Fredrika Jacobs and Michael Schreffler who, as departmental readers, offered insightful commentary that proved to be very helpful in the final editing process. And finally, it was an honor to have Mr. Kerry Brougher of the Hirshhorn Museum accept the role of outside reader for this dissertation. His thoughtful responses made me aware of several exciting possibilities with regard to the potential direction of the subject.

I would also like to acknowledge the continued support of my friends and colleagues at John Tyler Community College and my family members. In particular, I would like to thank my brother, Bert Waters, whose concurrent pursuit of a doctorate inspired me to get there first; my mother, Mary Waters, for her insistence that I “finish that paper;” my husband, Mark Brown, who provided me with the space, time, and energy to do so; and our son, Andy Brown, who always understood how important this project was to me and to our family. Their love, patience, and encouragement truly made this possible.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Figures.....	v
Abstract.....	x
Introduction: The Discourse of the Photographer's Wife.....	1
Representation and Discourse.....	3
Background and Review of Literature.....	7
Chapter Overviews.....	16
Chapter 1: Representing the Wife.....	19
The Man and His Wife.....	19
The Artist and His Wife.....	26
<i>The Muse</i> .....	28
<i>The Portrait</i> .....	31
<i>Artists and Wives</i> .....	36
The Photographer and His Wife.....	49
<i>Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe</i> .....	50
<i>Harry and Eleanor Callahan</i> .....	68
<i>Lee and Maria Friedlander</i> .....	77
<i>Images of the Wife</i> .....	85
Chapter 2: Representing Edith as Family.....	88
Family, Place and Religion.....	88
The Family in Context.....	93
Family Photography.....	103
Documentary Photography and the Snapshot Aesthetic.....	107
The Family Series.....	121
Reading the Family Series.....	135
Chapter 3: Representing Edith as the Photographer's Wife.....	138
Edith as Nature.....	139
<i>A Theology of Science and Art</i> .....	142
<i>Woman as Nature</i> .....	147

Edith as Mother.....	154
<i>Pregnancy</i> .....	155
<i>Motherhood</i> .....	161
Edith as Wife.....	168
<i>Erotics &amp; Transgression</i> .....	169
<i>Identity &amp; Narrative</i> .....	180
Conclusion: Edith as a Photograph.....	193
Bibliography.....	206
Figures.....	220
Vita.....	274

## List of Figures

Except as otherwise noted, Emmet Gowin's photographs are reproduced in *Emmet Gowin: Photographs* (New York: Knopf, 1976), to be referred to as "Knopf," and Martha Charoudhi, *Emmet Gowin: Photographs* (Boston, Toronto, London: Bullfinch Press, 1990), to be referred to as "Charoudhi," and are identified by page number.

### FIGURES

- 1 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait with Saskia*, c. 1635  
Christopher White, *Rembrandt and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), 32.
- 2 Peter Paul Rubens, *Self-Portrait with Isabella Brandt*, c. 1609  
Edward Lucie-Smith, *Rubens* (London: Spring Books, 1967), plate 2.
- 3 Rubens, *Het Pelsken*, 1635 – 40  
Lucie-Smith, plate 48.
- 4 Alfred Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1918  
*Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait by Alfred Stieglitz*. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), plate 24.
- 5 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1918  
Plate 27.
- 6 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1919  
Plate 21.
- 7 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1917  
Plate 2.
- 8 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1918  
Weston Naef, ed., *In Focus: Alfred Stieglitz* (Malibu, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995), plate 21.



- 9 Georgia O’Keeffe, *Music Pink and Blue*, 1919  
Katherine Hoffman, *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Celebration of Music and Dance* (New York: George Brazillier, 1997), plate 6.
- 10 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1930  
Plate 51.
- 11 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1933  
Plate 47.
- 12 Harry Callahan, *Chicago*, 1953  
Callahan, *Eleanor* (Carmel, California: The Friends of Photography and New York: Callaway Editions, 1984), plate 37.
- 13 Callahan, *Chicago*, 1948  
*Eleanor*, plate 16.
- 14 Callahan, *Weed against Sky, Detroit*, 1948  
Sarah Greenough, *Harry Callahan* (Washington, D.C.: The National Gallery, 1996), plate 66.
- 15 *Aix-en-Provence*, 1958  
*Eleanor*, plate. 56.
- 16 Callahan, *Chicago*, 1953  
*Eleanor*, plate 51.
- 17 Lee Friedlander, *Minneapolis, Minnesota*, 1966  
Lee Friedlander, *Self Portrait* (New York: Fraenkel Gallery, 1998), plate 37.
- 18 Friedlander, *Las Vegas*, 1970  
Friedlander, *Maria: Photographs* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), plate. 18
- 19 Friedlander, *Mexico City*, 1974  
*Maria*, plate 13.
- 20 Friedlander, *Nude, Phoenix, Arizona*, 1978  
William A. Ewing, *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form* (Chronicle Books, 1994), p. 97.
- 21 Emmet Gowin, *Nancy, Danville, Virginia, 1965*  
Chahroudi, p. 24.

- 22 Gowin, *Family, Danville, Virginia, 1970*  
Knopf, p. 31.
- 23 Gowin, *Edith, Ruth, and Mae, Danville, Virginia, 1967*  
Chahroudi, p. 17.
- 24 Nicholas Nixon, *The Brown Sisters*, 1976  
Nixon, *The Brown Sisters* (New York: The Museum  
of Modern Art, 1999), plate 2.
- 25 Antonio Canova, *The Three Graces*, c. 1815  
Timothy Clifford, et al., *The Three Graces: Antonio Canova*  
(Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1995), fig. 44.
- 26 Gowin, *Raymond Booher and Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1969*  
Knopf, p. 30.
- 27 Walker Evans, *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife*, 1936  
Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1939 to the  
Present* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1997), p. 240.
- 28 Gowin, *Edith and berry necklace, Danville, Virginia, 1971*  
Knopf, p. 56.
- 29 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1971*  
Chahroudi, p. 35.
- 30 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1970*  
Chahroudi, p. 34.
- 31 Gowin, *Edith*, 1986  
Chahroudi, p. 103.
- 32 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1967*  
Chahroudi, p. 29.
- 33 Gowin, *Edith and Elijah, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974*  
Chahroudi, p. 36.
- 34 Gowin, *Edith, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974*  
Chahroudi, p. 48.
- 35 Callahan, *Chicago*, 1950  
Pl. 39.

- 36 Gowin, *Edith, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974*  
Chahroudi, p. 49.
- 37 Friedlander, *Portland, Maine, 1962*  
*Maria*, plate 3.
- 38 Callahan, *Chicago, 1950*  
*Eleanor*, plate 41.
- 39 Friedlander, *New City, New York, 1972*  
*Maria*, plate 14.
- 40 Gowin, *Edith and Elijah, Danville, Virginia, 1968*  
Knopf, p. 17.
- 41 Gowin, *Edith and Elijah, Danville, Virginia, 1968*  
Chahroudi, p. 20.
- 42 Gowin, *Edith and Isaac, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974*  
Knopf, p. 95.
- 43 Gowin, *Edith and Isaac, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974*  
Knopf, p. 96.
- 44 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1971*  
Chahroudi, p. 39.
- 45 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1978*  
Chahroudi, p. 91.
- 46 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1971*  
Chahroudi, p. 41.
- 47 Gowin, *Edith and Rennie Booher, Danville, Virginia, 1970*  
Chahroudi, p. 26.
- 48 Gowin, *Edith and Rennie Booher, Danville, Virginia, 1970*  
Knopf, p. 40.
- 49 Gowin, *Edith and Rennie Booher, Danville, Virginia, 1971*  
Knopf, p. 41.
- 50 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1973*  
Chahroudi, p. 88.

- 51 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1983*  
Chahroudi, p. 90.
- 52 Gowin, *Edith, 1996*  
Arthur Ollman, *The Model Wife* (Boston, New York, London: Bulfinch Press, 1999), p. 136.
- 53 Friedlander, *New City, New York, 1971*  
*Maria*, plate 15.

## **Abstract**

### **THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S WIFE: EMMET GOWIN'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF EDITH**

By Mikell Waters Brown, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005

Major Director: Robert C. Hobbs, Ph.D.  
Rhoda Thalhimer Endowed Chair in Art History

Exemplified in the oeuvres of photographers Alfred Stieglitz, Harry Callahan, Lee Friedlander, and Emmet Gowin, the photographer's wife is a distinctive subject in twentieth-century American fine-art photography that fuses the domains of public and private life through the conflation of art and marriage. The transgressive nature of this juncture can be located in a confluence of gazes – the artist's, the subject's, and the viewer's – that are embroiled in constructing subjectivities. The phrase “photographer's wife” underscores an assumed imbalance of power reflecting a binary of active/passive, artist/model, and husband/wife. It is this study's contention that the complexity of the wife's role in the inspiration and production of her husband's creative output and the fluid nature of this interdependency are significant factors in images of her made by him and that they undermine the efficacy of this binary. A discursive examination of the

subject, with an emphasis on Gowin's *Edith* series, will determine how perceptions of marriage affect the viewing of those images.

Since the early 1970s, Gowin has guided the critical reception of his photographs with a distinctly anagogical reading of the works. This study contrasts Gowin's narrative with a discursive reading, allowing the works to be examined suprapersonally as a means of determining the larger dynamic traditions from which they derive. The subject implicates numerous discourses that are examined within the areas of gender and power, portraiture and self-portraiture, representation and identity, and viewer reception. Additionally, images in the *Edith* series often traverse the genre formations of photography. By defamiliarizing family, snapshot, documentary, and art photography, Gowin's images create intervals between genres allowing them to be viewed intertextually as contained by the boundaries of genre formation and outside of it. This aspect of the work illustrates how images of the photographer's wife can be viewed at the interstices of the public and private worlds of art and marriage, as well as across photographic genres. Viewed discursively, the photographer's wife can be examined as a dynamic production of knowledge that is shaped and reshaped over time.

## Introduction

### The Discourse of the Photographer's Wife

All photographs of the body are potentially 'political,' inasmuch as they are used to sway our opinions or influence our actions. In this regard, an advertising image is as political as the most blatant propaganda. So is the supposedly autonomous art object, insofar as it represents fundamental attitudes and values. From a feminist viewpoint an Edward Weston study of a nude on a sand-dune makes questionable assumptions about the passivity of women, the youthful ideal of beauty, and about women's assumed harmony with nature.

William A. Ewing, *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form*, 1994

[Stieglitz] began to photograph me when I was about twenty-three. When his photographs of me were first shown, it was in a room at the Anderson Galleries. Several men – after looking around a while – asked Stieglitz if he would photograph their wives or girlfriends the way he photographed me. He was very amused and laughed about it. If they had known what a close relationship he would have needed to have to photograph their wives or girlfriends the way he photographed me – I think they wouldn't have been interested.

Georgia O'Keeffe, *A Portrait*, 1978

In a 1999 summary of twentieth-century photography, critic A.D. Coleman wrote that in Alfred Stieglitz's "decades-long study of Georgia O'Keeffe, he invented the extended portrait as a uniquely photographic form."<sup>1</sup> Stieglitz first photographed O'Keeffe in 1917 and continued to do so until his death in 1946, though very few images were made after 1937. Entitled *A Portrait*, the series totaled approximately 350 photographs that were personally controlled by O'Keeffe after Stieglitz's death, and thereafter by her estate. This Stieglitz/O'Keeffe legacy has bequeathed to twentieth-century American fine-art photography the subject of the photographer's wife. Harry Callahan, Lee Friedlander, and Emmet Gowin are among the many well-known

---

<sup>1</sup> A.D. Coleman, "Breaking the Barriers," *Art News* (May, 1999): 150.

photographers who have made extended portraits of their wives in the tradition of Stieglitz. Callahan began photographing his wife Eleanor Knapp in the early 1940s and continued to do so over a period of two decades. Many of the later works include the couple's daughter, Barbara. Friedlander's extended portrait of his wife Maria DePaoli began with their marriage in 1958 and was published in book form as *Maria* in 1992, which contained images made as recently as 1991. Several of the photographs depict Maria with their children as they grow from infancy to young adulthood. In 2004 Friedlander published *Family* in conjunction with Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco, California. This collection includes many photographs of Maria in addition to images of their son and daughter with their spouses and children taken through 2003. In 1965 Gowin began working on a series of photographs that were centered on his wife, Edith Morris Gowin, and her relatives in Danville, Virginia. The family series came to an end in 1974, soon after the birth of the couple's second son, although Gowin has continued to photograph Edith. The most recent published image of her dates from 1996, and works from 1999 and 2000 were featured, along with earlier pieces, in an exhibition at the Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York City in 2001. With the exception of Friedlander, the series that these photographers made of their wives are among their best known works and when considered together lead one to conclude that the photographer's wife may be considered distinct subject matter.



## Representation and Discourse

It is necessary to define the term “representation” since it is widely used in this dissertation; as the chapter titles indicate, this study will consider the several ways in which Edith Gowin is represented in the photographs made by her husband. In an examination of how meaning is derived through representation, theorist Stuart Hall describes a “reflective approach,” wherein “meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world” and the depiction therefore “functions like a mirror, to *reflect* [its] true meaning.”<sup>2</sup> He notes that like mimesis in the visual arts, this theory views the function of representation as an imitation or direct correlate of a preexisting truth. Hall also describes a “constructionist approach,” in which meaning develops from the use of representational systems. “According to this [view],” he writes, “we must not confuse the *material* world...and the *symbolic* practices and processes though which representation [operates].”<sup>3</sup> Representations of the photographer’s wife are a form of portraiture, an artistic genre that has its roots in mimesis. In writing about “the centrality of naturalistic portraiture, and in particular the portrayed face, to western art,” art historian Joanna Woodall contends,

The desire which lies at the heart of naturalistic portraiture is to overcome separation: to render a subject distant in time, space, spirit, eternally present. It is assumed that a ‘good’ likeness will perpetually unite the identities to which it refers.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 24.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>4</sup>Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 1, 8.

The function of mimesis is assumed in most photographic portraiture, based upon the presumptive veracity of the photographed image. Therefore, in seeking to determine ways that identity is represented in the photographs of Edith Gowin, this study will look beyond reflection or mimesis by taking the constructionist approach, as described by Hall. The following observation by theorist Graham Clarke regarding photographic portraiture succinctly illustrates the nuanced layers of meaning that can be discerned by utilizing this method:

As an analogue of the original subject, the portrait photograph surreptitiously declares itself as the *trace* of the person (or personality) before the eye. In an official context, the photograph validates identity: be it on a passport, driving license, or form. It has the status of a signature and declares itself as an authentic presence of the individual. Once again, however, the authenticity is problematic. The photograph displaces, rather than represents, the individual. It codifies the person in relation to other frames of reference and other hierarchies of significance. Thus, more than any other kind of photographic image, the portrait achieves meaning through the context in which it is seen.<sup>5</sup>

The constructionist approach to representation is in keeping with the concept of discourse as developed by French theorist Michel Foucault. In *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault posits an epistemological examination of history as an intersection of discursive formations, or cultural rules and practices that both enable and constrain thought and social behaviors at a given point in time.<sup>6</sup> Hall observes that

---

<sup>5</sup>Graham Clarke, ed., *The Portrait in Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 1.

<sup>6</sup>Foucault writes, "This description of discourses is in opposition to the history of thought... The analysis of thought is always *allegorical* in relation to the discourse that it employs. Its question is unfailingly: what was being said in what was said? The analysis of the discursive field is orientated in a quite different way; we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes.... The question proper to such an analysis might be formulated in this way: what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and

Foucauldian discourse is about the production of knowledge through language, which would include the visual language of artistic practice, and he emphasizes how it both “constructs the topic [and] governs the way that a topic can be talked about and reasoned about.”<sup>7</sup> The phrase, “the photographer’s wife,” echoing the patriarchal construction “a man and his wife,” can be considered a discursive formation.<sup>8</sup> The phrase will be used intentionally in this study as a means of examining how a perceived imbalance of power associated with traditional views of marriage affects the viewing of the subject. Clearly gendered in this context is the photographer, who is assigned the active/possessive role, while his wife is viewed as passive and implicitly possessed as both object and subject. This approach corresponds to critic Susan Sontag’s reading of photography that: “To photograph people is to violate them.... [It] turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.”<sup>9</sup> The binary of possession/submission suggested by the phrase relates to the constructions of artist/model and husband/wife, however, as this study contends, such a reading is overly simplistic. Not taken into account are numerous issues concerning representation and identity implicated by this particular variant of artist/model/viewer interaction in which private realities intersect with public display.

---

nowhere else?” Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 26-7.

<sup>7</sup>Hall, 44.

<sup>8</sup>The photographer’s wife may be described as a discourse with a narrow but significant range that intersects with numerous other discourses such as marriage, art, photography, and portraiture. In this dissertation the term “subject” will be used to define the photographer’s wife as a distinctive subject matter that is subsumed under the broader context of the discourse, which is dynamic production of knowledge that is shaped and reshaped over time.

<sup>9</sup>Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strause and Giroux, 1977), 14.

The subject of the photographer's wife received some attention in 2000 in an exhibition entitled *The Model Wife* at the San Diego Museum of Photographic Art. Included in the exhibition are works by Stieglitz, Callahan, Friedlander, and Gowin, each of whom is featured in a chapter of the catalogue written by curator Arthur Ollman, the museum's director. Although Ollman's essays provide an excellent introduction to the subject matter, the overarching discourse merits an examination of greater depth than has been undertaken to date. By focusing primarily on Emmet Gowin's series of photographs of his wife, Edith, this dissertation will examine the discourse of the photographer's wife in twentieth-century American fine-art photography. Because the series intersects with the genres of family, snapshot, documentary, and fine-art photography, the opportunity for a discursive examination of photographic practice is clearly indicated. The subject also provides an excellent opportunity for the examination of gender-based social constructions related to representations of women, to the artist-model relationship, and to the institution of marriage. Additionally, Gowin's series contains a range of thematic distinctions or sub-categories that would implicate the discourses of family, mother, woman as nature, and wife as mate. And, because a process of collaboration often underlies the making of photographs of wives by their husbands, the series illustrates a conflation of portrait and self-portrait that is arguably unique to the subject. A discursive analysis of the photographer's wife will reveal a wide range of sometimes contradictory viewing positions that can be used as a means of investigating the intrasubjectivity of photographic practice and photographic looking.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> The term intrasubjectivity is used in this study to suggest the interaction within and between the

## Background and Review of Literature

Gowin has been a quiet but steady presence in American photography since his emergence in the late 1960s. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Art at Richmond Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University) in 1965, and in 1967 a Master of Fine Arts in Photography from the Rhode Island School of Design, where he studied with Harry Callahan. In addition to being included in a number of group exhibitions such as *The Model Wife*, Gowin has been the subject of numerous one-person exhibitions, beginning with the Dayton Art Institute in 1968. These include exhibitions at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (both 1971), the San Francisco Art Institute (1972), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1990), the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1971, 1973, 1983, and 2003), and internationally at the Photo Gallery International, Tokyo (1989, 1993), Espace Photographie Marie de Paris (1992), the American Centers at Fukuoka, Osaka, Kyoto, Sapporo, Yokohama, and Tokyo (1992-93), and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (1995). Gowin has had several shows at Pace/MacGill, including the exhibition of the *Edith* in photographs 2001. Most recently, an exhibition of two decades of aerial photographs entitled *Changing the Earth* was organized by the Yale University Art Gallery in conjunction with the Corcoran Gallery of Art. The catalogue was

---

subjectivities of the photographer, the subject, and the viewer. Carol M. Press provides a general description of this process as a “dynamic relational exchange [that] is quite complex, energized by the felt subjective enterprise on three levels: intrasubjective—experiences of self; intersubjective—experiences of relationships; and metasubjective—experiences of culture... These subjectivities are not felt in isolation from each other; they penetrate and seep through their elusive boundaries, creating a flow of experience that nourishes the foundations of our lives... [This] flow of experience is, of course, intrasubjective.” Press, *The Dancing Self* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2002), 1.

published by Yale University Press in 2002.

In 1976 Alfred A. Knopf and the Light Gallery jointly published *Emmet Gowin: Photographs*, containing sixty-six works, primarily from the series of family photographs that Gowin began taking in 1963. The 1983 Corcoran exhibition, a 1986 exhibition of photographs of the Jordanian site of Petra, and the 1990 Philadelphia exhibition all resulted in excellent catalogues. Gowin's works and writings have also been featured in several major publications, group exhibitions, and anthologies, including *Aperture*, *Private Realities: Recent American Photography* (Boston Museum of Fine Art), Peter Bunnell's *Degrees of Guidance*, Jonathan Green's *The Snap-Shot and American Photography: a Critical History 1945 to the Present*, Naomi Rosenblum's *A World History of Photography*, and John Szarkowski's *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* and *Decade by Decade: Twentieth-Century American Photography from the Collection of the Center of Creative Photography*. In 1981, Gowin and Garry Winogrand were featured in "The Photographer's Eye," a segment of the series *Creativity With Bill Moyers* on PBS.

Emmet Gowin has been the recipient of numerous awards, including fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1974), the National Endowment for the Arts (1977 and 1980), a Pew Artist Fellowship (1996), and a *Life Magazine* Alfred Eisentaedt Award (1998). From 1967 to 1971 he was on the faculty of Dayton Art Institute in Dayton, Ohio. In 1971 he began teaching at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania, where the Gowins continue to reside. And in 1973 he accepted a faculty position teaching photography in the Visual Arts

Program at Princeton University, where he is a full professor. At Princeton, Gowin was presented with a President's Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1997 and he currently sits on the Princeton University Council of the Humanities, along with Toni Morrison, Alexander Nehamas, and Joyce Carol Oates.

Although Gowin's work of the last three decades has been comprised primarily of aerial landscape photography, it is the family series that has elicited the greatest critical response. Works from this series appear in major photographic survey texts as representations of Gowin's oeuvre, and he is most closely associated with critical developments in photography occurring in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>11</sup> In 1967 John Szarkowski, then the Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, curated the landmark exhibition *New Documents*, featuring the works of Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand. Associated with an emergent vernacular or "snapshot" aesthetic, the work of these artists exemplified a subjective approach to documentary photography initially suggested by Robert Frank's book of collected images entitled *The Americans* in the previous decade. This aesthetic indicated an awareness of how private content could be made public, and *visa versa*, through the medium of photography. Though Gowin had already formulated his approach to the subject matter and was independently utilizing the vernacular snapshot aesthetic as early as 1965, the critical acceptance that his family series received may be attributed, at least in part, to the

---

<sup>11</sup> Examples include Jonathan Green, *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984); Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York, London, Paris: Abbeville Press, 1984, 1987, 1997); and John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978).

success of *New Documents*.

Arbus' idiosyncratic brand of "personal photojournalism" seemed to define most clearly the era of "New Documents," and American photographers began to produce images evoking psychological estrangement in the context of what has been described as a "freak show."<sup>12</sup> Winogrand summed up the inherent paradoxes of photographic practice with a series of tautologies and aphorisms such as,

The way I understand it, a photographer's relationship to his medium is responsible for his relationship to the world is responsible for his relationship to his medium. I photograph to find out what the world looks like photographed.<sup>13</sup>

This awareness of the complexity and reflexivity of photographic looking characterizes a stance that would take hold among artists and critics in the 1970s and would continue through the next two decades. A series of articles by Alan Sekula in *Artforum* and Susan Sontag in the *New York Review of Books* would effectively shift critical emphasis from the realm of formal and aesthetic consideration to that of social and political contextualization, leading others to question the exclusionary tactics of fine art photography and to examine the profound impact that commercial and vernacular photography have had on both public perception and public behavior. This postmodern discourse on photography was stimulated by wide-spread interest among critics in the

---

<sup>12</sup>The designations "personal journalism" and "freak show" are suggested by Green in *American Photography*. He writes, "Where the archetype of the thirties was the migrant mother, the archetype for the sixties was the deformed person. On the war front it was the napalmed victim. At home it was the freak. This fact was recognized not only by photography but by popular slang. . . . The camera, reaching only skin deep, is forced to take physical proportion and physiognomy as emblematic of psychological state. The most radical subject for the sixties was the ultimate minority: the traumatized self." He includes the following photographers in his discussion of "The American Freak Show": Diane Arbus, Larry Clark, Bruce Davidson, Danny Lyon, Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Green, 120.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 99.



writings of Walter Benjamin, specifically the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which the Frankfurt school critic questions the “auratic” or unique value of a work of art in a secularized society.<sup>14</sup>

Although Gowin’s family series is critically linked to the *New Documents* era, the critical writing that it has generated has tended to remain outside the margins of postmodern deliberation, possibly guided by the viewpoint of the artist. His acceptance of the auratic power of the photograph is unquestionable. At a time when poststructuralist theories of the “self” as a linguistic construct and an ongoing tactic place authentic selfhood “under erasure,”<sup>15</sup> Gowin insists on the creation of an art emerging from a self that is both authentic and a nucleus for universal meaning:

Although I didn’t know how to say this for a long time, once I realized that pictures are wonderful because they are made, because they are imbued with the feeling of the person making them, and because they are symbolic (something quite different from that which is simply represented) then I was interested.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of a personal and essential truth implicit in Gowin’s statements is at odds with Foucault’s concept of discursive formations, which emphasizes the suprapersonal role of

---

<sup>14</sup>“To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility...But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.” Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 224.

<sup>15</sup>These concepts made significant inroads in critical discourse primarily through writings by French Poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida, i.e., *Of Grammatology* (1967), a critique of Structuralist linguistics in which Derrida sought to define writing as a field of science. Stuart Hall summarizes “under erasure” as a deconstructive approach to concepts such as “identity” that “are no longer serviceable...in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superceded dialectically...there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them – albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated.” Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, in Paul du Gay and Stuart Hall, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, 1996), 1.

<sup>16</sup>Emmet Gowin, quoted in Jain Kelly, ed., *Darkroom 2* (New York: Lustrum Press, 1978), 40.

discourses in enabling and constraining information construed as knowledge. Guided by the artist, the critical literature on Gowin has typically complied with his own personal reading of the work, generally couching it within a biographical framework. By undertaking a discursive study of the subject, this dissertation will examine how the *Edith* series both personalizes and transforms the discourse of the photographer's wife, while recognizing that it still takes its authority from the suprapersonal terms that guide the discursive formation in which the artist participates.<sup>17</sup>

For Gowin, and for his viewers, Edith is the *axis mundi* around which the family series revolved. Created during a period characterized by a minimalist self-effacement and the aesthetics of impersonality, the images of Edith were intended, in his words, to “honor the body and personality that had agreed, out of love, to reveal itself.”<sup>18</sup> Questions arise as to who is being revealed, and to whom? In this regard, the *Edith* series manifests numerous inherent contradictions highlighting the intrasubjectivity of the photographic viewing experience: the images are public and private, temporal and timeless, actual and fictive. Edith is symbolically configured as Woman in Nature, yet she is simultaneously a real person who existed in a real time and place now made eternal and universal through the photographed image. The gestures, the demeanor, the familial connections depicted within the photographs, all belong to Edith. Thus notions of representation and identity, the conflation of portraiture and self-portraiture, husband/wife and artist/model, and the

---

<sup>17</sup>Concepts regarding the contrast of Gowin's personal reading of his work with Foucault's notion of discursive formations as described in this paragraph were clearly articulated by Dr. Robert Hobbs in a discussion on 24 July 2004.

<sup>18</sup>Gowin, *Emmet Gowin: Photographs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976), 100.

gendered/non-gendered viewer all contribute to foregrounding the intrasubjective process of photographic looking. It will be this study's contention that Emmet Gowin's photographs of Edith provide an excellent means for the examination of this process.

As previously indicated, scholarship on Gowin has tended to rely heavily on biographical details and interviews with the artist. Rarely have individual images been examined in any depth, be it stylistically, formally, or contextually, though they lend themselves to a broad range of interpretation. Ironically for a photographer who has often exalted the symbolic possibilities of the medium, this aspect of his work has been afforded a rather cursory analysis, with little attention given to the numerous symbolic or ideological traditions suggested within the images.<sup>19</sup> The most complete analysis to date of Gowin's *oeuvre* was written by Peter Bunnell for the 1983 Corcoran catalogue, and was reprinted in a collection of essays entitled *Degrees of Guidance*. Bunnell, who founded the Department of Photographic Studies at Princeton University in 1972, was an influential voice in the field of photography for the last three decades of the twentieth century. He curated Gowin's 1971 one-man exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and

---

<sup>19</sup>The following examples serve to illustrate a general critical consensus regarding Gowin's work:

From Charles Desmaris: "Emmet Gowin sees everyday life as a series of epiphanies and is one of few artists who successfully makes photographs intended as spiritual metaphors. Somehow Gowin avoids the cliché, and though the pictures - portraits of family members and vignettes of the world close by his Virginia home - are replete with sentiment, they are believable because they precisely balance their spirituality with a bold sensuality." Desmaris, "From Social Criticism to Art World Cynicism: 1970-1980," in James Enyeart, ed., *Decade by Decade: Twentieth-Century American Photography from the Center for Creative Photography*, (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1989), 92.

From Jonathan Green: "Gowin's simple yet intensely seen daily events take on the quality of ritual. His family and friends, being finely and fully drawn, assume universal significance. Gowin's work may be seen, as may Stieglitz's photographs of O'Keeffe, as an extended sequence or family album in which the viewer comes to know Gowin's world on an intense, intimate basis.... Though his images may have begun as fiction, they are presented as fact." Green, 153.

has been his colleague at Princeton since Gowin's faculty appointment in 1973. With regard to the *Edith* series, Bunnell's reading of Edith as paradigmatic "Woman" is clearly tied to an early twentieth-century Pictorialist photographic tradition in which, "Women were seen as the primary subject of the story-teller's art, of parables, and as the epitome of nature - woman viewed in nature's primordial garden."<sup>20</sup> Traces of a Pictorialist reading of Edith are evident in the following excerpt in which Bunnell makes note of the implicit (and explicit) relationship conveyed within the images:

These two people know more than what they render in these images and they do not reveal everything they know about each other. This is meaningful because through these pictures of flesh and spirit Gowin is aspiring to elevate his feelings to the realm of public expression.... It is in this way that his photographs become most symbolic, even religious.<sup>21</sup>

Edith's role as wife is critical to our understanding of the photographs, and yet the underlying beliefs and practices that define this role remain unexamined in the critical writings. Bunnell's discussion of the photographic process cited below seems to assume a traditional interaction between husband and wife that parallels the artist/model relationship. In other words, the artist/husband is active and possessive whereas the model/wife is both passive and possessed. He writes:

The light in the pictures of Edith is especially beautiful.... [The light] makes itself felt as Gowin's own presence as husband and lover. He knows when the light is right and he projects through these pictures the entrancing feeling that we would

---

<sup>20</sup>Peter C. Bunnell, *Clarence H. White: The Reverence for Beauty* (Athens: Ohio University Gallery of Fine Art, 1987), reprinted in *Degrees of Guidance: Essays on Twentieth Century American Photography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 22. The Pictorialist movement will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

<sup>21</sup>Bunnell, *Emmet Gowin, Photographs, 1966-1983* (Washington D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1983), 3.

not even see Edith if the light were not as it is, wrapping around her face, embracing her body and at times, radiating from her. The metamorphosis of their union is magnificently displayed in these luminous pictures.<sup>22</sup>

The very active role that Edith played in the production of the photographs and the palpable sense of personality that often emerges from those images is not apparent in Bunnell's writings about the works. The historical/biographical approach exemplified in this essay, which is prevalent throughout the critical writing on Gowin, is the explication of the artist's work by means of an examination of his intentions and methods as a photographer, without attempting to read outside of or against those intentions. Reading outside the work, that is, interpreting the work in a way that has not been explicitly revealed within the work itself or in the stated intentions of the artist, has not been attempted. This dissertation will acknowledge both approaches by illustrating the biographical construct which has formed the interpretive basis for Gowin's work thus far, and by seeking to distinguish the various discourses within which both the making and the viewing of the images have been enacted. In particular, this study will undertake an explication of the *Edith* photographs by describing the discursive construction of the husband/wife and artist/model relationships as binary formations, with the assertion that within these purported binaries the nebulous areas of identity and collaboration are problematic and intertwined. It is the contention of this dissertation that, for the viewer, an awareness of the marital relationship in representations of the wife provides a distinctive reference for viewing.

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 4.

## Chapter Overviews

The first chapter of this dissertation, *Representing the Wife*, examines the artist's and photographer's wife through a discursive analysis of the subject in historical and artistic practice. The chapter begins with a general overview of the institution of marriage, particularly with regard to gender and social identity, (i.e., marriage as "doing gender"). A section on artist representations of their wives begins with a brief examination of how the role of muse has shifted in accordance with the role of wife, particularly in late twentieth-century practice. This is followed by a look at the wife as portrait, which seeks to develop a strategy for examining portraiture through an overview of portrait theory drawing upon a diverse range of critical writings. This section will also feature selected historic precedents in the western tradition, specifically portraits of wives made by the seventeenth-century painters Peter Paul Rubens and Rembrandt van Rijn. The final segment will address issues particular to photographic portraiture of the wife with reference to the work of Stieglitz, Callahan, and Friedlander, and the role of the subject in the development of twentieth-century American fine-art photography.

Chapter 2, *Representing Edith as Family*, defines and examines the parameters of the family series from which the photographs of Edith derive and the history and narrative of the series as it has evolved in the critical writings on Gowin's work. The works in this series were made primarily between 1966 and 1973, the era of *New Documents* and the snapshot aesthetic, a period in which photographic practice often conflated the public and private realms and the documentary, vernacular, and fine art categories, thereby foregrounding the complexity and reflexivity of photographic

looking. The goal of this chapter is to establish the use of undermined or broadened viewer expectation as a means of further exploring this viewing process.

Chapter 3 will concentrate specifically on representations of Edith as the photographer's wife. Thematic categories found in the series will be examined, specifically Edith as nature (the symbolic "Woman"), as a mother, and as a wife, with particular emphasis on erotics and transgression. Additionally, Chapter 3 will examine various collaborative aspects of the series, and indicate ways in which the photographer's wife can be viewed as both portrait and self-portrait, allowing for an examination of the underlying narrativity of images made over time in conjunction with notions of imaged identity. Questions to be addressed in this study include the following:

- Do these photographs conform to and/or diverge from established norms regarding the imaging of woman, wife, and mother?
- How does the particular spousal relationship affect collaboration in the photographic process?
- What distinctions can be made between nude images of the wife *vs.* the anonymous nudes of photographers like Kertesz and Brandt? Is the photograph's erotic content mitigated or enhanced by the viewer's foreknowledge of the participants' sexual relationship?
- Since this foreknowledge allows for the viewer to conflate the photographic act with an act of intimacy, in what manner does desire expand the binaries of artist/model and husband/wife into a triadic configuration that includes the

observer? How is the viewer gendered through response to the works?

- The structure of the “extended portrait” allows the observer as witness to derive a public fiction from private fact, a continuous narrative comprised of fragmentary revelations. Questions regarding constructions of identity and representations of self arise. For instance, to what degree do the perceived identities of artist/model and husband/wife become at once symbiotic and conflated, so that perceptions of portrait and self-portrait simultaneously coalesce and diverge?

In the dissertation’s conclusion, *Edith as a Photograph*, the series will be viewed in relation to its location within the category of fine-art photography. Throughout this study, questions raised by the subject of the photographer’s wife in areas such gender-based expectations, symbolism, narrative, identity, and authorship reflect an epistemological examination of photographic representation centering upon the medium’s purported ability to image that most transcendent of all human qualities, the essential person. It is the contention of this study that the conditions unique to the subject of the photographer’s wife, as exemplified in the works of Emmet Gowin, provide a rich area within which to undertake this inquiry.



## Chapter 1 Representing the Wife

### The Man and His Wife

Rich men and kings who honor philosophers adorn both themselves and their beneficiaries; but philosophers courting the rich do nothing to increase the reputation of these people, merely to diminish their own. It is the same with wives. If they submit to their husbands, they are praised. If they try to rule them, they cut a worse figure than their subjects. But the husband should rule the wife, not as a master rules a slave, but as the soul rules the body, sharing her feelings and growing together with her in affection. That is the just way. One can care for one's body without being a slave to its pleasures and desires; and one can rule a wife while giving her enjoyment and kindness.

Plutarch, *Advice to the Bride and Groom*, c. 100

The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Therefore marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God.

*The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979

For almost the entire past millennium, marriage was the central institution through which men's and women's interactions were channeled, both toward each other and within the community as a whole. Most societies used marriage to consolidate or transfer property, control social and sexual affiliations, construct political alliances, establish social-support networks, determine children's rights and obligations, redistribute resources to dependents, organize intergenerational relations, and govern the division of labor by gender.

Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage: Then and Now*, 2000

“I now pronounce you man and wife.” This phrase, uttered innumerable times by clerics, magistrates and justices of the peace, exposes certain assumptions regarding the balance of power within the marital relationship. The man is an individual who, in a ritual officially sanctioned by church and state, has been given possession of a wife. That this phrase implies a kind of ownership, and thus a fundamental inequality of power, is evidenced by alterations in the wording of the standard marriage ceremony which have

been put into practice since the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s. For example, the rite of matrimony in the 1928 version of the Anglican *Common Book of Prayer* states, “I pronounce that they are Man and Wife, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” The 1979 version restates the pronouncement as “husband and wife,” indicating that general ideological shifts had by this time induced changes within Anglican practice. However, it should also be noted that the phrasing “man and wife” can still be found in religious and civil ceremonies, and that the convention of “giving away the bride” is still quite common in American weddings. Anyone who has been involved in a long-term committed relationship knows that the interaction between two partners is complex and individualized, tending to be most directly affected by the distinctive personalities of the participants and the exigencies of daily living, and is therefore not so easily reduced to a simple equation of power. Yet, the model inculcated by historic practices and validated by institutions such as church and state has created a lens through which we, as a society, tend to see the marital relationship. Even if we, as individuals, do not consciously subscribe to the practice of “man and wife,” that model remains evident, sometimes vestigially, sometimes blatantly, in the practices of contemporary Western societies. In the United States of the early twenty-first century, ideologies regarding marriage are evident in popular culture, i.e., in “reality television” programs such as *Joe Millionaire* in which a group of sexually appealing women vie for the chance to marry a purportedly wealthy man. The power of the woman is purely physical, that is, if she conforms to popular notions of attractiveness then she becomes a good candidate for winning “the prize,” a male whose assumed wealth gives him power

in the social and economic spheres.

The discourses of law and organized religion are constituent to the discourse of marriage, and the problematic nature of this juncture of church and state has been evidenced in the early twenty-first century with attempts at both the state and federal levels to define marriage constitutionally in accordance with Judeo-Christian concepts of a divinely sanctioned union between a man and a woman. Though the effort arose specifically as a countermeasure to the quest for legal and religious validation of same-sex unions, this movement to define marriage legally throughout the country, and the divisive controversy it has engendered, indicates the extent to which certain gender-related attitudes about the institution have been deeply woven into culture's fabric. A text on social psychology defines *sex* as biologically determined and *gender* as "everything associated with an individual's sex, including the roles, behaviors, preferences, and other attributes that define what it means to be a male or female."<sup>1</sup> The sometimes contentious discussion regarding nature or nurture, or biological destiny *vs.* societal indoctrination in the development of the personality remains wide open, though research indicates that gender identity, which is "that part of the self-concept involving a person's identification as a male or female," generally develops at around the age of two.<sup>2</sup> Because the sexual union of man and woman is requisite to the survival of the species, special socially sanctioned practices have evolved to regulate and define this union, and these practices have become deeply embedded within the human psyche. The institution of marriage

---

<sup>1</sup>Robert A. Baron and Donn Byrne, eds., *Social Psychology*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2003), 184.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*, 185.

may be defined traditionally as a practice of “doing gender,” involving the interaction of cognitions of maleness and femaleness. A discursive understanding of marriage in the public sphere as an institution and in the private sphere as a singular relationship between two people necessitates a recognition of the many individual and overlapping discourses which are implicated. One method of examination that is in keeping with a discursive analysis of the topic the artist’s wife is to look at marriage as a site for the negotiation of power.

In Western cultures, the gender-based balance of power suggested in “man and wife” has undergone innumerable permutations, often in response to changes occurring in economic conditions. Historian Carl N. Degler suggests that a key factor in the development of the modern family, which he dates from around 1825 - 1850, is located in the clearly delineated roles assigned to husband and wife. Women controlled the domestic sphere, i.e., the maintenance of the household and the care and nurture of husband and children. This care extended to both the physical and spiritual needs of the family. Degler writes that as moral guardians,

[wives] were acknowledged to be the moral superiors of men. Husbands, on the other hand, the ideology proclaimed, were active outside the home, at their work, in politics, and in the world in general.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century these roles underwent significant transformation effected by a multitude of profound social and economic changes, yet recent discussions regarding “family values” and the erosion of marriage, etc., tend to presume that the

---

<sup>3</sup>Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 26.

nineteenth-century model is paradigmatic and even divinely ordained. The following excerpt was taken from “The Baptist Faith and Message,” a document that was adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention on June 14, 2000:

The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image. The marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.<sup>4</sup>

This doctrine is based on a fundamentalist view of the Christian bible and derives specifically from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Ephesians (5:22-24), which states:

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as unto the Lord.  
 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.  
 Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so *let* the wives *be* to their own husbands in every thing.

It is worth noting that controversy erupted among various Baptist associations when the proclamation was first issued, because all affiliated members of the Southern Baptist Convention (which includes thousands of churches and missions throughout the world) were forced to sign the document. Those who did not were asked to sever ties with a very powerful religious organization that wields a great deal of financial and political clout. That there were a handful of Baptist congregations and missionaries who made the sacrifice and did not sign the document indicates the extent to which Degler's “Victorian

---

<sup>4</sup>“The Baptist Faith and Message,” adopted 14 June 2000; available from <http://www.utm.edu/martinarea/fbc/bfm.html>; accessed 23 May 2003.

Cult of True Womanhood” has lost its sense of relevance to many in contemporary society, even those who subscribe to traditional religious viewpoints.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, the patriarchal structure delineated by the Baptists remains vital in contemporary American life. Public concerns about the condition and survival of marriage, typically revolving around issues such as escalating divorce rates, a growing tolerance for cohabitation and same-sex couples, etc., generally locate these cataclysmic shifts in the institution of family in the increased autonomy of women in the late twentieth century. Historian Stephanie Coontz, who has written widely on the subject of the American family, suggests that these changes actually began in the nineteenth century, though the period from the 1920s to the 1960s saw a resurgence of the socioeconomic function of marriage. This ideology may be seen to culminate with depictions of the Cold War era “nuclear family” in popular culture, evidenced in such television shows as *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Father Knows Best*, all of which illustrate a breadwinning father who returns home at the end of the work day to his homemaker wife and kids. Significantly, it is within the home that the actual narrative in these shows occurs. Coontz contends that in the 1970s, “the long-term trend making marriage less central to social and personal life reasserted itself.”<sup>6</sup> She responds to attempts such as the Southern Baptists’ efforts to “reinstitutionalize” marriage according to prescribed doctrine as “[ignoring] the fact that the very sources of

---

<sup>5</sup>Degler writes, “Some historians have called the ideology of the woman’s sphere the ‘Cult of True Womanhood,’ ...[And in] the eyes of these historians, the Cult of True Womanhood, by combining piety and domesticity with submission and passivity, controlled women and narrowed their options.” Degler, 26.

<sup>6</sup>Stephanie Coontz, “Marriage: Then and Now,” in *National Forum: The Phi Kappa Phi Journal* 80, Vol. 3 (summer 2000): 12

satisfaction and success in modern marriages stem from precisely the changes in gender roles and social norms that have made marriages more optional and more fragile.”<sup>7</sup> She notes, “Whether we like it or not, marriage is no longer the way through which people organize their sex lives, their care-giving obligations, their work roles, and their social networks.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite the many changes that have occurred in Western society over the past four decades, the paradigm of “man and wife” still persists in social discourse and, whether we respond to this model of behavior with blind acceptance or adamant denial or something in between, its impact on the ways in which we represent ourselves and on the ways in which we view those representations should be addressed. Art historian Robert D. Newman observes that,

The nature of engaging images is allegorical in that viewers invest images with life and tend to consecrate that animation in some fashion as an ideal representation. Like the narrative action of all allegory, the narrative action of this engagement is autotelic.

He goes on to suggest that, “Viewing is framed by what is projected into a picture.”<sup>9</sup> It is the contention of this dissertation that the discursive formation of marriage, that is, the emblematic construction that has been designated as “man and wife,” is so prevalent and so deeply ingrained, that its explication is requisite to a study of representations of the wife. In particular, the next two sections of this chapter will offer a brief historical and

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>9</sup>Robert D. Newman, *Transgressions of Reading: Narrative Engagement as Exile and Return* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 31.

theoretical overview of that construct as it relates to examples of images that painters and photographers have made of their wives.

### The Artist and His Wife

When God created our first parent in the earthly paradise, the Holy Scripture says that he infused Sleep into Adam and while he slept took a rib from his left side of which he formed our mother Eve, and when Adam awoke and beheld her he said, "This is flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bone." And God said, "For this shall a man leave his father and his mother, and they shall be two in one flesh"; and then was instituted the divine sacrament of marriage, with such ties that death alone can loose them. And such is the force and virtue of this miraculous sacrament that it makes two different persons one and the same flesh.

Miguel de Cervantes, *The History of Don Quixote de la Mancha*, 1605

When [Rubens] painted his wedding portrait with Isabella they were both young; he understood the gaiety and confidence of youth, but not its pathos. Now that he was old, he could see in this young girl, his wife, almost bouncing out of her chair with health and vitality, the transience of youth. He had painted Isabella as though the moment could be eternal and she would never cease to be that pretty, well-dressed bride sitting so demurely still. He painted H el ene leaning forward to meet and enjoy every moment of her life, as beautiful as a flower and as ephemeral.

C.V. Wedgwood, *The World of Rubens 1577-1640*, 1967

C ezanne treated his sitters like still lifes. "Be an apple!" he is said to have barked at his wife.

Norbert Lynton, *Painting the Century*, 2000

In a discussion concerning the topic of Love in Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes tells a story about the division of the sexes. According to Aristophanes, there was originally but one sex, a combined male and female of great strength deemed by the gods to be too powerful and dangerous. Fearing its destructive potential, the god Zeus came up with a plan to split this form down the middle in order to lessen its power, resulting in the two halves of the severed form forever seeking to be reunited as a whole. "So when," Aristophanes explained, "the original body was cut through, each half wanted the other and hugged it; they threw their arms round each other desiring to grow together in the embrace." Zeus took pity on these human forms and rearranged their anatomies so that a



(re)union would occur during the act of sexual intercourse. “So you see how ancient is the mutual love implanted in mankind,” he concluded, “bringing together the parts of the original body, and trying to make one out of two, and to heal the natural structure of man.”<sup>10</sup> Literary scholar Wendy Lesser relates this story in her study of how men look at women through art. In many of the works that she examined, she noted “a kind of longing that was not just an expression of the erotic...[but a] desire to be the other as well as to view her, and at the same time an acknowledgement of an irrevocable separation.”<sup>11</sup> And in her study of the artist and the female nude, art historian Janet Hobhouse describes the desire for unification and wholeness in this way:

At times the life of the nude is so close to the life of the artist that her form becomes his involuntary autobiography; at times a confession, a description of self in the form of the ideal other. At other times the nude may be a refuge from the facts of the artist’s life, what he creates *instead*. At such times she is born not out of what is there but out of what is missing.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to Plato, Western tradition finds perhaps a more influential source of mythic sexual unification in the Bible, as illustrated by Cervantes’ restatement of the Old Testament creation story in the epigraph preceding this segment, and as defined in the

---

<sup>10</sup>W. H. D. Rouse, trans. and ed., *Great Dialogues of Plato* (New York: A Mentor Book from New American Library, 1956), 85.

<sup>11</sup>Wendy Lesser, *His Other Half: Men Looking at Women Through Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10. She writes, “The idea of the divided self or the mirrored self is already familiar to us from the work of psychoanalysts. D. W. Winnicott’s ‘true’ and ‘false’ selves, R. D. Laing’s schizoid or schizophrenic ‘divided self,’ Heinz Kohut’s theory of ‘mirror transference,’ and Jacques Lacan’s notion of the ‘mirror stage’ are all versions of this idea. All of these practitioners are, to one degree or another, inheritors of Freud, and their theories of self-division stem directly or indirectly from Freud’s concept of narcissism.” Lesser, 11.

<sup>12</sup>Janet Hobhouse, *The Bride Stripped Bare: The Artist and the Female Nude in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1988), 9.

New Testament by Paul in Ephesians 5:28-31:

So ought men to love their own wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.

For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:

For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.

For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

If, as Lesser suggests, an awareness of the desire to “become one” through the act of imaging is integral to understanding how men represent women, it is certainly salient in a study of representations of spouses, and the creative drive behind this compulsion is sometimes described in terms of divine inspiration or the muse.

### *The Muse*

The word “muse” is often alluded to in references to representations of the artist’s wife, lover, or ideal. The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italian poet Dante Alighieri’s unrequited love for Beatrice Portinari is perhaps the most famous illustration of the power of the muse in Western tradition, serving as a kind of template. Although she died young and the two had very little actual contact, she was nevertheless the inspiration for his first work, *La Vita Nuova*, and for much of his oeuvre including the *Divina Commedia*, which culminates with Beatrice leading Dante into *Paradiso* “by Love that moves the sun, the moon, and the other stars.” Five centuries later, this *amor* was consciously replayed, with rather different results, in the affair and subsequent marriage of English Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his favored model Elizabeth Siddal. Writer Francine Prose suggests that “Rossetti’s attraction to [Siddal] had less to

do with passion or admiration for a flesh and blood woman of the nineteenth century than with the imaginative role he assigned her as a reincarnation of Dante's Beatrice."<sup>13</sup> *Beata Beatrix*, painted two years after Siddal's death of a laudanum overdose in 1862, is an ecstatic vision of the muse as divine inspiration. Prose examined this designation in *The Lives of the Muses*, in which she noted the following:

If the muse – hovering above the artist and sprinkling him with the fairy dust of inspiration – throws off a glossy flash of the airborne and the divine, the art wife is plainly more matte, earthbound in ways to which we may have complex responses, reactions that rarely include the envy we feel for the muse. If we project ourselves onto the muse and resent her privileged, glamorous relationship with the artist, we can all feel a little sorry for the art wife – burdened with the combined tasks of mother, companion, cook housekeeper, business manager, agent, bodyguard, and gofer responsible for the minute chores specific to an artist's field: cataloging negatives, stretching canvases, etc.

Quite often, there is an overlap between *art wife* [emphasis mine] and muse.<sup>14</sup>

The Muses of ancient Greece were the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. Over the years, the role of muse has shifted somewhat from the celestial to terrestrial realm, and the job description has been altered to accommodate particular ideologies of time and place. That “she is his muse” is often assumed in relationships where the wife takes an active role in her husband's artistic career, though the term tends to be used quite loosely, without clarification as to whether her contribution is of an aesthetic or more practical nature. There also is a derisive aspect to the use of the word “muse” since the role has come to be seen as distinctly anti-feminist, a viewpoint described by former *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce in an article

---

<sup>13</sup>Francine Prose, *The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women & the Artists They Inspired* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), 103.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 272.

entitled “Is the Muse Dead?” According to Croce,

Muses are passive, therefore passé. Most degradingly, Muses do not choose to be Muses; they are chosen. Since the 1970s modern feminism has based its appeal to women on the premise that all barriers to the dream of self-realization are political. The Muse is only a man speaking through a woman, not the woman herself. What male artists call Woman is a construct designed to keep women in their place.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to downgrading the position from divine inspiration, Croce describes how the feminist argument has placed the muse on a par with a ventriloquist’s dummy.<sup>16</sup>

However, the actual practice of musedom is perhaps not so clearly delineated.

Discussions regarding the merging of the muse with what Prose calls the “art wife” suggest a more prosaic aspect to the job, as illustrated in the *New York Times* article “The Jazz Wife: Muse and Manager,” in which historian Robin D.G. Kelley writes,

Women like Nellie Monk and Lorraine Gillespie were not simply muses who inspired their husbands’ creative passions or housewives relegated to the background of their spouses’ public lives. Rather, they became a significant social and economic force in the jazz world and thus were ahead of their times.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, for many male artists and musicians the wife, who may indeed serve as a source of artistic inspiration, may additionally function in a traditional manner as a domestic “helpmeet” who keeps the distractions of home and family from interfering with the work of art making. Or, she may serve as a business partner, assisting with the

---

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Arthur Ollman, *The Model Wife* (Boston, New York, London: Bulfinch Press, 1999), 25. From Arlene Croce, “Onward and Upward with the Arts: Is the Muse Dead?” *The New Yorker*, (26 February – 4 March 1996): 164-169.

<sup>16</sup>This was pointed out in a conversation with Robert Hobbs on 24 July 2004.

<sup>17</sup>Robin D. G. Kelley, “The Jazz Wife: Muse and Messenger,” *The New York Times*, Arts and Leisure, (July 21, 2002): 24.

more mundane aspects of artistic production such as cataloging, exhibition, public relations, and sales, and perhaps even guiding them. Though certainly less romantic than Beatrice or the tragic Elizabeth Siddal, the muse as “art wife” seems to have evolved into an all-around creative enabler, and the question arises as to the degree to which the role of wife as muse signifies the wife as accountant, manager, or collaborator. The question of collaboration is particularly relevant in works in which the artist represents his wife, since evidence of her participation is made manifest through the visible record of her image. It is this study’s contention that the complexity of the wife’s role in the inspiration and/or production of her husband’s creative output, as well as the fluidity of this interdependency, are significant factors in the images of her made by him.

### *The Portrait*

Artists use family members as models for a variety of reasons, ranging from convenience and cost to the desire to commemorate a shared passion. The depiction of an artist’s wife may be defined as a portrait since the representation is clearly an individual likeness, either physiognomic or otherwise equivalent in some manner. However, this classification can be problematic. Henri Matisse’s painting of his wife from 1905, often referred to as *The Green Stripe*, is perhaps less an evocation of Madame Matisse’s subjectivity than an experiment in the use of vivid color in pictorial structure.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, many of Edward Weston’s photographs of his wife, Charis Wilson, reclining in the sand

---

<sup>18</sup>Shearer West writes, “The shock of Matisse’s work to contemporary audiences was this apparently cavalier treatment of a genre known for its mimetic qualities.” West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 195.

dunes can be viewed in conjunction with his landscape and vegetable photographs as natural abstractions in black and white. The use of the wife as a means of investigating pure form is certainly in keeping with Cézanne's reputed admonition to Madame Cézanne to "be an apple." Woodall notes that this tendency has its roots in the late-nineteenth-century avant-garde practice of using family members as subjects in noncommissioned works that "enhanced the authority of the artist by making worthiness to be portrayed dependent to one's relationship to him or her." The implied intimacy between artist and subject blurred the distinctions between model and sitter, thus "challenging the normal politics of portrait transaction."<sup>19</sup> Artists' wives have been represented in ways that span the gulf between anonymous model and expressive evocations of identity, and because many of the images may be placed in the category of portraiture, a general overview of that genre can be useful in the examination of representations of the artist's wife.

Irish playwright and noted wit, George Bernard Shaw, is reputed to have remarked about the portrait bust that Rodin had sculpted of him, "It's a funny thing about that bust. As time goes on it seems to get younger and younger."<sup>20</sup> Revealed in this *bon mot* are assumptions about the nature of portraiture, highlighting the interaction between the subject who is represented, the object of representation (as produced by an artist), and the viewer, who resides outside the time and place of that production even if, as noted by

---

<sup>19</sup>Woodall, 7.

<sup>20</sup>Clifton Fadiman, ed., *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 501.

Shaw, the observer is in fact the subject portrayed. Since its beginnings in the classical world, portraiture has been inextricably linked to the physiognomic likeness of the subject, making explicit a connection between identity and the human face. Portraiture has served as a method of recording an individual likeness for posterity while simultaneously locating the individual within the social sphere. As art historian Richard Brilliant notes,

[The] oscillation between art object and human subject, represented so personally, is what gives portraits their extraordinary grasp on our imagination. Fundamental to portraiture as a distinct genre in the vast repertoire of artistic representation is the necessity of expressing this intended relationship between the portrait image and the human original. ...[The] viewer's awareness of the art work as a portrait is distinctly secondary to the artist's intention to portray someone in an art work, because it is the artist who establishes the category 'portrait' .... This vital relationship between the portrait and its object of representation directly reflects the social dimension of human life as a field of action among persons, with its own repertoire of signals and messages.<sup>21</sup>

Discerning "identity" in the study of portraiture may involve a process of tracing the richly encoded threads of time and place, name and status, artist's intent and prevailing artistic practice, and so on. The bust of Shaw, for instance, can be linked to Rodin's early fascination with Roman portrait sculpture, the Renaissance revival of portraiture commemorating the individual, and late eighteenth-century busts of the *philosophes* and other "great men" of the Enlightenment. Rodin's bust of Shaw is mutually emblematic of artist and subject in that it is a representation of a great man by a great man, and the object offers them both a kind of immortality.

The subject of portraiture implicates numerous discourses such as identity,

---

<sup>21</sup>Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 7-8

authorship, mimesis and representation, social transaction and power. Many scholars have noted that portraiture is by and large exclusive to Western culture with its fundamental privileging of individual achievement and identity.<sup>22</sup> In a study of portraiture, art historian Shearer West delineates a series of dualities or dichotomous interactions, which she describes as characteristic of the genre.<sup>23</sup> First, there is the interaction between “the specificity of likeness and the generality of type,” wherein the resultant image can be affected by such variables as the social standing of the sitter, the intended function of the portrait, prevailing modes of artistic practice, and the particular style of the artist. Second, she cites the need for a portrait to represent both the distinctive physical characteristics of the sitter and the less tangible aspects of “soul, character, or virtues.” Third, she indicates that portraiture involves a series of negotiations between the sitter, the artist, and in many instances, an unseen patron. To this interaction one might add another crucial component, the viewer. As has been suggested, the subject of the artist’s wife is situated within the range of artistic practices associated with portraiture. By citing examples of works from a variety of artists, this study will attempt to define aspects of these practices that may be distinctive to these representations.

Examples of family portraiture can be found throughout the ancient world, from images on the walls of Egyptian tombs to Roman frescoes and relief carvings such as the depictions of the family of Augustus on the *Ara Pacis*. Married couples were sometimes

---

<sup>22</sup>As an example, West writes, “[There] are two prevailing stereotypes about portraiture in general that are worth investigating before the genre is considered in detail. The first of these is that portraiture was an invention of the Renaissance; the second is the portraiture is a predominately Western art form. While the first of these assertions can be refuted, the second is arguably true.” West, 14.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.



portrayed reclining on the lids of Etruscan sarcophagi as if at a dinner party. What is fairly consistent in ancient family portraits is the exterior social construction of identity. Art historian Katherine Hoffman notes that in pre-modern Western art, “family and more intimate imagery was not as significant as were images of public and idealized forms.”<sup>24</sup> Artist’s depictions of their own families emerged in the Renaissance, concurrent with self-portraiture and notions of individual worth and achievement. Viewed as a form of self-portraiture, functions of depictions of the artist’s family have varied widely from providing a means of formal experimentation to being a method of public relations and a tool for soliciting future sales. In looking at marriage portraiture in general, West indicates that because “portraits mediated social expectation and lived experience, [marriage portraits] may be related as much to the way people wished to see themselves as to [the] feelings of married couples.”<sup>25</sup> This distinction between public and private selves suggested by West is richly encoded in images where the marriage/family is the artist’s own. Thus with regard to the subject of the artist’s wife, whether or not the artist/husband/father portrays himself in the work, his active and guiding presence is implicated in the portrayal of his wife and children. It is, after all, his vision, his version of the story, his representation of the private experience that is made manifest in the public sphere.

---

<sup>24</sup>Katherine Hoffman, *Concepts of Identity: Historical and Contemporary Images and Portraits of Self and Family* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>25</sup>West, 116.

*Artists and Wives*

Many artists are noted for their contributions to the subject of the artist's wife. In addition to the numerous self-portraits that he made throughout his career, seventeenth-century Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn depicted both his first wife Saskia and his common-law wife Hendrickje Stoffels in individual and marriage portraits, and used them as models in religious and mythological scenes such as *Saskia as Flora* (1634) and *Hendrickje in the guise of Bathsheba at Her Toilet* (1654). A well-known self-portrait of the artist with Saskia (c.1635) [Figure 1], painted not long after their marriage, shows the bride seated on her husband's knee with her back to the viewer as she sedately looks over her shoulder. Her husband, the artist, laughs boisterously and lifts a glass in the air possibly to boast of his great luck in possessing such a bride.<sup>26</sup> Other examples from Rembrandt's oeuvre suggest that he used both Hendrickje and Saskia as models not only for the sake of proximity and convenience, but because the work was somehow inextricably interconnected to the experiences of daily life and these women were very much a part of those experiences. This elision of art and life, of public and private, is a significant characteristic of representations of the artist's wife, and will be explored in greater depth in works by seventeenth-century Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens.

Though there are earlier examples of the use of the artist's wife in Western art, Rubens' acclaim as an artist, the extensive influence of his work, and the numerous and

---

<sup>26</sup> About this painting, Christopher White writes, "[Rembrandt] wears a fur hat with an enormous white feather, and holds up a glass of wine to drink the health of the spectator and boast of his possession. He might be some bravo boasting of a conquest from a painting by Caravaggio or one of his northern followers." White, *Rembrandt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 41.

varied works that he made establish him as an exemplar, if not an originator, with regard to the subject.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Rembrandt, Rubens made relatively few self-portraits during his long career and, of those that he did create, many are either marriage or family portraits, depicting him with one of his two wives, and often with the addition one or more of their children.<sup>28</sup> Art historian Svetlana Alpers describes a drawing of the face of Ruben's first wife, Isabella Brandt, on the reverse side of which was discovered a chalk sketch of the artist and his second wife Hélène Fourment with their son, Nicholas.

The assumption is that Rubens began by drawing Isabella from life in the 1620s and then turned it over to draw his second family in the 1630s. But couldn't it be that Isabella came second, a memory called up in the '30s, when he was amidst his new family? Whatever its history, this sheet is clearly a kind of double cherishing, through the juxtaposition on either side of the two women he married.<sup>29</sup>

Though this scenario may be described as imaginative speculation on the part of Alpers, Ruben's response to Isabella's untimely demise in a letter dated July 15, 1626 suggests that his feelings for her may have lingered long after her death. He wrote, "I find it very

---

<sup>27</sup> In a discussion of Ruben's painting *Het Pelsken*, Margit Thøfner writes, "There is further evidence that, amongst the patriciate of early modern Antwerp, it was customary to interpret erotically charged paintings of women as portraying the wife of the painter. This evidence consists of an annotation which the Antwerp art collector Peeter Stevens made in his copy of Karel van Mander's *Schilderboek*. Probably some time around 1638, that is, probably just as Rubens was painting *Het Pelsken*. In that year Stevens had bought Jan van Eyck's famous *Woman at Her Bath*. The van Eyck painting is mentioned by van Mander, and in the margin next to this Stevens noted, 'The most famous bath, in which van Eyck has painted the portrait of his wife nude and clothed.' Van Eyck's painting has not survived but a copy of it is visible in the left background of Willem van Haecht's *Picture Gallery of Cornelius van der Gheest*." Margit Thøfner, "Helena Fourment: *Het Pelsken*," Thøfner, *Art History* 27, No. 1 (February 2004): 9.

<sup>28</sup> White writes, "Apart from several group portraits with friends or wives, Rubens painted only four or five self-portraits made, we may suppose, on request rather than as an exercise in self-analysis." Christopher White, *Peter Paul Rubens: Man and Artist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 193.

<sup>29</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Making of Rubens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 154.

hard to separate grief for this loss from the memory of the person whom I must love and cherish as long as I live.”<sup>30</sup>

Years earlier, soon after their marriage in 1609, Rubens painted *Self Portrait with Isabella Brandt* (also referred to as *Artist and Wife in Honeysuckle Bower*) depicting an attractive young couple surrounded by honeysuckle, a symbol of devoted love [Figure 2]. The wife sits in a subordinate position to her husband, his hand is placed in a relaxed manner upon the jeweled hilt of a sword, and her hand is placed confidently upon his other as they both smile at the viewer. Art historian Christopher White notes that the relatively large scale of the painting (68 ½” x 52”) was unusual at that time for family portraiture and that, in conjunction with the scale, the rather low viewpoint projects onto the couple a sense of monumentality and authority. He describes the portrait as an “unmistakable statement about social position [that is] redolent of middle class directness rather than aristocratic pretensions.”<sup>31</sup> Rubens was well aware of the stigma of art as manual labor and, at this relatively early stage of his career, was projecting the couple’s social status with a sense of assuredness that in retrospect seems quite prescient.

Four years after Isabella’s death, Rubens married H el ene Fourment who, at the age of sixteen, was thirty-seven years his junior. White notes that H el ene’s role in the artist’s life was quite different from that of his first wife. “With Isabella at his side,” he writes, “life and art had largely remained separate, but now there was frequent

---

<sup>30</sup>Ruth Saunders Magurn, ed. and trans., *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 136.

<sup>31</sup>White, *Rubens*, 61.

overlapping so that personal feelings can be read in a number of his late works.”<sup>32</sup> Art historians have often noted Rubens’ sexual infatuation with his young bride, whose ripe blonde fleshiness conformed to a general female type present in Rubens’ oeuvre even before H el ene was born, and for which he had already attained great acclaim. During their ten years of marriage Rubens made several paintings of his second wife which included single portraits, family portraits with Rubens’ children, and costumed portraits with H el ene in biblical and mythological guise as was the fashion at that time. Purportedly, her voluptuous form can also be found in many of Rubens’ works from this period, though the degree to which this actually occurs has been questioned.<sup>33</sup>

Of particular interest to this study is a life-sized portrait of the nude H el ene partially wrapped in a fur entitled *Het Pelsken* (or *Little Fur*) from 1635-40 [Figure 3]. This work has been described by Rubens scholar Julius Held as having a noticeably prominent place in scholarship on the artist.<sup>34</sup> In an influential article first published in

---

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 239.

<sup>33</sup>C. V. Wedgewood writes, “There is a strong popular belief that H el ene frequently posed for Rubens as a model for the many naked nymphs and goddesses that decorate his later paintings. The King of Spain was once confidentially informed that the naked Venus in a *Judgment of Paris* he had ordered was a portrait of the painter’s wife, ‘who is without a doubt the best-looking woman at present in this country.’ But actually there is no evidence that Rubens habitually used her as a model. If one starts looking for H el ene in Rubens’ work one finds oneself recognizing her in pictures painted before he married her, or even before she was born. The truth of the matter probably lies in the fact that Rubens always had admired her type of beauty – fair, pink and white, abundantly healthy, and with those generous contours which give a peculiarly luminous quality to reflected light.” Wedgewood, *The World of Rubens 1577 – 1640* (New York: Time Life Books, 1967), 143.

<sup>34</sup>Julius S. Held writes, “Ever since its appearance in the Vienna Collections, the painting has occupied an honored place in Rubens’ work. No serious biographer has ever failed to at least mention it, and it also figures frequently in popular writings.” Held, “Rubens’ *Het Pelsken*,” *Essays in the History of Art Presented to Rudolph Wittkower* (London: Phaidon, 1967), 188. Reprinted in Anne W. Lowenthal and

1967, Held contends that, “To the best of my knowledge, [*Het Pelsken*] has never been taken for anything but a somewhat unusual, possibly daring, portrait of H el ene Fourment.”<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the earlier wedding portrait with Isabella, this image seems to be less a public statement than a kind of private devotion though, as Held’s study suggests, it is not easily categorized. He found that most art historians described the painting as an intimate encounter, as the artist’s impression of H el ene “surprised” by her husband either on her way to or from the bath, or possibly as brief pause in the act of modeling, an “accidental view of the magnificent youthful body.”<sup>36</sup> Held notes that the anachronistic application of the “visual impression” is more suited to the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century period of scholarship than to the work’s mid-seventeenth-century date. One might also add that an oil painting the scale of *Het Pelsken* could not have been made as spontaneously as the writings suggest, but would have necessarily evolved over a period of time. It is Held’s opposing contention that the pudica gesture depicted in *Het Pelsken*, which he presents as deriving from ancient sources, indicates that H el ene is represented in the guise of the Aphrodite. “[Rubens] could hardly express his affection for her more aptly,” he concludes, “than by painting her in the role of the goddess of love and beauty.”<sup>37</sup>

---

others, eds., *Rubens and His Circle: Studies by Julius S. Held* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 106.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 106-7.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 112.

Held's identification of the mythological subject of the work as Aphrodite is now fairly established in Rubens' literature.<sup>38</sup> However, the work remains in an unstable and therefore intriguing position when considered as a portrait, based in part on its sheer physicality and visual candor. Subscribing to a realist strain of writing that regards this piece as a portrait, art historian C.V. Wedgewood describes *Het Pelsken* as

an intimate picture, a part of their private life; with affectionate accuracy, Rubens even painted her feet as they really were, the big toe crushed a little sideways by the wearing of tight shoes.<sup>39</sup>

Rubens willed the painting, now located in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, directly to H el ene Fourment in 1640, and it is specifically mentioned in her will of 1658. Records indicate that she owned the work until her death, and it remained in the family until at least 1674, possibly later. Art historian Margit Th ofner suggests that this provenance well situates the work for an examination of it in terms of female viewership. Moreover, these facts provide an opportunity to "explore how one woman responded to her own depiction in a manner likely to raise questions about her sexuality in the minds of her contemporaries."<sup>40</sup> Th ofner shows that Fourment was a devout Catholic and that in full accordance with church doctrine to "become one" with one's spouse, she was a fertile wife who bore eleven children for two husbands. She acknowledges Held's identification of the work as Aphrodite, but suggests that *Het Pelsken* confounds specific

---

<sup>38</sup>For example White writes, "In the most remarkable painting of Helena, until recently accepted as a genre study of her on her way either to or from the bath, she is portrayed in the role of Aphrodite... Possibly in emulation of the Cnidian Aphrodite of Praxiteles." White, *Peter Paul Rubens: Man and Artist*, 243.

<sup>39</sup>Wedgewood, 143.

<sup>40</sup>Th ofner, 2.

categorization:

Thus the painting mobilizes the genres of portraiture and history painting whilst deftly eluding both. Consequently, *Het Pelsken* does not transform Helena into Venus. Helena is partly herself and partly the goddess of love....So when Helena looked at *Het Pelsken* it was surely not like looking into a mirror. Because of the hybridity of the image – stated both in the title and by various pictorial devices in its surface – *Het Pelsken* presented her with a visual conundrum.<sup>41</sup>

The painting represents an elision of high-art public fiction and private fact; of Aphrodite, well established as a subject in Western tradition, and the artist's and his wife's lived experiences. One might question the extent to which the erotic content of the painting is mitigated and/or enhanced by the viewer's knowledge of the circumstances of the relationship. Underscoring this eroticism is the manner in which the painting was made. As is typical in Rubens' later works, the tactility and rich coloration of depicted materials such as fur and flesh in combination with painterly brushwork provide visible evidence of the artist's hand. Thøfner suggests that when the older Fourment looked at the painting, she saw traces not only of her younger self as a kind of *memento mori*, but also the literal and figurative touch of her first husband's hand upon her body.<sup>42</sup> It is not too much of an imaginative leap for the viewer to see the hand, with which the brush was held, actually touching those breasts, which had also served to nourish the couple's children.<sup>43</sup> And so the outside viewer, who is not located within the intimate circle of conjugal interaction, is

---

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 17, 25.

<sup>43</sup>Thøfner writes, "In a substantial body of sixteenth-century imagery, small and pert breasts denote sexual attractiveness while heavy, pendulous breasts were associated directly with the nursing of the young....In other words, they seem to denote motherhood as well as sexuality." Ibid., 20.



placed in the somewhat uncomfortable position of being a voyeur of the portrait and a more dispassionate onlooker of the mythological painting. This discomfort was noted by Held, who invoked the story of the Lydian king Candaules, so enamored with his wife's body that he exposed her to one of his body guards, thus inadvertently bringing about his own demise.<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, Thøfner suggests that it may have been a concern for the mortal soul of the outside male viewer that compelled Fourment to keep *Het Pelsken* out of the public sphere, since the painting might engender lust for another man's wife which, in the context of post-Tridentine Catholicism, was tantamount to adultery.<sup>45</sup>

The problematic aspect of intersections of public and private and seeing and touching that characterize *Het Pelsken* can be explained in terms of the distinction made between the nude and the naked in Kenneth Clark's influential work *The Nude*. One prominent source for Clark's distinction between the public idealized nude and the private realities of the naked figure is Plato's *Symposium*, where the Heavenly Aphrodite is described as inspiring a love of the mind, while the Common or Earthly Aphrodite provokes, as one of Plato's guests describes, "a love of bodies rather than soul."<sup>46</sup> Clark contends that this perceived fissure between the real and ideal is "the justification of the female nude." He continues,

Since the earliest times the obsessive, unreasonable nature of physical desire has sought relief in images, and to give these images a form by which Venus may cease to be vulgar and become celestial has been one of the recurring aims of

---

<sup>44</sup>Held, "Rubens' *Het Pelsken*," 107. Also in White, *Peter Paul Rubens*, 243.

<sup>45</sup>Thøfner, 5.

<sup>46</sup>Rouse, 78.

European art. The means employed for this transformation have been symmetry, measurement, and the principle of subordination, all refining upon the personal affections of individual artists.<sup>47</sup>

In her explication of Clark's thesis, art historian Lynda Nead describes the binaries of nude and naked, mind and matter, vision and touch as embedded within Western metaphysics from Plato to Descartes and Kant. She notes that this system underlies a hierarchy of aesthetics wherein the ideal (high or true art) invokes a disinterested or contemplative appreciation on a par with Kantian "pure form," as opposed to "excited arousal" or, in Clark's terms, the "incentive to action" provoked by material reality (i.e., the obscene or pornographic).<sup>48</sup> Nead shows how this binary system has been found to be gendered (male = mind, culture; female = matter, nature), thus profoundly implicating the subject of the nude female in the discourse of Western art. She goes on to state,

The transformation of the female body into the female nude is thus an act of regulation: of the female body and the potentially wayward viewer whose wandering eye is disciplined by the conventions and protocols of art."<sup>49</sup>

Because the imposition of "symmetry, measurement, and the principle of subordination," as described by Clark, is clearly gendered male in this binary construction, the transformation of the female body into art can be viewed as a means of controlling the female in a dominant patriarchal system. Nead describes the process as follows:

Now, if art is defined as the conversion of matter into form, imagine how much greater the triumph for art if it is the *female* body that is thus transformed – pure

---

<sup>47</sup>Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: a Study in Ideal Form* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1959), 109.

<sup>48</sup>Nead, 23, 24, 27.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

nature transmuted, through the forms of art, into pure culture. The female nude, then, is not simply one subject among others, one form among many, it is *the* subject, *the* form.<sup>50</sup>

Held's interpretation of *Het Pelsken* as Aphrodite can thus be described as an attempt to tame or regulate the image of H el ene Fourment by situating her recognizably in the realm of high art.<sup>51</sup> This is in contradistinction to the florid prose that has often accompanied the work, emphasizing H el ene's dimpled flesh, her pendulous and possibly milk-laden breasts with their pale, pink nipples, etc., in addition to the emphasis on the painting's uncompromising realism evidenced by observations of her "deformed" toes and the garter marks imprinted on her thighs.<sup>52</sup> If the subject was solely Aphrodite, poetic exaltations of pink nipples would not be so unstable in the context of high art. The viewer, assumed to be male, would have no chance of actually touching these nipples and his delectation would remain firmly in the realm of disinterested contemplation. However, the uncontested fact that H el ene was not a goddess but a real woman and the intimate circumstances of the image's creation that are suggested within the work combine to situate the flesh and form of *Het Pelsken* interstitially within the regimes of nature and culture. The viewer may not be able to touch the nipples, but Rubens certainly did, both figuratively and literally. Knowledge of this fact prevents the work from being clearly fixed within the "impressively nuanced system for the differentiation between art

---

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>51</sup>Held writes, "In the light of this evidence, it is certain that Rubens knew well Pliny's reference to...the Cnidian Aphrodite of Praxiteles....[It] is also obvious that at least in regard to the position of her arms, his notion of the figure was influenced by other, more familiar classical Aphrodite types, such as the Venus Medici...or the Capitoline Venus." In "Rubens' *Het Pelsken*," 110.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 107.

and pornography” described by Nead and, as such, it can be seen as supporting her contention that the binary is, in itself, spurious and unstable.

Rubens' *Het Pelsken* serves as an excellent means for introducing the numerous discourses that emerge in a study of the subject of the artist's wife. Although it was intended to be seen only by the artist and Hélène Fourment, the work illustrates the awkward displacement of private viewership for public display that characterizes its history. The domains of both art and marriage can be described as social constructions that are deeply culturally embedded. Because the painting defies complete transformation to Clark's high-art nude, critical response has placed it in a somewhat transgressive position between the naked and the nude. This position, in conjunction with the painting's enormous appeal, might partially explain *Het Pelsken*'s prominence in the literature on Rubens, a sure indication that the image is highly cathected. Although marriage may be a public institution, its reality is customarily played out behind closed doors in the lives of individuals. The permeability of the perceived boundaries that characterize the intersections of public and private, and art and marriage, is inherently problematic, perhaps stemming from a deep-seated fear of public trespass on the private domain. Such is the condition of *Het Pelsken* and of many, though certainly not all, representations of the artist's wife. The painting does not represent the transmutation of either the female body, or sexual desires, into the culturally contained and unified form of art in the manner of Clark's nude. She is neither a goddess nor is she a virgin or a whore, a metaphor for nature, a nameless model, or any other construction of Woman. She is all of these, and yet above all she is Hélène Fourment, and in Rubens' painting she is

ostensibly looking not at us – the nebulous, unidentified viewer, for whom the painting was never intended – but at her husband behind the easel, as also he looks back at her.

The active presence of Rubens in *Het Pelsken* is indicated not only by the literal (and implied) presence of the hand of the artist, but also by Hélène's gaze. Based on contemporary church writings and a knowledge of contemporary artistic practice, which were both readily available to husband and wife, Thøfner suggests that the "frankly returned gaze of [Hélène] might stand for her sexual powers and her potential sexual willingness." She adds that, "Understood from this perspective, *Het Pelsken* becomes a painterly commemoration of the complex visual negotiations which...were part and parcel of the licit sexual pleasures of marriage."<sup>53</sup> Fourment's active gaze, in conjunction with the painting's provenance effectively placing her in the role of one of the work's only outside viewers, at least during her lifetime, may be seen to both illustrate and undermine the gendered spectatorship described in 1972 by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*:

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men....Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated....One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of the woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.<sup>54</sup>

The patriarchal construction of viewing that Berger describes has been defined in feminist writings as phallogocentric scopophilia, by which the female is an objectified and

---

<sup>53</sup>Thøfner, 19.

<sup>54</sup>John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 46-47.

passive receiver subjected to the male's controlling gaze.<sup>55</sup> Yet, as has been suggested by Thøfner, *Het Pelsken* depicts Hélène looking at Rubens as he looks at her looking at him, ad infinitum. This Möbius-like interplay implies the active and unremitting participation of both spouses, obstructing the image's stabilization by muddying the divide between active and passive and thus between artist and model. In signifying reality through her visceral presence, through our knowledge of the relationship between the participants, and through the implied communication occurring between husband and wife, Fourment stubbornly resists transformation/containment. Berger notes this resistance in the following passage:

There are a few exceptional nudes in the European tradition of oil painting [which] are no longer nudes – they break the norms of the art-form; they are paintings of loved women, more or less naked....In each case the painter's personal vision of the particular women he is painting is so strong that it makes no allowance for the spectator....The spectator can witness their relationship – but he can do no more: he is forced to recognize himself as the outsider he is. He cannot deceive himself into believing that she is naked for him. He cannot turn her into a nude. The way the painter has painted her includes her will and her intentions in the very structure of the image, in the very expression of her body and her face.<sup>56</sup>

He illustrates this point with two paintings: Rembrandt's *Danaë* from 1636, for which Saskia is the presumed model, and *Het Pelsken*, which he calls "an exceptional

---

<sup>55</sup>The concept of the gaze was initially examined in feminist film theory, e.g., in Laura Mulvey's 1975 landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which Mulvey based her concept of the scopophilic (or voyeuristic) gaze upon her reading of Freud and Lacan. The role of the scopophilic gaze in traditional filmic pleasure is located in the viewer who, through the act of looking, identifies with the male protagonist and who thus seeks, visually, sexual possession of the woman as the object of desire. This objectification of the female by means of the gaze has been described in feminist criticism as a masculine deployment of power. Mulvey, *Screen* 16, 1 (1975). Reprinted in Marshall Cohen and Gerald Mast, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 803-816.

<sup>56</sup>Berger, 57-58.

painted image of nakedness.”<sup>57</sup> This aspect is located in “the element of banality which must be undisguised but not chilling. It is this which distinguishes between voyeur and lover.”<sup>58</sup> With regard to the binary established by Clark and expounded upon by Berger, if the reification of woman through art gives formation to the ideal, then Hélène Fourment in *Het Pelsken*, as a wife, remains in the awkward position of being both naked and nude. By exploding the binary, the painting clearly illustrates the artificiality of the construct while highlighting the perceived boundaries of public and private.

### The Photographer and His Wife

Photography does have a long history of idealizing feminine beauty; yet its most persuasive chronicles are not fictional projections of blessed damosels but taut photographic testaments to the individuality of the sitter and the contextualizing power of the camera. Atget’s, Cartier-Bresson’s, and Bellocq’s prostitutes.... Stieglitz’s O’Keeffe; Weston’s Tina Modotti; Lange’s American country women.... Callahan’s Eleanor and his Chicago women; Gowin’s Edith;... Nixon’s Bebe;... – all are both real women and symbols of the eternal feminine. They are not defined by dress but by the intensity of their presence and the truthfulness of their photographic presentation.

Jonathan Green, *A Critical History: American Photography*, 1984

The heterosexual male’s visual attraction to females is one of art’s principal generators.... How is the portrait affected when the model is the artist’s wife, when both parties are known intimately to the other and the relationship is one of unique complexity and depth? In such relationships, each partner has emotional commitments to nourish. Each has needs and dependencies at risk. Each controls more than the art.

Arthur Ollman, *The Model Wife*, 1999

In 1980 Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art presented an exhibition of photography entitled *The Portrait Extended*. In the catalogue essay, guest curator Charles Desmarais described the works as recent examples of the form of visual biography that had become established in photography and cited as antecedents “the classic serial

---

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 60-61.

approach to extended portraiture, as represented by the family photo album and [the] work of Alfred Stieglitz, Harry Callahan, Richard Avedon, and Emmet Gowin.”<sup>59</sup> With regard to the strategy of visual biography, he notes:

[Biography] is a narrative activity, as much as it is a descriptive one. Faced with prevailing attitudes which emphasize the painting-world concept of an artwork as an isolated, integrated pictorial statement, these young contemporary photographers have felt a need to re-introduce (or re-emphasize) narrative context in a medium which has narrative at its root.<sup>60</sup>

In consideration of Desmarais’ statement and the overall intention of this dissertation, this segment of Chapter 1 on the photographer and his wife will briefly examine extended portraits by photographers Stieglitz, Callahan, and Friedlander of their respective wives, with a concentration on the various discourses revealed by each series’ underlying narratives. The goal for doing so is to determine aspects of the subject inherent to photography and its history, to suggest possible influences on Emmet Gowin and/or connections to him, and to establish areas within which this topic can be explored in greater depth by focusing in later chapters on Gowin’s *Edith* series.

### *Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe*

As she approached the age of ninety, Georgia O’Keeffe selected fifty-one photographs from the almost 350 that were made of her by her husband Alfred Stieglitz between the years 1917 and 1937 for exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The accompanying catalogue entitled *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Portrait by Alfred Stieglitz* (1978) included an introductory essay by O’Keeffe, in which she stated:

---

<sup>59</sup>Charles Desmaris, ed., *The Portrait Extended* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980), 5.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*



[Stieglitz's] idea of a portrait was not just one picture. His dream was to start with a child at birth and photograph that child in all of its activities as it grew to be a person and on throughout its adult life. As a portrait it would be a photographic diary.<sup>61</sup>

Forty-five photographs of O'Keeffe from Stieglitz's extended portrait of her were first exhibited in 1921 in a Stieglitz retrospective at the Anderson Galleries in New York. This exhibit occurred when he was still constantly photographing O'Keeffe, an activity that would begin to decline in 1922 when he started to concentrate more on his *Equivalents* series of cloud studies. In 1923 he organized a show of thirty additional O'Keeffe photographs at the same venue, and the ongoing series continued to be exhibited and published by Stieglitz in some form until his death in 1946, and thereafter by O'Keeffe, who inherited complete control of his estate. In 1988, a decade after its first exhibition of the series, the Metropolitan Museum reprised *A Portrait* with the addition of thirty prints culled from a recent acquisition. According to museum records, the Stieglitz/O'Keeffe show attracted almost as many viewers as a concurrently held Degas exhibition, which is perhaps an indication of O'Keeffe's prominent place in American art.<sup>62</sup> In both the 1978 and 1988 Met exhibitions it was likely that O'Keeffe's name rather than her photographer-husband's drew the crowds. This apparent imbalance of power more weighted toward the wife is an anomaly in the subject of the artist's wife and characterizes the later period of O'Keeffe's career, but even so, *A Portrait* is paradigmatic in the establishment of the photographer's wife as a significant subject in

---

<sup>61</sup>Georgia O'Keeffe: *A Portrait by Alfred Stieglitz* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), 9.

<sup>62</sup>Anna C. Chave, "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," *Art in America* 78 (January 1990): 124.

twentieth-century American photography. In the Introduction to this study critic A.D. Coleman cites Stieglitz's composite portrait as a reason for listing him as one of the century's most influential artists. And, as Arthur Ollman, curator of *The Model Wife* warned, "After this body of photographs, it seems, anyone working in these fields must first read the trespass warnings."<sup>63</sup>

On October 5, 1993, a symposium on the art and life of Alfred Stieglitz was held at the Grolier Club in New York City. Sponsored by the J. Paul Getty Museum's Department of Photographs, participants included John Szarkowski (Curator Emeritus at the Museum of Modern Art), Sarah Greenough (Curator of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art and a noted Stieglitz scholar), Weston Naef (Curator of Photographs at the Getty), and Emmet Gowin. The following excerpt from the panel discussion serves to provide some background to the series and, even more importantly, to illustrate an issue that consistently arises in the numerous studies that have been made of the works, namely, to what degree these works are a collaborative effort between the two artists involved in their making.

**Szarkowski:** It is hard, in looking at these, to put aside the fact that this is O'Keeffe and the photographer was Stieglitz. They are drenched in myths and expectations.

**Greenough:** I would be careful, though, about saying that the theatrical aspects of some of these portraits is a reflection of O'Keeffe and how she wanted to be seen. That first summer at Lake George, O'Keeffe was thirty-one years old and Stieglitz was fifty-four. He was the world's most famous photographer, and certainly the most important person in the New York art world. O'Keeffe was a nobody – a schoolteacher from the plains of Texas. So if Stieglitz said, "Lie down in the grass, turn your head, look up at me," or "throw your head back in

---

<sup>63</sup>Ollman, 59.

this way,” of course, she would take that direction. She was enamored of him. They were deeply in love.

**Naef:** You’re saying that at this time Stieglitz was in control, whereas when we knew O’Keeffe in the 1970s, she was in control of every situation! We can easily project onto this situation what we saw of O’Keeffe, but I think you’re right to emphasize how much Stieglitz was in control.

**Gowin:** Do you accept O’Keeffe’s belief that Stieglitz was pretty much always photographing himself?

**Naef:** Oh, absolutely.

**Greenough:** Exactly.

**Naef:** Of course, every picture Stieglitz made of O’Keeffe is really a portrait of himself. But in fact, what we’re seeing is Stieglitz’s dream of a woman. He was attracted to women, and each of these is a different kind of woman that he may have been attracted to at some point.<sup>64</sup>

Although there remains some question as to the extent of collaboration that took place over the course of *A Portrait*, there is no question that Stieglitz and O’Keeffe mutually participated in the development and subsequent mythologizing of each other’s public personas. He made her career, and she revived his. The scholarship on one is invariably linked in some manner to scholarship on the other. They are historically enmeshed not only as husband and wife but as photographer and painter and artist and subject. Thus, in order to locate the particular character of *A Portrait* with regard to the subject of the photographer’s wife, the previously articulated discursive intersection of art and marriage must expand to include the intersection of art and photography.

If O’Keeffe enjoyed broader name recognition in the late twentieth century,

---

<sup>64</sup>Weston Naef, ed., *In Focus: Alfred Stieglitz* (Malibu, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995), 127-8.

Stieglitz looms large in the field of photography. By persistently asking if photography can have the significance of art, he became a prime mover in the advancement of American fine-art photography. The importance of the status of the medium in this dissertation centers on the role that Stieglitz established as the great impresario of modern art and art photography in early twentieth-century New York, and how this role was inextricably connected to his relationship with O’Keeffe as lover, husband, and art dealer, and ultimately how it relates to the images that he made of her. The vexing aspect for Stieglitz in his quest – paraphrasing Daumier – to “elevate photography to the height of art,” is the medium’s ostensible indexicality and its invention in the nineteenth century when positivism was in its hegemony. In order to distinguish photography from science and establish its identity as a fine art, Stieglitz incorporated the subjectivity accorded to painting into its processes through experimentation with subject matter, the choice and manipulation of the camera, the chemistry of the darkroom, and the printing of the image. As photographic historian Jonathan Green notes,

[Stieglitz’s] genius at translating moments in the external world into decisive spiritual and psychological moments initiated a whole tradition in American photography....[He] legitimized photography as a means of conscious artistic expression.<sup>65</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, Stieglitz’s quest to define photography as art was concentrated on his involvement with the Pictorialist movement and leadership of it. Pictorialist photography was, in part, a reaction to the rampant materialism that had overtaken the medium’s practices, particularly in America. Although applied

---

<sup>65</sup>Green, 17.

photography, i.e., photography with commercial, scientific, and industrial uses, dominated the American scene, the Pictorialists believed that photography was an art form similar to painting. These divergent approaches to the medium were succinctly summarized by Stieglitz's friend and colleague, critic Charles Chaffin, who noted in 1901, "There are two distinct roads in photography – the utilitarian and the aesthetic: the goal of the one being a record of facts, and the other an expression of beauty."<sup>66</sup>

Inspired by European camera clubs such as London's Linked Ring Brotherhood (to which he was elected in 1894), the Camera-Club de Paris and the German Secessionist movements, Stieglitz systematically set about to establish a tradition of American fine-art photography through numerous exhibitions, by writing and publishing a series of articles, and by establishing the Photo-Secession group and the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, later referred to as "291" due to its location at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York City. Stieglitz's periodical *Camera Work*, published from 1903 – 1917, not only articulated the aesthetic and philosophical principles of Pictorialist photographers and critics, but it also established an extremely high level of photographic reproduction, thus enhancing the movement's contention that photographic prints are indeed unique works of art.

Aesthetic antecedents of Pictorialism include James McNeill Whistler's "art for art's sake," *japonisme*, the Pre-Raphaelites, Symbolism, and Impressionism. Favored subject matter included portraits, nudes, landscapes, and allusions to biblical and

---

<sup>66</sup>Quoted in Peter Galassi, *Walker Evans & Company* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 11.

mythological themes in which Pictorialists aspired to poetic expressions of Truth and Beauty. Technical innovations in the 1880s and '90s such as hand-held cameras and flexible film made camera usage both easy and universal. This universality led to a kind of naïve photographic looking in which viewers assumed the veracity of images based upon their own countless point-and-click experiences. Because the craft of photography had been embraced by the masses and could no longer in itself be evidence of artistic practice, Pictorialists made use of the gum bichromate printing technique, which allowed them to alter and manipulate the print, thus signifying the presence of the artist's hand. After several Pictorialists, including Stieglitz, began using hand-held cameras, techniques such as cropping and enlarging, as well as various darkroom manipulations were employed to distinguish art photographs from vernacular and commercial forms of the medium. Pictorialists were resolute amateurs who were motivated by passion and artistic expression and not by remuneration. As critic Sadakichi Hartmann wrote in a 1904 edition of *Camera Work*:

Fortunately, the Secessionists care little for popular approval, insisting upon works, not faith, and believing that their share having been done in producing the work, the public must now do the rest. A few friends, and these of understanding mind, a few true appreciators, this is all they expect and all they desire.<sup>67</sup>

Stieglitz applied many of his strategies for establishing photography as a fine art to his other great quest, the formation of a distinctly American modern art. His extensive experience in Europe and association with the photographer Edward Steichen, who had

---

<sup>67</sup>Sadakichi Hartmann, "The Photo-Secession Exhibition at the Carnegie Art Galleries, Pittsburgh, Pa.," *Camera Work* 6 (1904). Reprinted in Jonathan Green, ed., *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology* (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1973), 44-45.

photographed early modern luminaries such as Henri Matisse and August Rodin in the years that he lived in France, made Stieglitz clearly aware of major tendencies in European modern art.<sup>68</sup> He was the first American to exhibit the works of Matisse and Rodin, as well as Constantin Brancusi, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, and others, at 291. A clear link between Stieglitz (and, by implication, photography) and fine-art was established in the public mind through these exhibitions and through his personal and business relationships with several American artists including Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, O’Keeffe, and Charles Sheeler. These and several other artists, writers, and photographers, including Sherwood Anderson, Paul Rosenfeld, and Paul Strand, came to be known as the Stieglitz circle.<sup>69</sup> This group shared a common desire to create a modern American art. In addition to being a primary instigator, Stieglitz served this quest by mentoring and guiding his stable of artists, publishing and exhibiting their work, and placing it in the hands of collectors and museums.

As previously indicated, Pictorialist photography was largely influenced by the Symbolist movement and the concept of “art for art’s sake.” In her dissertation on *Georgia O’Keeffe and Photography*, Sarah Whitaker Peters shows how these ideas

---

<sup>68</sup>Stieglitz was a second-generation American of German descent who began a study of engineering at Berlin Polytechnic at the age of seventeen. Fluent in French and German, Stieglitz translated Vasily Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* from German into English.

<sup>69</sup>Green writes, “[The] seminal mixture of the Old World and the New is wonderfully evident in the role Stieglitz took up as a high priest, educator, and prophet of photography and modernism. Surrounding himself with artists, intellectuals, and disciples, he took on the character of the Old World master, peppering traditional teachings with parables and similes. Yet he was also the American frontier preacher and humorist: fiercely individualistic, irreverent, at times rough, homespun, colloquial. He was a curious cross between the old Hasidic teacher, the Baal Shem Tov, and Mark Twain.” Green, *American Photography*, 15.

profoundly affected Stieglitz's approach to photography, noting,

It is entirely consistent with Stieglitz's aims and intentions...that he should have drawn so deeply upon the Symbolist art of Rodin and Whistler during the early years of the O'Keeffe composite portrait."<sup>70</sup>

Stieglitz exhibited Rodin's drawings at 291 in 1908. In an essay describing the dual strains of symbolism and conservatism in Rodin's late drawings, art historian Victoria

Thorson writes,

Two natures of woman particularly fascinated Rodin: the erotic and the spiritual...[He] dramatized the erotic by drawing a naked woman with her legs spread apart, her hands pressing her breasts together, or flaunting her body with arms behind her head. He symbolized her spiritual nature by characterizing her as Venus, a Greek vase, or the Sun.<sup>71</sup>

Several of the works in *A Portrait*, particularly from the period between 1918 and 1921, show O'Keeffe pointing to her breasts or squeezing them together. Images of O'Keeffe's torso with legs spread apart, the details of her genitalia masked (likely during the printing process) by the darkness of her pubic hair, are also reminiscent of Rodin's erotic drawings and his sculptures such as *Iris, Messenger of the Gods* (no date), the latter particularly with regard to its fragmentary nature [see Figures 4 – 7]. Peters notes that it was,

Rodin's influential concept of the partial figure (endowing body parts with an expressiveness equal to the face, by animating them from every point of view) which directly informed Stieglitz's angled close-ups of O'Keeffe's torso, hands,

---

<sup>70</sup>Sarah Whitaker Peters, "Georgia O'Keeffe and Photography: Her Formative Years 1915 – 1930" (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1987), 104.

<sup>71</sup>Victoria Thorson, "Symbolism and Conservatism in Rodin's Late Drawings," in Albert Elsen and J. Kirk T. Varnedoe, eds., *The Drawings of Rodin* (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishing, 1971), 121.



breast, thighs, buttocks and feet.<sup>72</sup>

In his essay on Rodin, art historian Leo Steinberg describes the sculptor's particular fascination with the hand:

In the human hand Rodin discovered the only familiar existence which has no inversions, no backviews or atypical angles; which can never be seen upside down....Rodin made some 150 small plaster hands, two to five inches long, for no purpose but to be picked up and revolved between gingerly fingers.<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, Stieglitz repeatedly photographed O'Keeffe's hands in close-up detail, gesturing and miming various expressive positions. O'Keeffe was said to be very proud of her tapered fingers, and their presence is emphasized throughout *A Portrait*.

With regard to Rodin's use of the partial figure, Steinberg contends that though the "traffic in anatomical fragments had long been legitimized," citing Roman busts, medieval relics, and the late-nineteenth-century use of excavated torsos as "an academic typeform," Rodin's "fragmentations trace an original path."<sup>74</sup> He continues,

There is a powerful shift here away from traditional ground. Rodin has not so much modeled a body in motion, as clothed a motion in body, and in no more body than it wants to fulfill itself. Whence it is no paradox to nominate Rodin's figure the precursor of Brancusi's *Bird in Space* – where sculpture gives form to a trajectory.<sup>75</sup>

By exhibiting photographs of O'Keeffe as a torso or fragment, Stieglitz was placing these works within the context of an established history of art and, when he made reference to

---

<sup>72</sup>Peters, 101.

<sup>73</sup>Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 339.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 361-62.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 363.

Rodin, specifically within the context of modern art. This contextualizing is particularly evident when O’Keeffe’s hands are depicted in the presence of the organic forms of her own highly abstracted artworks, often visually responding to them.

The emblematic use of the female often present in Rodin’s art was a mainstay of Symbolism and, hence, of Pictorialist photography.<sup>76</sup> Peter Bunnell writes that the extensive use of the female figure in Pictorialist photography “reflected [the artist’s] belief that it was the most artistic and spiritual [subject] in art’s long tradition,” and he specifically indicates their use of the female as “the epitome of nature.”<sup>77</sup> The longevity of the Symbolist-influenced notion of the paradigmatic woman in connection with Stieglitz’s images of O’Keeffe, and its prevailing affect on the subject of the photographer’s wife, are both tellingly illustrated in the following excerpts from the Getty symposium in which Gowin describes two images from the series [Figures 7 and 8]:

If you didn’t know who this was or who made the picture, you would still be left with two profound shapes in these hands. The hand on the bottom is a receptacle, suggesting a kind of womb consciousness. The other suggests a breast consciousness. Not only is she touching and referring to her own body, she is referring to the function of her body through symbolic gestures....She is pointing

---

<sup>76</sup>When Stieglitz’s project of photographing O’Keeffe began in earnest in 1917, he was moving away from Pictorialism toward straight photography, as evidenced by his featuring of the works of Paul Strand in *Camera Work*. However, the diffused focus characteristic of the early works in *A Portrait* is consistent with Pictorialism, as is the undercurrent of Symbolism. Daniell Cornell writes, “The emphasis on artistic personality, measured by a poetic expression of originality, ties [together] opposing attitudes to manipulated and pure photography....This may feel like a contradiction from our current vantage point, in which pictorialism and pure photography seem to be antithetical aesthetics that establish a dialectic in the history of photography. However, both aesthetics seem to be equally at home in [*Camera Work*] and to be understood as sharing a similar project.” Cornell, “*Camera Work* and the Fluid Discourse of Pictorialism,” *History of Photography* 23/3 (Autumn 1999): 295.

<sup>77</sup>Bunnell, 22.

to herself the way figures in Renaissance paintings touch themselves when they want to tell you of some kind of mystical connection, as when Mary points to her belly. O’Keeffe refers to herself as if she were an abstraction of the body.<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps the best illustration of the influence of Symbolism can be found in the following excerpt from Stieglitz’s 1919 essay on “Woman in Art.” Though unpublished at the time, it was well known within the Stieglitz circle and is now often alluded to by scholars discussing both O’Keeffe’s paintings and Stieglitz’s earlier contributions to *A Portrait*.

He writes:

Woman *feels* the world differently than Man feels it. And one of the chief generating forces crystallizing into art is undoubtedly elemental feeling – Woman’s and Men’s [*sic*] are differentiated through the difference of their sex make-up. They are One together – potentially One always. The Woman receives the World through her Womb. That is the seat of her deepest feelings. Mind comes second... The underlying aesthetic laws governing the one govern the other – the original generative feeling merely being different. Of course Mind plays a great role in the development of Art. Woman is beginning – the interesting thing is *she has actually begun*.<sup>79</sup>

Clearly evident in Stieglitz’s statement are themes that have already been established in this study, specifically the construction of Man = Culture/Intellect, Woman = Nature/Feeling, and the idea that this binary of male/female may potentially combine as One. In this passage Stieglitz denotes all women by the metaphorical “Woman” while individualizing “Men.” His contention that “she [Woman] has actually begun” to use her mind in the making of art is, of course, a reference to O’Keeffe since he believed when he first became aware of her in 1916 that she embodied not only his ideal woman, but

---

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 126, 127.

<sup>79</sup>Quoted in Peters, 272. Originally published in Herbert Seligmann, *Alfred Stieglitz Talking* (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1962).

also his aspirations for an advanced American art. As he wrote in a letter to protégé and photographer Paul Strand in 1918, “She is the spirit of 291 – Not I.”<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, as art historian Barbara Buhler Lynes has shown in her extensive study of the critical reception of O’Keeffe’s works during the 1920s, the general perception that a woman’s creativity was essentially physical, stemming from her womb, was pervasive in the early development of O’Keeffe’s career and had, in her mind, an unfortunate and intractable impact on the critical reception of her work. This ideological attitude arose not only from Symbolism’s influence, but is also directly traceable to Stieglitz’s 1921 retrospective, which included closely cropped shots of O’Keeffe’s body together with images of her posing, often in sexually suggestive postures, with her work [i.e., Figures 5, 6, and 8]. By doing so, “Stieglitz established” according to Lynes, “visual correlations between the forms of O’Keeffe’s imagery and those of her body and thereby implied a dynamic relationship between the two.”<sup>81</sup> In many ways theirs was a masterful public relations tactic. Stieglitz placed a price tag of \$5000 – an exorbitant sum at that time even for a painting – on one of the O’Keeffe nudes. This price not only served to place photography on a par with art in the market place but, as Lynes points out,

[Whether Stieglitz] intended to do it or not, by implying that this fascinating woman and artist was his high-priced and exclusive property, he objectified O’Keeffe even more than his photographs [of her] may have on their own.”<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>81</sup>Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O’Keeffe, Stieglitz, and the Critics, 1916 – 1929* (Ann Arbor, London: UMI Research Press, 1989), 41.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 43-4.

Thus O’Keeffe was already famous and even notorious in elite circles of the New York avant-garde before the first major exhibition of her work in 1923.

In an examination of “O’Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze,” art historian Anna Chave suggests that Stieglitz’s exhibition of the O’Keeffe photographs was, perhaps subconsciously, a means of controlling her sexuality and thus maintaining a hold over her art. He enthusiastically promoted the description of her paintings as at once intuitive and illicit, naïve and brazenly wanton. Though she strongly resented the overtly patronizing tone of such criticism, and would resoundingly deny any sexual connotations in her work throughout the rest of her long career, Stieglitz continued to encourage descriptions of her paintings as “reports on her wondrous climaxes” because, as Chave asserts,

those ‘great and ecstatic climaxes’ (as the public well knew) were given to O’Keeffe by none other than Alfred Stieglitz; her art itself, he liked to intimate, issued out of these experiences.<sup>83</sup>

He was quoted as saying, “Each time I photograph I make love,” a statement that many contemporary critics, particularly those within his circle, seemed to take to heart.<sup>84</sup> After the 1923 exhibition organized by Stieglitz, O’Keeffe’s work began to change, presumably in response to this type of criticism. She moved away from the pure abstractions of the late teens and early twenties, which so clearly suggested the rounded forms, the voids and crevices, and the hidden spaces of the female body [Figure 9]. Chave contends that Stieglitz thus inadvertently redirected O’Keeffe’s figurative explorations of her own sexuality in her work by placing it under the dominion of the

---

<sup>83</sup>Chave, 123.

<sup>84</sup>Lynes, 45.

male gaze, specifically his gaze and, by implication, the gendered gaze of the viewer.

Art historian Marcia Brennan suggests another approach to the critical reception to O’Keeffe’s work in the early 1920s. She notes a similarity in the metaphorical language of the body used to describe not only the works of O’Keeffe but also the abstractions of several male members of Stieglitz’s circle, specifically Demuth, Dove, Hartley, and Marin. Brennan contends that Stieglitz’s quest to direct a viable discourse of American modern art led him to develop an approach that she terms “embodied formalism,” a coherent critical language which “enabled writers to ascribe gendered characteristics to abstract painterly forms.”<sup>85</sup> According to Brennan, Stieglitz’s formalist project played a decisive role in the development of twentieth-century critical theory and exemplifies the discursive juncture of modernist art and the writing that evolved to describe, define, promote, and frame its reception. When examining Clement Greenberg’s response to the works of O’Keeffe and other artists of the Stieglitz circle, and to the prevailing aesthetic of embodied formalism surrounding that work, Brennan concludes,

[For] both Greenberg and the Stieglitz circle formalist discourse was based on a strong internal dialectic between gendered corporeality and impalpable disembodiment, the latter of which variously took the forms of spirituality, opticality, or transcendence....As a result, formalism represented a metaphysical discourse that was not limited, but rather fundamentally enriched, by its own conceptions of physicality.<sup>86</sup>

In this context, we might conclude that the exhibition of Stieglitz’s photographs of

---

<sup>85</sup>Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 269.

O’Keeffe immediately prior and subsequent to her 1923 exhibition not only provided a framework in which those works could be viewed but also helped to initiate the terms which would be applied to other modernist American art from that same period. Though Brennan deals primarily with painting, her notion of “embodied formalism” is integral to Stieglitz’s concurrent project of establishing photography as a distinct form of fine art.

Premises such as Chave’s and Brennan’s present Stieglitz as not only the photographer responsible for making and exhibiting photographs of O’Keeffe, but also the originator of the critical reception crucial to the contemporaneous view of her art. However, O’Keeffe was widely known to be strong-willed and ambitious, and the photographs that comprise *A Portrait* continued to be made over a period of two decades and not just in the early years of the couple’s relationship, suggesting that the dynamics involved in the creation of the series are more fluid and less one-sided than is indicated by either Chave’s or Brennan’s arguments. This study introduced the question of collaboration at the beginning of the section on Stieglitz and O’Keeffe, and despite the comments of panel members in the excerpt from the Getty symposium cited above, the issue is both problematic and particularly germane to the discussion of the photographer’s wife. O’Keeffe’s own comments on the subject of collaboration are somewhat inconclusive, as is typical of her tendency to obfuscate the details of her life. In 1978, she recalled the process of posing:

Soon Stieglitz began photographing me again. My hands had always been admired since I was a little girl – but I never thought much about it. He wanted head and hands and arms on a pillow – in many different positions. I was asked to move my hands in many different ways – also my head – and I had to turn this way and that. There were nudes that might have been of several different people –

sitting – standing – even standing upon the radiator against the window – that was difficult – radiators don’t intend you to stand on top of them. There were large heads – profiles and what not.<sup>87</sup>

From the vantage point of almost six decades, O’Keeffe’s description of herself as a mannequin capable of being manipulated is undoubtedly only a partial disclosure. However, as O’Keeffe’s and Stieglitz’s relationship changed, and as their work changed, so did the photographs, and so, presumably, did the dynamics of their collaboration on these images. The early works (c. 1917 – 1922) featured soft-focused nudes and seemingly post-coital images of O’Keeffe in a flimsy nightgown, in addition to many torsos and hands and O’Keeffe posing with her artwork. Photographs from the late 1920s and early 1930s tend to be more starkly black and white in accordance with straight photography, as in headshots detailing O’Keeffe’s firm features and indomitable expression, or images of her hands sharply profiled against a horse’s skull or the mechanical forms of her new car [Figures 10 – 11]. When viewed as a whole, *A Portrait* results in a narrative of life and art that emerges from both the photographs and O’Keeffe’s paintings, as well as from the works of other artists and photographers championed by Stieglitz. With this in mind, a nuanced understanding of collaboration appears in Sarah Peters’ dissertation on O’Keeffe and photography, in which the art historian concludes “the symbiotic relationship between these two artists caused them to create many unique and coherent works of art that would not otherwise have been possible.”<sup>88</sup> She suggests, moreover, that “what brought photography most forcibly to

---

<sup>87</sup>Georgia O’Keeffe, 5.

<sup>88</sup>Peters, 263.



O’Keeffe’s creative attention was becoming the prime focus of Stieglitz’s camera lens herself.”<sup>89</sup>

As has already been noted, O’Keeffe’s equal or dominant position in the active/public realm of art makes her husband’s composite portrait of her atypical in the subject of the photographer’s wife. Even so, *A Portrait* is the indisputable template for the subject in the context of American fine-art photography. We have seen how Rubens’ *Het Pelsken* provokes the viewer to question whether the work is a painting of Venus or a portrait of Hélène Fourment. Just as *Het Pelsken* traversed the perceived boundaries of art and marriage, Stieglitz’s project additionally eroded the divide between art and photography. Gowin’s fellow panel members at the Getty symposium readily concurred with his query regarding “O’Keeffe’s belief that Stieglitz was pretty much always photographing himself.” The identification of the image with the photographer who created it, rather than as a simple likeness of the individual depicted within, distinguishes Stieglitz’s O’Keeffe series from the standard practice of photographic portraiture. By utilizing tropes such as the fragment and the symbolic construction of Woman, he was able to clearly associate his photographs of O’Keeffe with her watercolors and paintings, with the artworks of other members of his circle, and with modern art in general. Stieglitz’s legacy went beyond the idea of the composite portrait; it was the formation of a whole new way of making, exhibiting, and publishing, writing about, and looking at photographs.

---

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 264.

*Harry and Eleanor Callahan*

To accompany the first publication of his photographs in 1946, Harry Callahan wrote the following personal statement:

Photography is an adventure just as life is an adventure. If man wishes to express himself photographically, he must understand, surely to a certain extent, his relationship to life. I am interested in relating the problems that affect me to some set of values that I am trying to discover and establish as being my life. I want to discover and establish them through photography. This is strictly my affair and does not explain these pictures by any means. Anyone else not having the desire to take them would realize that I must have felt this was purely personal. This reason, whether it be good or bad, is the only reason I can give for these photographs.<sup>90</sup>

Critical writing about Callahan suggests a shy, often verbally inarticulate man who, though self-taught, nevertheless became one of the primary figures in establishing photography in academe. He has been described as one who taught primarily by example, and who emphasized a strong work ethic and a belief, according to photographic historian John Pultz, that the process of being a photographer is as much a way of life as it is a means of making images.<sup>91</sup> Callahan advocated the notion of “photographic looking,” or seeing the world as if through the lens of a camera, which implied a total integration of the processes of his daily life into the images he made. In reference to his study on the psychological significance of the nude in art, British psychologist Liam Hudson notes,

[Photographic imaging] is not exclusively an activity for professionals. Metaphorically, we all do it; envisaging, epitomizing the world around us and our relationship to it.

---

<sup>90</sup>Quoted in Sarah Greenough, *Harry Callahan* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1996), 181.

<sup>91</sup>John Pultz, “Harry Callahan: The Creation and Representation of an Integrated Life.” *History of Photography* 15, no. 3 (autumn 1991): 224.

Therefore, he suggests,

[The] relations of artist to model, of both to the image, and of all three to the spectator, serve as a format for a sizeable proportion of the everyday thinking that we all do.<sup>92</sup>

This, as we will see, was certainly the case for Callahan.

In 1933 Harry Callahan met Eleanor Knapp in Detroit. When they married three years later, both worked for the Chrysler Motor Parts Corporation. Five years later he purchased his first camera and learned how to use it by joining a camera club. The hobby soon became an obsession, and involvement in the camera club and subsequent trips to New York led him to investigate the work of Stieglitz, Strand, Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall, and as others actively involved in photography as a fine-art. The artist's statement quoted above was written when Callahan was buoyed by the knowledge that Eleanor was assured a stable income as a secretary, enabling him to leave his day job in pursuit of the "adventure," as he called it, of a life as an artist-photographer. Fortuitously, during that same year of 1946 he was offered a position in the photography department of the Institute of Design in Chicago. Founded by Lázló Moholy-Nagy as the New Bauhaus in 1939, this was one of the first university programs in photography, and in 1949 Callahan was appointed as department head. While at the Institute he met Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Aaron Siskind, Edward Steichen, and Hugo Weber and became particularly close to Weber and Siskind. Callahan stayed in Chicago until 1961, when he went to Providence to found and chair the photography

---

<sup>92</sup>Liam Hudson, *Bodies of Knowledge: The Psychological Significance of the Nude in Art* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1982), 138.

department at the Rhode Island School of Design, remaining there until he retired from teaching in 1977.

Callahan's career exemplifies a transition in the situation of art photographers as they moved from amateur to professional status. As has been noted, Stieglitz's generation had valorized their amateur status as a means of distinguishing the presumed higher calling of the artist from the more widespread practical applications of the medium. Pultz observes,

[Despite] the overwhelming preponderance of documentary and commercial photography on the one hand, and camera club pictorialism and amateurism on the other, [Callahan was able to] carve out a narrow space, outside of the mass media and accessible to a relatively limited audience, in which to give visual form to an individual sensibility."<sup>93</sup>

By making a living through teaching, grants, and the publication and sale of his work, Callahan was able to establish himself as an independent artist working in the medium of photography. Pultz describes this situation as that of "a photographer who worked only for himself, free of all external restraints and obligations,"<sup>94</sup> at least with regard to the images that he made. Callahan's career as a fine-art photographer thus represented a major step in the formation of this emerging art.

Callahan's involvement with the medium and with image making began only after he and Eleanor were married, making her a part of the process from its very beginning. The introductory essay to the 1984 exhibition of his work entitled *Eleanor* refers to the series as the "most complete, personal, and impressive body of work in Harry Callahan's

---

<sup>93</sup>Pultz, 227.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 222.

distinguished forty-year career” and states that they are “among his best-known and best-loved work.”<sup>95</sup> The majority of the works were made between 1947 and 1958, and they stylistically span the range of Callahan’s oeuvre from straight photography and the so-called “8x10 snapshots” he made in the early fifties, to his experiments with the use of multiple exposures and extreme high contrast. His work exhibits a strongly modernist and somewhat surrealist sensibility and the critical writing on it is consistent in noting that in all his endeavors, Callahan’s primary concern was the photograph as a means of personal expression. The *Eleanor* series is typical of this approach since he would time and again revisit the same subjects, reworking them through numerous methods, resulting in thousands of exposures. Ollman suggests that because of Callahan’s reticent nature, photographing people outside his intimate circle was only possible by working anonymously, as in his Chicago street scenes of the 1950’s. “He was well known,” Ollman writes, “to encourage his students to turn their cameras on their lives, and he led by example.”<sup>96</sup> With Eleanor and, after 1950, their daughter Barbara always close at hand, the subject of the immediate family played a significant role in the further development of his distinctly formalist approach to photography.

As a formalist, Callahan was a member of a small and rather insular group of photographers who sustained the artistic legacy of Stieglitz. The works of Callahan, his Institute of Design colleague Siskind, and California photographer Minor White best

---

<sup>95</sup>James Alinder, “Harry and Eleanor,” in Harry Callahan, *Eleanor* (Carmel, Ca.: The Friends of Photography and New York: Callaway Editions, 1984), 9-10.

<sup>96</sup>Ollman, 96.

exemplify what has been called “expressionist” photography, in part because of its chronological and philosophical ties to Abstract Expressionism. In 1945 Siskind wrote,

I may be wrong, but the essentially illustrative nature of most documentary photography, and the worship of the object *per se* in our best nature photography is not enough to satisfy the man of today, compounded as he is of Christ, Freud, and Marx. The interior drama is the meaning of the exterior event. And each man is an essence and a symbol.<sup>97</sup>

Emerging in an age when notions of realism in art were framed by society’s expectations, the expressionists’ non-conformism was guaranteed to appeal to a rather limited audience in the wake of McCarthyism and Cold War paranoia. Minor White, in particular, was linked with the counter-culture of abstract painters, Beat poets, jazz musicians, and those with an interest in Eastern mysticism. White affected the discourse of fine-art photography through the quarterly journal *Aperture*, which he published from 1952 to 1976, while Callahan and Siskind profoundly influenced succeeding generations of photographers through their teaching. Szarkowski summarizes their impact in

*Photography Until Now:*

The rise of photographic education produced a new class of photographic role model: photographers who were famous....In the United States, as early as 1950 Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind were highly respected as artists by that small world that looked at photographs in museums....In terms of the quality of their work Siskind and Callahan were exceptional; they were, however, typical of photographers who taught in American art schools in the sense that it would be difficult to regard their work as anything but art....Callahan and Siskind regarded art itself as a traditional and thus social activity; one’s work was assumed to stand on the shoulders of earlier artist’s work, and was thus a part of a great chain of artistic achievement.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup>Quoted in Green, *American Photography*, 53.

<sup>98</sup>Szarkowski, *Photography Until Now* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 272.

In the catalogue for the 1996 *Harry Callahan* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, curator Sarah Greenough observed,

Callahan never used Eleanor as a vehicle through which he tried to express his own preconceived notions of womanhood or motherhood. . . . Instead, he used his photographs to understand their relationship and to define her meaning to him.<sup>99</sup>

Conversely, it could be argued that he so clearly understood their relationship that she was able to provide him with a means of investigating photography. Either way, and despite Greenough's contention, many of the works suggest a link to the Pictorialist/Symbolist construction of Woman. The association of Woman with Nature in the *Eleanor* series is made explicit in the following excerpt from Bunnell's catalogue essay for *Harry Callahan* (1978):

Callahan's world is one dominated by the image of nature. . . . Certain of his great textural landscape pictures are like tapestries. Woman stands among the trees as a human presence as much as woman walks the streets of the city. All of Callahan's pictures are environments, landscapes into which he projects his romantic spirit. His pictures are all meant as a confession of deep interest and respect. He is truly in love with woman and he lives and breathes this admiration with reverence. . . . Apart from Stieglitz's obsession with Georgia O'Keeffe, it is doubtful if the woman's world has ever before been so fully revealed in photographs by a man.<sup>100</sup>

The "woman's world" Bunnell evoked is one of generative forces, as illustrated by *Chicago* (1953) [Figure 12] in which there is no mistaking the implication of Woman=Nature as Callahan juxtaposes Eleanor's silhouetted nude body against a tree-filled skyline that is contained within an egg-shaped form through the use of numerous multiple exposures. In addition to this piece, there are high-contrast photographs from

---

<sup>99</sup>Greenough, 50.

<sup>100</sup>Bunnell, 146.

1948, almost flattened to abstraction, which are cropped details of Eleanor's buttocks and pudenda [Figure 13]. It is quite telling that a viewer familiar with Callahan's work might find an image such as *Weed against Sky, Detroit*, (1948) highly suggestive of Eleanor Callahan's intimate body parts, perhaps even confusing it for such [Figure 14]. And there is the series of multiple exposures of Eleanor against open fields, taken during the year the Callahans spent in Aix-en-Provence, France. In a 1958 photograph isolating her translucent form from waist to knee, the flowing grasses of the field seem to merge with her pubic hair [Figure 15]. Several critics suggest that Callahan's numerous depictions of Eleanor in the landscape, cityscape, and the seascape indicate, as Greenough terms it, "an all-encompassing, ever-present relationship, one that is so powerful that even when he is not with her, he sees her all around him."<sup>101</sup> [See Figure 16.] This assessment is certainly in keeping with Callahan's integrated approach to life and image-making that includes Eleanor's body, whose rounded forms tend to suggest fecundity even in the most formal studies.

Although they were worlds apart in terms of temperament and lifestyle, Georgia O'Keeffe and Eleanor Callahan are nonetheless connected in the public eye, and in the history of art, by the composite series of photographs made by their husbands. And beyond this similarity, there is the parallel of two very private women who allowed nude photographs of themselves – many quite intimate and revealing – to be published and exhibited with their names clearly attached to them. Like questions regarding

---

<sup>101</sup> Greenough, 50.



collaboration in the Stieglitz/O’Keeffe series, Eleanor’s reaction to the visual scrutiny of her husband and, by extension, of the viewing public, has been of interest to historians and critics. She is quoted extensively on the subject in *Nude: Theory* (1979) by photographic historian Jain Kelly, which includes the following excerpts:

At no time did I ever have the feeling that the photographs Harry took of me would be anything less than beautiful. It was part of our daily life for 25 years...He took pictures of me wherever we happened to be. I might be cooking dinner, and Harry would say, ‘Eleanor, the light is just beautiful right now. Come on. I’d like to take a picture of you,’ and we’d go make a photograph.

When he first thought of photographing me in the nude, I felt very shy. I thought, “Oh no, nice girls don’t have their picture taken in the nude.” I protested a couple of times, but I soon got over that. Harry assured me he would never do anything to embarrass me. I knew that his work was done with an eye to the beauty of the nude.

I would say he must have taken thousands of pictures of me. When we worked, he might shoot one roll, maybe two rolls. There are many, many nudes I’m sure no one has ever seen.

When I look back on those photographs, I don’t see them as myself. I see them as very beautiful pictures, but I don’t think, “That’s me.” If I did, I might hold back. I might feel strange. As it is, they are something separate from me.<sup>102</sup>

And James Alinder noted in the introductory essay to the 1984 *Eleanor* exhibition,

While her availability and willingness were crucial to the making of the photographs, there is no doubt that Eleanor’s most valuable contribution was as Harry’s inspiration.<sup>103</sup>

Two notions are clearly revealed in these excerpts; first, Eleanor has been viewed as her husband’s muse, a role with which she seems to have been in agreement. Just as Stieglitz’s and O’Keeffe’s careers were inextricably entwined, so were the Callahans’.

---

<sup>102</sup>Kelly, ed., *Nude Theory* (New York: Lustrum Press, 1979), 36.

<sup>103</sup>Callahan, *Eleanor*, 12.

Even though Eleanor had an estimable reputation as an executive secretary, working for Moholy-Nagy and Charles Scholl of Dr. Scholl's shoes, among others, she would receive at best a passing reference in the literature on her role as the artist's spouse and would not be mentioned in articles, exhibition catalogues, and dissertations were it not for the *Eleanor* series of photographs. Further, there would be no public awareness of her if Harry were not successful as a photographer and was not himself the subject of scholarly scrutiny. Marriage is, among many other things, an economic partnership. As suggested earlier in this chapter, the role of the muse as art-wife (or art-husband, for that matter) is often fairly mundane, resulting in a kind of creative enabler tending to life so that the artist can be free to pursue loftier goals. Eleanor Callahan certainly fulfilled that requirement, particularly in the early years of their (mutual) career. However, it seems that she also served in the more traditional, poetic form of muse by becoming the impetus for images that would provide both her and her husband with a degree of immortality.

The second notion revealed in Eleanor's statements is that she viewed her body in the photographs as having been transformed into art. Hence, it would make sense that their public display would not negatively impact her modesty. However, it can also be argued that photography's perceived indexical relationship to reality would seem to undermine this transformation, as Nead contends in her study of the female nude:

The assumed immediacy and accuracy of the photographic image is invested with a pornographic intent; whereas the abstraction and mediation of artistic methods such as painting and drawing are believed to be contrary to the relentless realism of the pornographic project."<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>104</sup> Nead, 52.

In addition to images showing “full frontal nudity,” the question of pornography arises with regard to the close-ups of torsos, breasts, buttocks and pudenda in both the O’Keeffe and Callahan series. The photographs of these women have typically been exhibited and published as series, with a variety of images shown within the viewing format. This creates a visual awareness of the whole person and allows for an understanding of the part – Georgia’s pubis, Eleanor’s breast – as relational and therefore individual. It has been previously noted that the synecdochical use of the fragment as an expressive form can be construed as a signifier of artistic practice. This reference to art in conjunction with the viewer’s presumed knowledge of the identity of the body and the body’s relation to the image’s maker would serve to undercut the potential prurient nature of the naked subjects, thus transforming them into nudes. At least for Callahan, and apparently for his wife, the process of photography allowed for a transmutation of lived reality into a form clearly recognizable as art by means of the familiar tropes of symbolic womanhood, formalist manipulation, the aesthetics of a highly personal style, and implied references to recognized traditions in art. Thus, Ollman can write with some justification that, “Callahan never presented his wife’s nudity to his audience for their sexual delectation. Even the full nudes are chaste and tender.”<sup>105</sup>

*Lee and Maria Friedlander*

Since *Lee Friedlander Self Portrait* was first published in 1970, this photographer has regularly relied on the book format as a means for showing his work. Influenced by

---

<sup>105</sup>Ollman, 99.

Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959), Friedlander sought the control of choice and arrangement of images that publishing provides, and acknowledges appreciating the book's format, which allows for repeated viewings over a period of time.<sup>106</sup> Works in this form include: *The American Monument* (1976), *Flowers and Trees* (1981), *Lee Friedlander Portraits* (1985), and *Lee Friedlander Nudes* (1991). His trademark solipsistic approach to the process of photographing is revealed in *Self Portrait* by images in which his presence is most often indicated by way of either his shadow and/or reflection, as if to acknowledge the indisputable fact of his mediating eye. In the forward, he wrote,

I suspect that it is for one's self-interest that one looks at one's surroundings and one's self. This search is personally born and is indeed my reason and motive for making photographs.<sup>107</sup>

*Maria: Photographs by Lee Friedlander* was published in 1992 by the Smithsonian Institution Press. It contains thirty black-and-white pictures of his wife, Maria DePaoli Friedlander, the earliest of which was taken on their honeymoon in 1958 and the most recent on a 1991 excursion to Yosemite National Park. In the book's prefatory interview, the photographer stated:

I'm always taking pictures because I'm curious about someone or something. I'm certainly curious about Maria. I still am. It's a mystery that we've been together thirty-odd years – that anyone stays together and remains curious about one another. But the other half is that I'm a workman with a tool in his hand. What's in front of me starts to get photographed. And Maria has been in front of me a lot.

---

<sup>106</sup>Lee Friedlander, *Maria: Photographs* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 11.

<sup>107</sup>Friedlander, *Self Portrait* (New York: Fraenkel Gallery, 1998).

Both of those things are at work<sup>108</sup>

Although both photographers made thousands of images of their wives over a period of many decades, Harry Callahan and Lee Friedlander created significantly different styles. In consideration of this difference, Szarkowski, the curator who played a leading role in not only establishing Friedlander's career but also in formulating a history of mid-twentieth-century photography, postulated a "fundamental dichotomy" evident in the medium "between those who think of photography as a means of self-expression and those who think of it as a method of exploration."<sup>109</sup> According to this history, Callahan and Friedlander stand on opposing sides of the "romantic [vs.] realist vision of artistic possibility."<sup>110</sup> Callahan's work, as has been noted, belongs in the expressionist camp with Siskind and White while Friedlander, in the company of his close friend Garry Winogrand, fits in the realist or documentary camp under the wide ranging influence of photographers Atget, Cartier-Bresson, Evans, and Frank, the FSA project of the 1930s, photo-journals such as *Life* and *Look*, and the vernacular snapshot. Callahan preferred working in a large format (generally 8"x10"), experimenting with darkroom manipulations and, by the 1970s, extensively photographing in color. Differing from Callahan, Friedlander worked almost exclusively in black and white, using a hand-held 35mm Leica for much of his career; his resultant images are in the tradition of American straight photography. Even with the notable differences between their oeuvres, the two

---

<sup>108</sup>Friedlander, *Maria*, 8.

<sup>109</sup>Szarkowski, *Mirrors & Windows*, 11.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

photographers also have much in common; particularly, they shared a work ethic in which the process of making images is fully integrated into the way they have lived their lives. As Friedlander stated in *Maria*:

I don't have any plan. I take a picture when something looks interesting or I feel a need to play with my camera – one or the other, I don't usually know which comes first.<sup>111</sup>

And even though the end result may differ to a great extent, Callahan and Friedlander also share a belief in the transformative power of the camera lens by way of the photographer's eye.

In the pantheon of photographer's wives, Maria Friedlander is certainly less well known than Georgia O'Keeffe, Eleanor Callahan, or Edith Gowin. Unlike images of these women, Friedlander's photographs of Maria are rarely cited as examples of the artist's work; his reputation is based primarily on his portraits and his vernacular images of the urban and suburban landscape. Prior to the publication of *Maria*, the series was never shown as such, and the photographs would appear as only one or two examples in the context of a larger theme. For example, *Portraits* includes one shot of Maria from 1972, which has the shadow of Friedlander's head emerging from the bottom left, with a self portrait of Friedlander behind the wheel of a pick-up truck on the facing page. Symbolically, when the book is closed, wife and husband are conjoined. Such deliberate juxtaposition of images is evident throughout the book, providing an underlying layer of narrative. *Self Portraits* has a tightly cropped image of Maria from 1966 [Figure 17]. In

---

<sup>111</sup>Friedlander, *Maria*, 5.

this photograph, the dark shape of her husband's head and shoulders is clearly evident on the white of Maria's coat as a sign of the image's being made, a conceit that is a hallmark of Friedlander's style and is not reserved only for images of his wife. Perhaps in this work the shadow is intended to suggest his "mark" upon her and the symbolic merger of the two people depicted within the image. This piece is indicative of Friedlander's oeuvre as a whole; its reflexivity is evident not only in the photographer's indicated presence, but also through the repeated use of rectangles (Maria's glasses, her torso and crossed arms, the door panels in the background) in affirming the rectangular shape imposed by the Leica. Green compares Friedlander's ability to isolate a formal structure from the chaos of visual experience to Robert Rauschenberg's assemblages: "But where Rauschenberg pieces the parts together, Friedlander grasps them in a single, coherent moment."<sup>112</sup> In consideration of this observation, it can be argued that the resultant images become cathected in a way that is unlike the snapshots from which they partially derive. As Friedlander's longtime friend, painter R.B Kitaj, wrote in the introductory essay to *Portraits*:

Friedlander, working with the tradition...of representing people according to some of the terms of a binocular vision, sustains a radicality of purpose common to art, which is born in the quality of mind with which the artist can be blessed. Friedlander, such artists, make pictures which get to be seen by way of an expectant clarity which the mind prepares....I mean they look like real life encounters remembered with an unusual energy.<sup>113</sup>

Though public awareness of *Maria* does not compare to the rather prominent

---

<sup>112</sup>Green, *American Photography*, 107.

<sup>113</sup>Friedlander, *Portraits* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 12.

position that *A Portrait*, *Eleanor*, and *Edith* have attained in their makers' respective oeuvres, this and the other series all evolved stylistically within the context of each photographer's other works, that is, clearly in the context of art. There is a distinction to be made between family images that are meant for family members, and those intended for exhibition and publication, a consideration that will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter. These images of the photographer's wife were all intended for public viewing. However, unlike those of Stieglitz, Callahan, and Gowin, Friedlander's photographs of his wife and family played a less critical role in the development of his particular aesthetic and are therefore not viewed as being as exemplary. Whereas a "typical" Friedlander will frame numerous discordant elements into a collage-like geometry of unified form, photographs of Maria tend to offer her as the dominant element. Friedlander described this tendency:

Maria, in terms of the larger group of pictures of the family, is the heroine. So if we had a hundred pages to use we'd probably throw in the pictures of the kids and some of me, and Maria would still be the heroine.<sup>114</sup>

Another distinguishing aspect of the series is the relative lack of nude images of Maria. Evidently nude photographs do exist, but were not intended for public display.<sup>115</sup> The namesake book includes just four semi-nude photographs; an overhead shot of Maria breastfeeding their daughter Anna while two-year-old son Erik looks on; a shot of Maria's angular body in dark panties and bra, her head averted; Maria emerging from the bathroom, holding a bra and covering herself with a towel; and Maria across a hotel room

---

<sup>114</sup>Friedlander, *Maria*, 5.

<sup>115</sup>Ollman, 141.



in Las Vegas, clad only in white panties, leaning against a wall within a rectangle of light from the window, her husband's shadow almost completely obscuring our view of her exposed breasts, perhaps as a means of protecting her from our vision [Figure 18]. Of the four photographs that are indicated, only two could even remotely be construed as having sexual connotations, which is not to say that the images in general are not intimate. As Friedlander acknowledges, their intimacy is due, in large part, to our awareness of his presence: "They're intimate," he stated, "in the sense that I'm there in all of them."<sup>116</sup> He shows us Maria asleep, in a state of complete vulnerability, and Maria sitting on the edge of a bed and looking out a window, totally absorbed in the moment, waiting for a thermometer to register her daughter's temperature [Figure 19].

In *The Photographer's Eye*, Szarkowski described the photograph as "The Thing Itself":

More convincingly than any other picture, a photograph evokes the tangible presence of reality....Our faith in the truth of a photograph rests on our belief that the lens is impartial, and will draw the subject as it is, neither nobler nor meaner.<sup>117</sup>

An uninflected and seemingly casual view of the subject is a critical element of Friedlander's style and the power and success of his work rests, in large part, on the tension that is created by his images' elision of the genres of fine-art photography and the vernacular snapshot. It is possibly this tension, and the association of the works with the perceived objectivity of the snapshot, which disallows the requisite transmutation that

---

<sup>116</sup>Friedlander, *Maria*, 6.

<sup>117</sup>Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

would enable Maria to see her own body as art. This would help to explain why Eleanor was much more comfortable with nudity and the frequent exhibition of her imaged body than Maria, though neither has been described as an extroverted, attention-seeking personality. In an interview with Ollman, Maria described her reaction to the series:

I have some detachment from seeing Lee work, and seeing how he evolved. So the fact that there are a lot of pictures of me is no surprise. I do find the book collectively touching, but also an invasion of privacy, disturbing, and it puts me in the center stage where I'd rather not be....Had Lee said to me, I'd like to do a session with you, either nude or clothed...I think that would have been wrong for me. In some ways I'm shy. I think it would have destroyed whatever it was Lee saw of me in these pictures.<sup>118</sup>

Friedlander's *Nudes* project, which he began in 1977, serves as a counterpoint to *Maria*. These photographs of hired models have been described as awkward and ungainly, even ugly due to their uncompromising descriptions of body hair, veins, blemishes, and flesh.<sup>119</sup> [See Figure 20.] The *Nudes* remain anonymous and are identified only by location and date. The sense of reality in the *Maria* photographs, on the other hand, is based on their identification as family snapshots; they contextualize her as an individual, through time, and present her in various roles as wife, mother, daughter, sister. Though the seemingly disparate quality of realism evident in both series may cause the relationship to appear somewhat tenuous, both *Maria* and the *Nudes* are firmly located in the discourse of fine-art photography; the *Nudes* by way of the traditions of figure painting, particularly Gustave Courbet's graphic nudes of the 1860s, and photography (i.e., Bill Brandt and Andr e Kert esz); and *Maria* by way of the established subject of the

---

<sup>118</sup>Ollman, 141.

<sup>119</sup>See Friedlander, *Nudes* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991).

photographer's wife.

### *Images of the Wife*

We are preconditioned to view family images in the context of narrative, as archived memory made visible through the format of the family album. In a larger sense, we experience family in the context of an ongoing narrative, i.e., the family tree, family history, the telling and retelling of family stories, the collection of family artifacts, and so forth. The paintings that Rembrandt and Rubens made of their respective wives resulted in a narrative that depends on art history and the purported original intention of the artist. In the case of these artists, the visual narratives of individual women, each located in a particular time and place, developed through a sequence of images that have later been augmented by written narratives emphasizing the artist who made the images. Yes, this is *her* in the painting, but we see her through *his* eyes just as history tends to view her in the context of his career. And, just as our response is affected by our knowledge of the marriage referenced in the paintings, it is also affected, to some extent, by the viewer's understanding and experience of the marital relationship. The bottom line is that representations of the artist's wife are encoded with subjectivities that distinguish them from other kinds of images.

This study has thus far described how the subject of the artist's/photographer's wife has fused the domains of public and private life through the conflation of art and marriage. The transgressive nature of this juncture can be located in the confluence of gazes – the artist's, the subject's, and the viewer's – that are embroiled in constructing

subjectivities. We see the wife through her husband's eyes as she responds to his presence, and yet the entire process of making and displaying the image is delimited by the traditions and expectations of artistic practice. Art historian Daniell Cornell writes,

The introduction of non-photographic media from the European avant-garde [i.e., the exhibition of Rodin's drawings at 291] was directly related to the realization of the unique properties offered by various materials. This meant that each medium was a unique language with its own visionary vocabulary. By exploring those other artistic languages, photographers were instructed about both the possibilities and the limitations of their own medium.<sup>120</sup>

Stieglitz's extended portrait of O'Keeffe successfully merged his dual quest to establish an American modernism within which photography could be practiced and understood as a fine-art. Callahan's *Eleanor* photographs represent a continuation of this program. Like Stieglitz, he used the creation of images of his wife as a means for exploring and expanding the stylistic parameters of the medium in ways that place him firmly within the framework of modernism while simultaneously evoking the nudes of the classical tradition. When viewed as such, Eleanor Callahan becomes objectified through the photographs as both the nude and the photographer's wife and, as such, her form becomes iconic: she is a generative force, Woman in Nature, an organic abstraction, etc.

In Friedlander's series, Maria is momentarily captured by light on film in her roles as wife and mother. She is neither a classical nude nor a Symbolist-inspired signifier of Nature – she is resolutely an individual who is nonetheless depicted solely within the context of her relationship to the photographer. The tension in these works is located within the inherent contradiction of the genres of fine-art and snapshot

---

<sup>120</sup>Cornell, 298.

photography as well as the affects that contradiction has on viewer reception.

Additionally, Friedlander's typically solipsistic use of his own shadow/reflection within many of his images places him in the position of being a kind of surrogate viewer.

Similar to surrogate figures found in the early nineteenth-century paintings of German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich, this placement further punctuates the somewhat discomfoting identification of the viewer with the photographer, in this case the husband, which generally characterizes the reception of images of the artist's wife.

Arising from a critical period in the establishment of twentieth-century American fine-art photography, the subject of the photographer's wife has been shown to play a significant role in that history. Considered as a Foucauldian discourse whose terms change over time, the subject of these works provides an underlying legitimization of imagery that transforms the personal into the artistic and that can be examined as a distinctive confluence of the discourses of art, photography, and marriage. The interplay of these discursive fields allows the resultant artworks to be examined within the context of areas such as gender and power, public and private spheres, portraiture and self-portraiture, representations of women and viewer reception. Thus, when Emmet Gowin, with the encouragement of his teacher Harry Callahan, began to make photographs of his wife and family in the mid-1960s, he found an already established tradition within which to work, a tradition, moreover, to which he could make his own contributions.

## Chapter 2 Representing Edith as Family

### Family, Place, and Religion

What is Above is Within, for every-thing in Eternity is translucent:  
The Circumference is Within: Without is formed the Selfish Center  
And the Circumference still expands going forward into Eternity.  
And the Center has Eternal States! these states we now explore.

William Blake, *Jerusalem*, c. 1820

For every Space larger than a red Globule of Man's blood  
Is visionary, and is created by the Hammer of Los:  
And every Space smaller than a Globule of Man's blood opens  
Into Eternity of which this vegetable Earth is but a shadow.

William Blake, *Milton*, c. 1810 (quoted *Emmet Gowin/Photographs*, 1990)

Emmet Gowin was born on December 22, 1941 in Danville, Virginia, a small city located on the Dan River in an area along the North Carolina border noted for tobacco farming and textile production. Gowin's father was a Methodist minister, and he has described his childhood experiences as taking place in a household where scriptural law prevailed, stating "I had read the Bible several times by the time I was twelve years old. It was expected of me."<sup>1</sup> Gowin's mother, the daughter of a Quaker minister, was a gifted musician who often served as church organist for her husband's congregations. "My father frightened me with his theology," Gowin has said about his parents, "whereas my mother practiced patience and forgiveness. She was the influence in my life."<sup>2</sup> This

---

<sup>1</sup>Sally Gall, "Emmet Gowin," *BOMB* 58 (winter 1997): 21.

<sup>2</sup>Martha Chahroudi, *Emmet Gowin: Photographs* (Boston, London: Bullfinch Press, 1990), 7.

influence is evident in Edith and Emmet Gowin's long-time membership in the Newtown Friends Meeting near their home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Additionally, their sons Elijah and Isaac attended Quaker schools and many of Gowin's statements and actions indicate that he conscientiously subscribes to the Quaker principles of non-violence and thoughtful speech. Perhaps as a way of explaining a lifelong preoccupation with both religion and nature, he attributes his childhood knowledge of the world to the Bible and Boy Scouting. This dual focus is illustrated by a story that Gowin often relates concerning his first memorable encounter with photography in which, at the age of sixteen, he saw Ansel Adams' *Grass and Burnt Tree, Sierra Nevada* reproduced in a magazine, an experience that evidently left him with a strong impression of the medium's expressive potential. In a 1981 interview with writer and journalist Bill Moyers for the Public Television program *The Photographer's Eye*, he described his response:

And it struck me as being symbolic, and I never thought that a photograph was symbolic. I looked at the little picture of the tree stump and the grass and thought that is what the concept of resurrection really stands for, something passes away, something takes its place.<sup>3</sup>

An emphasis on the symbolic and the desire to make connections that are both personal and cosmic have been consistent throughout Gowin's career, as exemplified by the following statement in his 1990 catalogue from the Philadelphia Museum of Art,

*Emmet Gowin/Photographs:*

Art is the presence of something mysterious that transports you to a place where life takes on the clearness that it ordinarily lacks, a transparency, a vividness, a completeness. One's emotions are remade into something more whole and

---

<sup>3</sup>"The Photographer's Eye" (Washington, D.C.: PBS Video, 1981).

something holy....In the right frame of mind, you pass right through the superficial surface of things and see that behind it there is a reality that is infinite.<sup>4</sup>

Gowin often illustrates his fascination with the mythic underpinnings of lived experience by telling and retelling stories about his past, like the one above about the Adams' photograph of the tree stump. These anecdotes, and repeated references in conversations, interviews, and exhibition catalogues that point to influences such as the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century English poet William Blake, twentieth-century comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell, and photographer Frederick Sommer, who was Gowin's late friend and mentor, establish for him a distinct artistic persona that emerges from the critical literature on his work. He cites Blake and Sommer, in particular, as "the two artists who have given me the most guidance." He continues,

Blake...tells us that the task of the artist is to serve the creative imagination.... [His] art is a cosmology of the heart, and the story of the mind's war with the heart, between reason and feeling. Fredrick Sommer says that "the most important thing is quality of attention span, and to use it for acceptance rather than negation." I think he says this because he knows that even art can easily deteriorate into business, and because he understands that our world view, spiritually and psychologically, is unavoidably linked to the quality of our own behavior. That's why he can say, "It's what we do everyday, in the simplest way, that counts." ...[Using] their ideas of what an artist is, you can see that the World could never have too many artists.<sup>5</sup>

The voice with which Gowin has actively guided the construction of this persona is characterized by a gentle and mellifluous Southern cadence, undiminished by three decades of living in Pennsylvania and teaching at Princeton University. From the mid-1960s to the present the subjects of family and landscape have dominated his oeuvre, and

---

<sup>4</sup>Chahroudi, 9.

<sup>5</sup>Gall, 25.



these themes, in conjunction with his own emphatically spiritual interpretation of the work, combine to suggest a strong connection to a traditional Southern aesthetic more clearly defined in literature than in the visual arts. Literary scholar Patricia Evans describes this aesthetic in the following analysis of Southern literature:

Characteristics...are: the importance of family, sense of community, importance of religion, importance of time and place, exploration of the past, sense of human limitation (moral dilemma), and use of southern voice and dialect.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Stieglitz, Callahan, and Friedlander, Gowin's career as a photographer began with the family series and until recently, with the exhibition and catalogue of his aerial landscapes, much of his subsequent reputation has rested on those images. Danville, Virginia, was the original location of the family series and, as Gowin has indicated numerous times, the landscape photographs that have comprised the majority of his work of the last three decades evolved directly from both that series and its location. Gowin's clear association of family and place echoes Virginia photographer Sally Mann's assessment of her own Southern landscape series, "The landscapes evolved into family photographs without the figures."<sup>7</sup> For Gowin, this connection is even more profound. As he stated with regard to the relationship between his family images and more recent work, "I don't see anything that I don't see through a high degree of emotional

---

<sup>6</sup>Patricia Evans, "Southern Literature: Women Writers," available from <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/southwomen.htm>; Internet: accessed 10 August 2004.

<sup>7</sup>Roy Proctor, "People/Places: Art and Insight in the Photographs of Sally Mann." *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (16 April 16 2000), H8.

connectedness. This is true of the family or the aerial photographs.<sup>8</sup>

By means of the narrative that has been woven into the critical literature, Gowin has consistently sought to establish an analogical interpretation of his work that transcends literal or allegorical readings in order to find meaning on a spiritual level. This approach to the practice of photography and Gowin's adherence to the basic tenets of the Southern aesthetic – family, place, and religion – combine to distinguish the *Edith* series from the other examples of the subject of the photographer's wife previously discussed in this study. The personal narrative of the *Edith* series as it has evolved since the early 1970s through exhibition and publication, in conjunction with Gowin's stories and statements, provides a crucial point of departure for an investigation of these works. This examination of the series will present this narrative but will diverge from the prevailing critical literature by simultaneously offering a discursive reading, allowing the photographs to also be read suprapersonally as a means of determining the larger dynamic traditions from which the work derives.

In general, the *Edith* series can be divided into specific thematic categories – Edith as family, nature, mother, and mate – with a good deal of overlap between this categorical framework, and distinctions within it. The series can also be viewed within the rubrics of various photographic genres, specifically, family, snapshot, documentary, and fine-art photography. This chapter will concentrate on representing Edith as family by looking at the background and context of the family series, the tradition of family

---

<sup>8</sup>Jock Reynolds, ed., *Emmet Gowin: Changing the Earth* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 153.

photography, and the influence of documentary photography and the snapshot aesthetic on fine-art photography in general and on Gowin's work in particular. Its structure, which incorporates Gowin's narrative with a discursive overview, will continue to be utilized in the third chapter on Representing Edith as the Photographer's Wife. The purpose in doing so is to indicate areas where this artist has both engaged in and transformed the subject of the wife in the practice of twentieth-century fine-art photography.

### **The Family in Context**

In one sense, the real subject here is memory. Memory and place are hopelessly entangled, memory exposed to hard-edged facts that sometimes directly contradict memory. It seems to me that there are three kinds of memory – one that is private, your own secret word hoard of facts and fiction; public memory; and somewhere in between, but perhaps more powerful than both, lies family memory, what we can recall from the experience of kinfolk we know and have touched, those we have witnessed.

George Garrett, "A Summoning of Place," 2002

It's odd to me now when I think back on the kind of person I was 25 years ago, making pictures of Edith's family and so forth. I felt then that if pictures weren't of people, they weren't about what was really important. Behavior, our behavior, that's what's really important... When I was making the family photographs it was during the Vietnam War and we knew exactly what kind of time we were living in. The television brought that to us every evening. To not give yourself to an activity that you feel is wrong, is to be doing what you should be doing. To not do what is wrong and to do what you feel is right is a political act.

Emmet Gowin, *Dialogs*, 1998

In an interview with photographer John Paul Caponigro and his wife Alexandra

Caponigro, Gowin related the following story:

In a recent class seminar, my students caught me a little off guard. This class contained mostly young women. A little surprise of warmth and vitality came into their faces as they asked, "Tell us again how you met Edith at a YMCA dance on Saturday night." So of course I told them as best as I could how I met Edith. Both they and I know that my life would not be the same without her. They think that's amazing. And I guess I do too.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>John Paul Caponigro, "Dialogs – Emmet Gowin," originally in *Camera Arts* (December 1998 – January 1999); available from [www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/dialogs/dialogs\\_a-n/emmet\\_gowin.html](http://www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/dialogs/dialogs_a-n/emmet_gowin.html); Internet: accessed 19 July 2004.

Since the early 1970s Gowin has been quoted several times as stating “Edith and I were born about a year and a mile apart,” suggesting a sense of inevitability with regard to their relationship. Although their parents knew each other slightly, Gowin’s family left Danville when he was a young child in order for his father to take a church in the eastern part of the state, and they returned to Danville only when Emmet was in high school. When the couple met at the dance in Danville in 1961, Gowin was in the process of completing his second year of business school. He had already decided to become an artist, and even though his parents did not consider art to be a viable career option, he entered Richmond Professional Institute (RPI, now Virginia Commonwealth University) that fall as a commercial art major. In retrospect, Gowin believes that his early grounding in religion enabled him to arrive at art school “ready to look at the world in a symbolic context.”<sup>10</sup> He recalls having a strong reaction during freshman orientation when another student complained about having to take photography, calling it “a waste of time.” Although he intended to concentrate on drawing and painting and had not thought much about photography,

I had a sense that because photography was so limited to fact, its relationship to the symbolic would be really obscure and powerful...and that because its facts are so self-evident, the way it performs its magic would be almost invisible. I saw that just in [the other student’s] statement.<sup>11</sup>

Friend and former classmate Phillip Meggs recalled the first critique in the photography class that he and Gowin took together. The assignment was to take a roll of

---

<sup>10</sup>Emmet Gowin, interview by author, 10 June, 1998, tape recording, Danville, Virginia.

<sup>11</sup>Gowin, interview.

film and after a trip to Danville over the weekend to see Edith, his new girlfriend, Gowin returned with a roll comprised predominately of images of her. According to Meggs, the instructor's rather sarcastic response was, "Mr. McGowin (as he always called Emmet), who's the fashion model?"<sup>12</sup> Gowin was undeterred, and during his freshman year at RPI he made the decision to become a photographer. Meggs' anecdote reveals that from Gowin's first roll of film, making photographs of Edith was to be a part of his approach.

In 1961, while in a drawing class at RPI, Gowin was shown a copy of Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* and found himself to be particularly drawn to the images of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank. He wrote in 1976,

The photographs of Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank were among the important models for my first pictures. I felt entirely natural accepting these influences. I learned photography mostly from books; [Cartier-Bresson's] *The Decisive Moment* was the first. I imitated the pictures that I admired; made pictures of pictures.<sup>13</sup>

In 1999 he noted, in retrospect, that at that time his attempts to "do Cartier-Bresson in Virginia" were much more difficult than imitating Frank. "It's not really surprising that the Virginia I knew between 1961 and 1965 looked like *The Americans*."<sup>14</sup> In 1963 Gowin went to New York to meet briefly with Frank to receive feedback on his portfolio, which he now admits was quite derivative, and they discussed the possibility that Gowin might attend graduate school. Frank suggested that should he decide to do so, he might consider working with Harry Callahan at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

---

<sup>12</sup>Phillip Meggs, interview by author, 6 November, 1997, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>13</sup>Emmet Gowin, *Photographs*, 99.

<sup>14</sup> Caponigro.

Edith and Emmet were married during the summer of 1964 between Gowin's junior and senior years at RPI. He graduated in spring of 1965, and that fall the couple moved to Providence so that he could begin the Master of Fine Arts program in photography and work with Callahan at RISD. Not long after their arrival in Providence, Gowin was sent a draft notice requiring his immediate presence in Danville in order to register as a noncombatant conscientious objector. Upon returning to RISD he had a significant encounter with Callahan, which he describes as follows:

Harry said, "I saw your wife on the street while you were gone, and I want to talk to you about her." I said, "What do you mean?" "Well, first I can tell how much she loves you. We met on the street and had a long talk. She just sighed and said how worried she is about the draft. We talked about school. You can see how concerned she is for your welfare. You're very fortunate. I just wanted to let you know that I could see that." It quite took my breath away. What a statement, what a subject. He had spoken so tenderly, had used the word *love*. I wasn't used to that. I was surprised. But it set in mind a guideline for the kind of thing that should be talked about, that we rarely do talk about, yet which represents a way in which we really need each other.<sup>15</sup>

While staying with Edith's family on the trip to Danville, Gowin decided to take pictures using a borrowed 4"x 5" camera and film holders donated by Callahan, thinking that this would be a good opportunity to experiment with an unfamiliar format and process. Edith's five-year-old niece, Nancy, kept pestering him to take a picture of her and her dolls and the resultant image, *Nancy, Danville, Virginia, 1965* [Figure 21], became the breakthrough work establishing a series of photographs that would focus on the family and its surroundings. Gowin cites this experience and Callahan's influence as giving him permission to photograph the personal, and thus in his words, to "be in the

---

<sup>15</sup> Louise Shaw, ed., *Harry Callahan and His Students: A Study in Influence* (Atlanta: Georgia State University, 1983).

presence of our own first hand experience.” He states that in order to do this, “I had to give up [being] answerable to Frank. What I had to become answerable to was what was happening in front of me and how I felt about it.”<sup>16</sup> Before him was Edith’s family, whose acceptance, openness, and strong sense of interdependence provided a stark contrast to his own family experience.

British sociologist Jon Bernardes writes, “Most people in Western industrialized societies, and probably most people world-wide, consider family as the most important aspect of their lives.”<sup>17</sup> Making reference to a far more reductive view of the family than that experienced by Gowin, he describes the remarkable power wielded by the concept of the modern nuclear family in post-war Britain and the U.S., which consists of a mother, a father, and their offspring. Bernardes notes that the prominence of this construct in the public consciousness “is attractive to opinion leaders because it asserts the correctness of clear gender divisions, parental responsibility for children and the privacy of ‘the family’.” He further contends, “Ordinary people resist giving up the idea of ‘the family’ because it is so simple and justifies so much behaviour.”<sup>18</sup> Art historian Katherine Hoffman notes that the image of the American family often depicted in popular photo-journals such as *Life* and *Look* magazines in the 1940s and ‘50s conveyed “the American ‘national character’ as friendly, decent, and kind;” a “perfect family” that was clearly defined in terms of both appearance and behavior. As she explains,

---

<sup>16</sup>Caponigro.

<sup>17</sup>Jon Bernardes, *Family Studies: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

The notion that the United States was heterogeneous in its population and values was not portrayed at this point in time....Americans were portrayed as being white, middle class, and members of a small nuclear family.<sup>19</sup>

Hoffman also observes that in contrast to the use of paintings and drawings earlier in the century, the media's prevalent use of photographs at mid-century created an easily perceived veracity that was extremely powerful in shaping public perceptions of family life. The social and economic forces underlying the formation of these perceptions are made clearly evident in a speech given by Vice President Richard M. Nixon to an audience in Moscow in June, 1959:

There are 44,000,000 families in the United States. Twenty-five million of these families live in houses or apartments that have as much or more floor space as the one you see in this exhibit. Thirty-one million families own their own homes and the land on which they are built. America's 44,000,000 families own a total of 56,000,000 cars, 50,000,000 television sets and 143,000,000 radio sets. And they buy an average of nine dresses and suits and fourteen pairs of shoes per family per year.<sup>20</sup>

By explicitly equating success and happiness with consumerism, Nixon's speech reveals how the media construction of the American family served as a crucial weapon in the Cold War struggle against Communism. As writer Ingrid Sischy notes, "Familyhood is probably the most commonly used metaphor (or euphemism) for nationhood."<sup>21</sup>

By the mid-1950s, photographic essays that had revealed the "typical American

---

<sup>19</sup>Hoffman, 144-5.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Eric J. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 141.

<sup>21</sup>Ingrid Sischy, "Self Portraits in Photography," in Thomas F. Barrow and others eds., *Reading Into Photography: Selected Essays, 1959 – 1980* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 240.



family” on the pages of magazines were transformed into readily accessible narratives by television, which brought numerous family-themed series such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* into millions of American households. Though more overtly fictive than the printed representations of family, these shows were nonetheless perceived as reflecting normalcy with regard to gender roles and living conditions, and their impact on the popular imagination indicates that by mid-century television had become a significant purveyor of the prevailing social paradigm. The period when Gowin was making the family photographs (roughly 1966 to 1973) was also characterized by critical changes in public perceptions of family. *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, a humorous look at an actual though highly idealized suburban nuclear family that ran from 1952 to 1966, was superseded in 1971 by *All in the Family*, a ground-breaking social satire that took an unflinching look at racism, bigotry, and dysfunctional family life in an urban environment.

The tendency toward the exposure of private ills in public discourse found in *All in the Family*, as opposed to the covert sublimation characterized by *Ozzie and Harriet*, was largely an influence of the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s, which itself became a template for the civil activism of the anti-war and feminist movements of the later '60s and 1970s. Given impetus by an atmosphere of civil disobedience and by an increasingly youth-oriented popular culture, a counter-culture movement emerged by the mid-1960s that questioned the viability of institutions held sacred by the entrenched power structure, i.e., the generation that came of age during World War II. In this environment, notions regarding family and country, once held inviolable, came under fire

in a haze of disillusionment and distrust. There was a desire among many to live openly and freely without social constraint, to get back to the land, to experience free love, etc. One outgrowth of this examination of the institution of family was the popularity of communal living, which took a great many forms, but tended to revolve around the idea of shared property. B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, first published in 1948, illustrated a utopian prototype emulated by many of the open living communities formed in the 1960s. One such community, Twin Oaks, was founded in 1967 in Louisa County, Virginia, about three hours from Edith Morris Gowin's family home in Danville.

When many of the other photographers of his generation were seeking subjects in exotic locales abroad or in inner-city neighborhoods, Gowin found his inspiration during his years as a graduate student, new teacher, and new father in a semi-rural communal environment at his wife's family home. In 1998, he reflected on his early works in an interview that took place in the family enclave in Danville,

In the late '60s in an isolated place like this, I knew I could have done other things, but I felt that this was the most authentic place. If I had had the idea of going to the Amazon to work and had come all the way back around, this would have been as authentically unusual, and as local, as many of those places that you pass along the way. And what I was working with was a handful of photographic mentors, because the rest of the world didn't care if you made a great photograph – maybe Walker Evans – maybe Callahan – maybe a handful of people would have been able to have seen it. But that was it. We were working [for] an absolutely miniscule audience.<sup>22</sup>

Gowin describes Edith's family during the period when the series was being made:

These people...were in a sense farmers, weavers, cotton mill people, workers,

---

<sup>22</sup> Gowin, interview.

simple people in touch with nature. And that was affected by where they lived and how they lived and the way they carried on their affairs.”<sup>23</sup>

Four generations of the Booher/Cooper/Morris family resided in five houses located on a small cul-de-sac on the outskirts of Danville. Rennie Booher, the matriarch of the family and Edith’s maternal grandmother, had seven children – five girls and two boys – several of whom lived on the cul-de-sac and/or had children or grandchildren living there.

Edith’s father was killed in an automobile accident when she was a child, so her mother, Reva, brought up her and her sisters Mae, Ruth, and Helen in the midst of this extended family, a situation enabling her to work as a weaver at the Dan River Textile Mill. This communal approach to raising children would continue into the 1960s and early 1970s when the Gowins would spend their summers in Danville, tending to the children and the garden while the rest of the family worked at the mill. In retrospect, Gowin sees this period in their lives at least partially through the lens of the Vietnam War. Although his status as a non-combatant conscientious objector was never fully verified, by 1968 the Gowins’ first son Elijah had been born and at that time men with children were not being drafted. He recalls that when the family series was first being shown in the early 1970s,

I felt that I was on very clear moral grounds; that I was standing aside from Vietnam and that seemed to me in sharp contrast to the alternative. . . . I felt that [the war] was morally corrupt and wrong. But I didn’t think that in political terms. I felt that it was just humanely wrong, [and] that what I was doing was humanely right. And it’s so simple from that position. I was learning how to grow plants. I was picking up something that I had watched my father do, but that I had little interest in when I was made to do it. But I was now in a sense free. Keeping a garden, growing things, and participating in life seemed really legitimate.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Bunnell, *Emmet Gowin: Photographs, 1966 – 1983* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of

Art, 1983), 5.

<sup>24</sup> Gowin, interview.

Gowin's own parents, Emmet and Grace, who were reportedly thrilled when their son received a degree in photography because they were terrified that he would become an artist, saw very few of his photographs from either the family or *Edith* series. His mother had an opportunity to see "a tiny fragment, perhaps eight to ten pictures" from the 1970 *Album 5* publication before she passed away. His father saw the 1976 monograph published by Knopf, but was more bothered by the text that Gowin wrote than by the nude images of his daughter-in-law. Citing William Blake's admonition to "Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans [*sic*]," Gowin contends in regard to his parents, "I was writing a different theology all together [which] would lead to discord of a general sort."<sup>25</sup> He locates clashes of opinion he and his parents had on such issues as civil rights and the Vietnam War in terms of their differing interpretations of theology. To have confronted his parents with his work at a time when he "would have had to argue for an emerging point of view" was in his mind problematic and now is difficult for him to contemplate.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, members of Edith's family – the subjects of many of his photographs – were by and large uncurious about the project and generally quite accepting of it. For this reason Gowin was secure living and working in the milieu of his wife's family and, in his words, was "better off staying close to what was mine – uniquely mine and available."<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Gowin, interview.

<sup>26</sup>Gowin, interview.

<sup>27</sup> Gowin, interview.

## Family Photography

The taking and contemplation of the family photograph presuppose the suspension of all aesthetic judgment, because the sacred character of the object and the sacralizing relationship between the photographer and the picture are enough unconditionally to justify the existence of a picture which only really seeks to express the glorification of its object, and realizes its perfection in the perfect fulfillment of the function.

Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, 1965

I have a love/hate relationship with my family photographs. They speak to me about the hopes, joys, and sufferings of my family, but I am aware of how much was left out of our documentation... I have hunted through drawers and boxes, searching for photographs that reveal narratives other than the ones in our family albums. I find images of awkward moments and unflattering poses that are often more revealing than the ones framed on the walls and presented in photo albums. Were these images not as important to remember?

Lorie Novak, "Collected Visions," 1998

Photography likes to remember, and photography has almost only to do with things past, as to its prints anyway; the religion of photography rather insists on remembrance.

R.B. Kitaj, *Lee Friedlander Portraits*, 1985

Studies of family photography have examined and delineated its normative functions within family tradition. Broadly summarized, these functions include documentation, which provides the family with a sense of its history and collective identity, and interaction wherein both the taking and the viewing of such photographs offer an opportunity for interactive participation among group members. Sociologist David Halle's 1987 essay in *Art Journal* entitled "The Family Photograph" examines the display of family photographs in the homes of respondents in several New York City neighborhoods. His findings indicate that most photographs on view are informal: "[They] depict people at leisure – in the back yard, at the beach, on trips and outings within the United States, and on vacations abroad." He notes, "Almost all of them *are* family pictures: there are few photos of friends, colleagues, peers, or strangers."<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>David Halle, "The Family Photograph." *Art Journal* 46 (fall 1987): 217, 219.

With regard to presentation, the study shows that “Clusters dominate the placement of the pictures. Eighty-nine percent of [them]...are in groups of four or more.”<sup>29</sup> Additionally, there is evidence of informality with regard to this placement, suggesting that the primary function of family photographs is to provide an opportunity “to spend time enjoying the company of family members.” He concludes that the photographs surveyed in his study “serve as records and reminders, not of power, status, or ancestry, but of good times.”<sup>30</sup>

In his dissertation on *Photography as Document: A Study of Family Photography and its Viability as a Truth Telling Medium* (1995), Clark Grahame Baker distinguishes various functions of family photographs according to the method by which they are viewed: “Family albums are used to generate conversation among friends, wallet photos help to break the ice with strangers, and portraits are used to create favorable impressions.”<sup>31</sup> Baker found that the most significant family pictures are not on display but are collected into family albums, thereby limiting the range of viewing. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu broke ground in this field of research with the 1965 publication of *Photography: A Middlebrow Art*, in which he contends that the family album “expresses the essence of social memory,” noting further,

The images of the past arranged in chronological order, the logical order of social memory, evoke and communicate the memory of events which deserve to be preserved because the group sees a factor of unification in the monuments of its past unity or...because it draws confirmation of its present unity from its past: this

---

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 221.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 223.

<sup>31</sup> Clark Grahame Baker, “Photography as Document: A Study of Family Photography and its Viability as a Truth Telling Medium” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Alabama, 1995), 38.

is why there is nothing more decent, reassuring and edifying than a family album.<sup>32</sup>

More recently, literary scholar Marianne Hirsch published two works on the subject, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997) and *The Familial Gaze* (1999), in which she contends that collections of family photographs are socially encoded and thus serve both to illustrate and perpetuate the expectations and values of the family represented within a given set of images. As she writes in the introduction to *Family Frames*,

[Photography's] social functions are integrally tied to the ideology of the modern family. The family photo both displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness; it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes a prime objective of those rituals. Because the photograph gives the illusion of being a simple transcription of the real, a trace touched directly by the event it records, it has the effect of naturalizing cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and coded characteristics.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout these studies on family photography the role of memory, both individual and collective, is shown to be fundamental to the genre's meaning and function. For this reason, the use of descriptive texts is critical to the viewing process, particularly as participants die and memories fade and in cases where the subjects are unfamiliar to the viewer. As Baker notes,

One of the keys to fully understanding the family photographs of others is to have the images accompanied by written information by individuals who participated in their creation.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 30-1.

<sup>33</sup>Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Post-Memory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>34</sup>Baker, 37.

Bourdieu contends that while evoking the past, the family album actually serves to exorcize it, in a manner similar to funeral rites,

...namely at once recalling the memory of the departed and the memory of their passing, recalling that they lived, that they are dead and buried and that they continue on in the living.<sup>35</sup>

Assuming that the genre's commemorative function supercedes considerations of form, then the criteria for success in family photography is based on the extent to which the observer can relate to what is communicated about the people, places, and things in the photographs. Hirsch describes the complexity of this process:

[When] we photograph ourselves in a familial setting, we do not do so in a vacuum; we respond to dominant mythologies of family life, to conceptions we have inherited, to images we see on television, in advertising, in film. These internalized images reflect back on us, deploying a familial gaze that fixes and defines us. But each picture is also the product of other looks and gazes as family members define themselves in relation to each other in the roles they occupy as mother, father, daughter, son, husband, or lover. That process of definition – that familial act of looking – is also recorded visually in photographs. And as these looks and gazes intersect, they are filtered by various screens that define what and how we see.<sup>36</sup>

Hirsch's construction of "the familial act of looking" implicates two distinct levels of meaning in the creation and viewing of family photographs: a personal level that requires knowledge of the individuals and interrelationships represented within the images, and a suprapersonal level, which is based on recognition of the coded beliefs and behaviors evinced by the works. If recognition engenders a sense of identification, then the suprapersonal reading does not require knowledge of the subjects in the photograph in

---

<sup>35</sup> Bourdieu, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), xvi.



order for the viewing experience to have meaning. This examination of the processes of reading family photographs is relevant to the artistic practice of placing photographs of family members within a public art context. Would the expectations for viewing differ if the family photographs in the gallery were instead paintings, a medium which is neither as familiar nor as accessible to the broader public as photography? To what extent does the observer identify with the narrative construction that emerges from the images and text, and to what extent is this identification based upon encoded norms located within the images and/or encoded expectations of viewing? These questions suggest that if no personal meaning is derived from the viewing of my family, my history, my identity, then meaning must function on a suprapersonal level, which might include identification with the family narrative on a fictive level or an aesthetic appreciation of the photograph as an art object, or both.

### Documentary Photography and the Snapshot Aesthetic

In general, the term *snapshot* designates photographs taken by amateurs with simple cameras to record family events such as vacations, weddings, and so on.... Many professional photographers adopted this direct and spontaneous approach, but the aesthetics of instantaneity and of the posed photograph have been understood as opposite and even antagonistic approaches.  
Gilles Mora, *Photo Speak*, 1998

By explicitly defining photographic art in opposition to the sprawling mass of ordinary, practical photography, Alfred Stieglitz paradoxically endowed the latter with an embryonic identity it had not possessed. [Walker] Evans and his successors completed the process by recognizing a coherent aesthetic in the same pile of mundane photographs that everyone knew and used, filed, or discarded as the daily occasion required. Thanks in part to Evans, we now have a name for this material; we call it 'vernacular,' meaning functional or ordinary rather than refined or exotic.  
Peter Galassi, *Walker Evans & Company*, 2000

In 1888 a banker by the name of George Eastman revolutionized photography by

introducing the Kodak, a hand-held camera which significantly democratized the making of pictures. Previously, all practitioners required cumbersome equipment and a knowledge of various arcane chemical processes, which had the effect of limiting the availability of photographic production. By the 1890s, in accordance with Kodak's advertising slogan "You push the button, we'll do the rest," taking pictures had become a widely accepted activity, and its growing accessibility influenced how the public both experienced and perceived the medium. Photographic historian Naomi Rosenblum describes the formative years of vernacular photography,

[Most pictures] were made solely as personal records by individuals of modest visual ambitions. Untutored in either art or science, they tended to regard the image in terms of its subject rather than as a visual statement that required decisions about where to stand, what to include, how best to use the light....[Untroubled] by questions of print quality, they mostly ignored the craft elements of photographic expression.<sup>37</sup>

The results of the "point-and-click" experience came to be known as the "snapshot," a term coined earlier in the century by English photographer Sir John Herschel that photographic historian Robert Hirsch suggests was "adopted from the hunting term meaning to shoot instinctively without taking aim."<sup>38</sup> Because snapshots were intended primarily for recording the images of people, places, and events, as long as the resultant print accurately evoked the memory of whatever was, in essence, captured at the moment of exposure, then the photograph would be considered successful. The original Kodak camera allowed the user to take up to one hundred exposures, which were developed and

---

<sup>37</sup>Rosenblum, 260.

<sup>38</sup>Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography* (Boston and New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 173.

printed in Eastman's factory in Rochester, New York. As suggested by Rosenblum, this process clearly placed the emphasis for point-and-click photography on quantity, and not quality. The growing perceptions that picture quality was solely a matter of visual accuracy and that anyone who can push a button can make a photograph were particularly irksome to Stieglitz and the other Pictorialists, who were intent on distinguishing fine-art photography from its vernacular and applied forms.

By the mid-twentieth century, this approach to photography was ubiquitous. As Jonathan Green noted in his introduction to *The Snap-Shot*, a compendium of essays, photographs, and interviews about the subject,

The continuous existence of millions of unpretentious, evanescent photographic images has formed a cultural and visual presence which has influenced the mainstream of photographic production in the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup>

*The Snap-Shot*, which was published by *Aperture* in 1974 and included works by Gowin and Paul Strand, is evidence of the artistic appropriation of certain characteristics of vernacular photography. This tendency had begun earlier in the century when Stieglitz published an article by Strand in the final issue of *Camera Work* (1917) that effectively signaled the end of Pictorialism by including the following pronouncement for what would come to be called "straight photography":

Photography, which is the first and only contribution thus far, of science to the arts, finds its *raison d'être*, like all media, in a complete uniqueness of means. This is an absolute unqualified objectivity.<sup>40</sup>

Straight photography was transformed into a formal strategy and as such was associated

---

<sup>39</sup> Green, ed., *The Snap-Shot* (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1974), 3.

<sup>40</sup>Green, *Camera Work*, 326.

with photographers like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston in the 1930s and with American modernism. Conversely, Strand's formalist dictum also suggests the influence of photographer Lewis Hine, with whom he had studied at the School of the New York Ethical Culture Society. Like Jacob Riis in the late nineteenth century, Hine used the medium as a means of effecting significant social change by photographing the horrific living and working conditions of the under classes. Photographers such as Hine and Riis thought of themselves as sociologists, not artists, and regarded the photograph as evidence to be used for the amelioration of suffering, and not as a form of expression or object of beauty. By combining the disparate functions of art and documentation, Strand would define the major direction of modern American photography.

In 1922, Weston described the influential concept of previsualization:

Since the recording process is instantaneous, and the nature of the image is such that it cannot survive corrective handiwork, it is obvious that *the finished print must be created in full before the film is exposed*....Hence the photographer's most important and likewise most difficult task is not learning to manage his camera, or to develop, or to print. It is learning to *see photographically* – that is, learning to see his subject matter in terms of the capacities of his tools and processes, so that he can instantaneously translate the elements and values in a scene before him into the photograph he wants to make.<sup>41</sup>

Previsualization and the notion of “seeing photographically” became standard in the practice of straight photography, and as such were significant in distinguishing the genre of fine art-photography from vernacular practice. Influenced by Strand's works and writings, Weston and Adams, with other west coast artists, formed Group *f.64* in 1932, naming themselves after the smallest aperture (or *f*-stop) on the camera, which provides

---

<sup>41</sup>Edward Weston, “Seeing Photographically.” In Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 172-3.

the greatest depth of field. Clarity of focus obtained through the use of a large-format view camera was the hallmark of their approach to the medium. In reaction to the perceived excesses of Pictorialism, print manipulation was forbidden. Although the subjects of landscape and the nude remained quite popular, all subject matter, whether organic or inorganic, a bell pepper or an engine turbine, was rendered with consistent attention to clean, crisp and precise tonal variation and contrast. In formalist fashion, the sought after effect was not the photograph as a record of an object, but the photograph as the thing in itself, with its own set of meanings often enhanced by the abstracting qualities of black and white contrasts. In order to augment the artist's control over these contrasts, and ultimately over the formal purity of the print, Adams developed the Zone System, a process of determining exposure and development, which came to be a standard darkroom practice.<sup>42</sup> For generations of straight photographers, the medium's claim to art resided in a technique that maintained the controlling vision of the artist and a steadfast belief in the resultant photograph as the distillation of a singular transformative vision.

The Nazi incursions of the 1930s brought an influx of European modernism and photojournalism onto the American art scene. In particular, Europe provided examples of photographic collections successfully published in book form, such as Albert Renger-

---

<sup>42</sup> Beaumont Newhall notes that with his Zone System, Adams "worked out a highly ingenious and practical rationale for determining exposure and development, based upon sensitometric principles, which gives the photographer precise control over his materials." Adams uses "the interrelation of four principle variables: sensitivity of the negative material; amount of exposure; subject luminances (i.e., brightness); development. From this data he can obtain in his negative any one tone and will know exactly the tones that other subject luminances will produce. The infinite gradation of light and shade found in nature Adams divides into ten zones." Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1838 to the Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982, 1997), 192.

Patzsch's *Die Welt ist Schön* (1928), August Sander's *Anlitz der Zeit* (1929), Brassai's *Paris de Nuit* (1933), and Bill Brandt's *A Night in London* (1938). Made possible by great advances in photomechanical reproduction, the book format would become the most effective means of displaying photographic work to a large audience. Until the overthrow of the Weimar Republic, Germany had taken the lead in the development of photojournalism, producing newspapers and magazines such as the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Uhu*. These periodicals established the picture-essay format utilized by the American illustrated weeklies such as *Life* and *Look* magazines, both established in the late 1930s. At its height of popularity in the 1940s, *Life* had a circulation of over eight million and its photo-essays by such photographers as Margaret Bourke-White and W. Eugene Smith were widely known and imitated. Given the overwhelming preponderance of journalistic and vernacular photography, the distinction between the fine art and applied genres began to fade. Steichen, an early Photo-Secessionist and Stieglitz's partner at 291, worked for the military as an aerial photographer during both World Wars. In 1923 he signed a contract with publishing conglomerate Condé Nast and began a highly successful phase of his multifaceted career as a fashion and celebrity photographer for magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. He was soon joined in those ranks by photographers Man Ray and André Kertész and, in later decades, by Richard Avedon, Helmut Newton, and Irving Penn, all of whom wore the mantle of the artist/ portrait/ fashion photographer.

The influence of Paul Strand on numerous photographers, the wide-spread impact of photojournalism, and the methodology of straight photography paved the way for the

genre of documentary photography, which prevailed throughout the 1930s and '40s. Documentary photography of this period is perhaps best exemplified by the works of the Photography Unit of the Farm Securities Administration, one of the many agencies instituted by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to help alleviate the disastrous affects of the Great Depression. Under the administration of Roy Stryker, the FSA collected over 270,000 images by photographers such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, and Ben Shahn who were assigned the task of recording the people and places of the American landscape. FSA subject matter was often scripted and its objectives were by and large social advocacy and/or governmental propaganda. Evans was eventually fired by Stryker for resisting the script, but the images that he made for the FSA formed the basis of his own work, which combined the large format and precise focus of straight photography with the casual effect of the snapshot to capture the particulars of the American experience. As curator of photography Peter Galassi wrote in the introduction to the Museum of Modern Art's exhibit of *Walker Evans & Company* (2000):

Evans' appreciation of unvarnished photographic description meshed perfectly with his taste for the unpretentious functional artifacts he often photographed. In both cases, the vernacular appealed to him in part because it was the anonymous expression of a collective culture.<sup>43</sup>

Evans' relationship with MoMA began in 1933, when he was the focus of the museum's first one-person exhibition of photography. His books *American Photographs* (1938), with an essay by Lincoln Kirstein, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), with captions by James Agee, along with that initial exhibition, are an indication that

---

<sup>43</sup>Galassi, 13.

documentary photography was being subsumed by the practices and institutions of fine art photography and that fine art subject matter had broadened its range considerably to include the vernacular.

The aftermath of the Second World War established the United States as a dominant world power both militarily and economically. This dominance was also felt within the field of art, and photography was to benefit from the expansion of the institutions supporting American artistic practice. Émigrés such as Maholy-Nagy, who hired Callahan to teach at Chicago's New Bauhaus, brought the medium into the university system at this time. In 1940 MoMA established the first department of photography in a major museum, with Beaumont Newhall named as director. He resigned from that position in 1946 (to be replaced by Steichen) and in 1948 wrote *The History of Photography* which, in its revised edition, remains a standard text in survey-level courses throughout the country. Newhall's *History...* was based upon his 1937 MoMA exhibition *Photography 1839 – 1937*, and was described by Galassi as “the first attempt in a museum of art to trace the history of photography, not as a chronicle of technical improvements but as the evolution of a new species of picture.”<sup>44</sup> By the 1960s the growth of photographic collections was widespread in major museums throughout the country, the effects of which are described by Sontag in *On Photography*:

That all the different kinds of photography form one continuous and interdependent tradition is the once startling, now obvious-seeming assumption which underlies contemporary photographic taste and authorizes the indefinite expansion of that taste. To make this assumption only became plausible when

---

<sup>44</sup>Galassi, *American Photography: 1890 – 1965* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 28.



photography was taken up by curators and historians and regularly exhibited in museums and art galleries. Photography's career in the museum does not reward any particular style; rather, it presents photography as a collection of simultaneous intentions and styles which, however different, are not perceived as in any way contradictory.<sup>45</sup>

The popularity of photo-weeklies at mid-century, in conjunction with numerous images of war brought back from Europe, the Pacific, and Korea, would prove that photography was an important tool for the shaping of the American consciousness.

Photojournalism was included in exhibitions at MoMA under the directorships of both Newhall and Steichen and, as a format, was enshrined in Steichen's 1955 *The Family of Man* exhibition. As Steichen wrote in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue:

[*The Family of Man*] demonstrates that the art of photography is a dynamic process of giving form to ideas and explaining man to man. It was conceived as a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life – as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.<sup>46</sup>

Though roundly criticized at the time from within the photographic community, *The Family of Man* was nevertheless an international phenomenon, touring the world at government expense. The success of the exhibition and the multiple editions of its catalogue suggest photography, perhaps because of its very ubiquity, could develop a mass audience in a way that few other forms of visual art could. By including a wide array of styles and subjects from an extensive list of photographers, the actual works and the intentions of the individual artists were subordinated to Steichen's overriding message of essential oneness. The homogenization of the medium evidenced by *The Family of Man* clearly exemplifies Sontag's description of photography's presentation by

---

<sup>45</sup>Sontag, 132.

<sup>46</sup>Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955).

the museum establishment as “one continuous and interdependent tradition.”

Running counter to Steichen’s widely accepted approach of message over medium and function over form were the expressionist photographers who, at mid-century, maintained the artistic legacy of Stieglitz, Strand, and Weston. As described in the previous chapter, Callahan, Siskind, and White inhabited the more rarefied world of formalism, and their influence, particularly within the university system, would help to sustain the distinctiveness of fine-art photography. Szarkowski, who was Steichen’s successor at MoMA, proclaims in an oft-cited quote,

[Perhaps] the three most important events in American photography during the fifties were the founding of *Aperture* magazine (1952), the organization of *The Family of Man* exhibition (1955), and the publication of Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1959)...Minor White’s magazine and Robert Frank’s book were characteristic of the new work of their time in the sense that they were both uncompromisingly committed to a highly personal vision of the world, and to the proposition that photography could, in aesthetic terms, clarify that vision. They were alike also in the sense that both avoided hortatory postures. Neither pretended to offer a comprehensive or authoritative view of the world, or a program for its improvement.<sup>47</sup>

White offered the readers of *Aperture* methods of “reading” photographs, and suggested that images could be used for meditative contemplation. The Swiss-born Frank’s photographs of the American scene from the vantage point of an outsider offered no such guidance for the viewer. *The Americans* is, according to Green, “a small encyclopedia of photographic forms and styles.”<sup>48</sup> This lack of stylistic predictability, along with an unremittingly bleak outlook, gave rise to unusually harsh criticism from even the most select viewing public upon the book’s publication. It was not until later in the 1960s and

---

<sup>47</sup>Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows*, 16, 18.

<sup>48</sup>Green, *American Photography*, 90.

'70s, when hidden areas of contemporary life had been more fully exposed by the media and popular culture, that the impact of Frank's snapshots of the "moments in between" could be truly gauged in the works of *New Documents* photographers Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand, and others such as Larry Clark, Danny Lyon, and Nicholas Nixon.

In writing about this period, photographic historian Terence Pitts notes,

The sixties have often been characterized as the decade of the ill-defined photographic style called the snapshot aesthetic. But if anything, we ought to remember these years as the decade in which photographers grappled with the meaning and definition of their own medium."<sup>49</sup>

The search for meaning and definition described by Pitts was often reflexive, as can be seen in Friedlander's references to his own physical presence in his works and in the tendency for photographers to increase the use of their own families as subjects. In an essay on "Self-Portraits in Photography," Ingrid Sischy observes that, "Many documentary photographers who matured during the '60s turned inward – away from the 'outside world' – toward 'personal experience' in the '70s."<sup>50</sup> She examines family photographs in the context of self-portraiture and sees them as a part of this process of turning inward. Parenthetically, she notes,

[One] of the first photographs that one takes is of one's family, and one is not usually in it. Yet looking at it one cannot help but project into it, to those feelings that day about those people, to one's place among those people.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Terence Pitts, "Public Places/Private Spheres." In James Enyeart, ed., *Decade by Decade: Twentieth Century American Photography from the Collection of the Center for Creative Photography* (Boston: Bullfinch, 1989), 72.

<sup>50</sup>Sischy, 232.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

Sischy cites Gowin's *Edith* series among several examples of "contemporary photographers' self-implicating worlds."<sup>52</sup> Works such as those described by Sischy, including several by Gowin, comprised the 1992 exhibition *Flesh & Blood: Photographer's Images of their Own Families* that was organized by the Friends of Photography, a group associated with the Ansel Adams Center in San Francisco, California. In a catalogue essay for *Flesh & Blood* entitled "The Snapshot Comes of Age," photographic historian Andy Grundberg writes:

[Snapshots] are interesting because they constitute a genre of image that is fundamental, immediate, and unselfconscious. These non-art qualities of most family pictures paradoxically make them irresistible models for photographers who are deeply interested in extending the boundaries of what can be considered the art of photography.<sup>53</sup>

Gowin acknowledged his indebtedness to the snapshot aesthetic in 1970 with the first significant publication of his work in *Album 5*:

Sometimes my photographs resemble home snapshots (which is one of the richest resources of strong images I know of). Many of the people in my pictures are my family or my wife's family or their friends and I make many pictures of my wife. But I always want to make a picture that is more than a family record. I feel that my clearest pictures were at first strange to me – as D. H. Lawrence said: "Even an artist knows that his work was never in his mind." However, what Edward Weston said about there being no substitute for "intensity of feeling at the moment of exposure" that sure seems right too.<sup>54</sup>

In the preface to the section featuring his work in *The Snap-Shot*, he wrote:

From 1966 to 1970 my admiration for the homemade picture was highest. What I

---

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Andy Grundberg, "The Snapshot Comes of Age," in Alice Rose George and others, eds., *Flesh and Blood: Photographers' Images of Their Own Families* (New York: Picture Project, 1992), 13.

<sup>54</sup>Gowin, *Album 5*, 40.

admired was filtered directly into my photographs. I was becoming alive to certain essential qualities in family photographs. Above all, I admired what the camera made. The whole person was presented to the camera. There was no interference, or so it seemed. And sometimes the frame cut through the world with a surprise. There could be no doubt that the picture belonged more to the world of things and facts than to the photographer.<sup>55</sup>

These two statements by Gowin indicate a dual interest in the snapshot as both a record of objective visual information (belonging to “the world of things and facts”) and a source of “intensity of feeling” that yields “more than a family record.” Frank’s subjective approach to documentary photography had established the conjunction of these contradictory attitudes in fine-art photographic practice. Gowin’s involvement with the snapshot was contemporaneous with *New Documents*, and he was inspired by many of the same sources as Arbus, Friedlander, and Winogrand. Another source for Gowin were Callahan’s “8 x 10 snapshots,” which were similar to Evans’ works in combining the apparent immediacy of point-and-click photography with the slower deliberation of the large format camera. Unlike Friedlander and Winogrand, who favored the hand-held 35mm camera, Gowin consistently relied on a large format, which involved a completely different interaction with the sitter. In *Album 5* he wrote:

Most of the pictures here were made with a 4 x 5 on a tripod. In this situation, both the sitter and the photographer look at each other and what they both see and feel is a part of the picture.<sup>56</sup>

In 1967, Gowin began to collect pictures, not of his own family, but of strangers, resulting in the possession of two family albums that he felt were exemplary. He

---

<sup>55</sup> Green, *The Snap-Shot*, 8.

<sup>56</sup>Gowin, *Album 5*.

collected these photographs in search of the “talismanic presence of the real snapshot,” which “bore the presence of a living person,” its “levels of both objective and subjective experience” being key to the “magic” of the image.<sup>57</sup> He recalls having a strong belief in the fetishistic power of the object, the photograph itself, which he illustrates by admitting that when the family albums were requested for publication in a British journal, he naïvely sent the actual albums rather than reproductions. They were unfortunately lost in transit. He had, however, made slides of the originals, which he still uses as examples of the often unconscious application of structure in the making of snapshots. Although his work of this period is generally associated with this genre, Gowin is definitely geared to formal quality: he contends that in any batch of family snapshots there will always be at least one good photograph that uses structure to “serve the emotion of the image” in order to communicate something that “you recognize as true.” As he asserts, “I always thought that what we called a good picture...opens us to something that we know, but we don’t know how we know it.”<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup>Gowin, interview.

<sup>58</sup>Gowin, interview.

## The Family Series

When George Eastman first introduced the Kodak in 1889 he made photography available to everyone. . . . A natural subject for the camera was, of course, the family. Those families who could afford it had been depicted in paintings for centuries. But through the use of photography, the visual representation of the family for posterity was available to all. In our time the camera has become an adopted member of the family, ever-present to faithfully record the family's important events and everyday moments of living. But what happens when those skilled at photography, those who are spiritually attuned to the power of the medium, use the camera to photograph their own families?

Brooks Johnson, *The Family as Subject*, 1985

Are families simply fair game because they can't easily run away? Would they wish, in effect, to wear Day-Glo orange vests on their autumnal walks through the living room to avoid being shot? Do parents and wives, husbands and children have a love-hate relationship with their would-be captors (after all, the family dog seems quite accepting)? Or do the subjects actually retain volition and mobility, and choose to let the photographers take their pictures out of fascination, or because of belief in artistic entitlement, or just because they're good sports?

Anne Beattie, *Flesh and Blood*, 1992

In the forty-five years Lee and I have been married, I have seen every one of these photographs shortly after Lee made them. So I know them very well as separate pictures. Seeing them now, though, in book form, makes them seem different: to look at them in this new format changes how I feel when I see them. It strikes me, for example, that although I had looked at the photographs of Erik and Anna with their newborn babies so often, when I came upon them here, these pictures I know so well, I found myself touched, deeply moved, in tears. I think it's because these photographs, all assembled here, tell a family story, and I had reached the part in which my children now have children of their own – whereas just minutes before in the book, Erik and Anna were *my* babies. I was seeing beyond the separate pictures and looking at them now as a part of this story – my own, Lee's, theirs. So, I ask myself, what is this Family Book? Is it our own family album? Is it our pictorial biography? Does this book tell us whether we are, to paraphrase Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, one of those happy families that are all alike or an unhappy family that is unhappy in its own way? Maybe a bit of all of the above, and yet none completely.

Marie Friedlander, *Family*, 2003

In 1976 Alfred A. Knopf published *Emmet Gowin: Photographs*, the first extensive collection of Gowin's images in published form. The monograph is comprised of sixty-six photographs and of those, twenty-six can be described as representative of the family series in that they depict either members of Edith's family or Edith with members of her family. Notably, we see Edith's sisters Ruth and Mae (Helen declined to be photographed), her niece and nephew Nancy and Dwayne, Edith's grandmother Rennie Booher, Rennie's sister Maggie, and Edith's uncles Raymond Booher and Willie Cooper.

Sixteen photographs are of Edith alone and six more show her with either Elijah or Isaac Gowin. There are also an additional nine photographs of people and places associated with the family home in Danville. Presented in a roughly chronological order, the sequence of images begins with a 1963 photograph of Nancy as a diapered toddler standing in a grassy field with a very large goat, and ends with a series of images from 1974 of a nude Edith holding a very plump newborn Isaac. Although a few European landscapes and still-life photographs are included in the final section of the book, the family pictures predominate and it is these works (including the individual images of Edith) which served to establish Gowin's reputation as a fine art photographer. "Bound," in Gowin's words, "in Bible cloth,"<sup>59</sup> this book creates a visual biography suggesting various permutations and interrelationships among family members and a clearly established connection to the interior and exterior spaces in which they reside. And its presentation in book form, as opposed to the temporary experience of an exhibition, allows the viewer repeated access to the images, thereby aiding in the development of a narrative construction.

One of the pieces in the Knopf monograph, *Family, Danville, Virginia, 1970* [Figure 22], resembles the kind of picture that would be seen in a family album: several generations relaxing in the backyard on a summer's day, children playing on the grass, the family dog nearby, a watermelon sliced open in the foreground. The familiarity of the subject matter combines with the informal arrangement of the figures, two of whom are cropped almost out of the frame, to underscore the suggestion of a snapshot. However,

---

<sup>59</sup>Gowin, interview.



although Gowin's method of titling these images by name, location, and date makes reference to the family album's archival function, this photograph was not intended for that purpose and its rather cumbersome method of creation was anything but point-and-click. By using a process that requires a relatively extended period of time for both setting up the shot and exposing the film, Gowin combined the artistic control afforded by the large format camera with the sense of immediacy characteristic of vernacular subject matter such as the family on a summer's day. He described this approach in the monograph:

My pictures are made as a part of everyday life and are not the result of any project or assignment. Most of the pictures were made with a camera on a tripod. In this situation, both the sitter and photographer become part of the picture.<sup>60</sup>

Such images cannot be made spontaneously or surreptitiously. Though chance must be factored into the formal arrangement of the figures, Gowin has indicated that his process is in keeping with Weston's notion of previsualization, hence, there is a degree of complicity that must be in place between photographer and subject(s) implying, at most, a form of collaboration or, at the very least, an element of trust.

It is likely that Gowin made several exposures of the family that day, and yet this is the one photograph that he chose to print for exhibition and publication. Criteria for selection and process of display are two aspects of Gowin's work that distinguish *Family...* from the genre of traditional family photography. With regard to the choice: why this exposure and not another? In a family photograph, the qualitative success of the image would be based upon several factors, which include the memorable significance of

---

<sup>60</sup>Gowin, *Photographs*, 100.

the event depicted, the identity of the people in the photograph, and their degree of likeness. As has been noted, for Gowin quality is based not on the subject of the image, but on the image itself, and he insists that a coherent formal structure is critical for a successful photograph. During the period of the family series, he tended to work in triadic configurations and often used a triangular formation as the basis of his composition. In *Family...* Edith's aunt Maggie is at the apex of the triangle in the center of the upper third of the picture's rectangular format. The extended leg of the boy on the left and the arm of the diapered child on the right lead diagonally back to Maggie, providing a compositional unity that is reinforced by other diagonal elements such as the siding on the house and by the placement of the watermelon halves in the foreground.

In addition to a resolute attention to formal structure in the creation and selection of his photographs, Gowin's use of the large format means that there is no diminution of detail in the printing. This process allows him consistently to display a broad range of tonal variations in *Family...* The use of black and white film in itself further differentiates Gowin's family series from vernacular snapshots. By the late-1960s color photography, which was perceived as a further enhancement of the medium's requisite verisimilitude, had become the customary form of family representation. When *Family...* was made in 1970, black and white photographs viewed in the context of the family album were becoming suggestive of the past.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the large format process used by Gowin was clearly associated with the practices of the artist/

---

<sup>61</sup> "By 1965 color, through movies and television, was omnipresent in American life, and for the first time both amateur and professional photographers bought more color film than black and white." Robert Hirsch, 417.

photographer in the darkroom, developing and making prints that would then take on the aura of unique objects. There is no doubt that a casual snapshot can exemplify sound composition and visual coherence; however, as has been indicated, formal considerations tend to be less significant than subject matter or likeness in traditional family photography. For Gowin, the structure of the image is the deciding factor when it comes to what gets printed, published, and shown. Thus his family photographs represent a partial inversion of the roles subject and means play in the traditional snapshot.

Another clear area of differentiation between Gowin's series and traditional family photography is in the aspect of display. Halle's study of family photographs indicated the predominance of "clusters...of four or more" placed in areas of the home such as the living room, bedroom, or den.<sup>62</sup> He found a preference for casual depictions of family members arranged informally, and he notes the significance of the quantity of photographs and repetition of subjects:

The pictures on display, often so numerous themselves, are but a fraction of those stored in albums and elsewhere....[And] clearly many of those displayed portray similar images repeatedly."<sup>63</sup>

Gowin's family series was not intended to function in the manner of traditional family photography as an archive for private communication among relatives and friends, but was created for public display in galleries and museums as well as in books and publications. However, Gowin titled the works in an archival manner and the series is generally exhibited and published in clusters, similar to the presentation of family

---

<sup>62</sup>Halle, 221.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 223.

photographs in an album or in the home. This approach allows the spectator to become familiar with the subjects, to experience them within the context of a chronological sequence and to observe, for instance, the children as they grow and to take note of the effects of time and childbirth on Edith's body. The narrative displayed is not that of the viewer – this is, after all, a family of strangers – but through repeated representations of individual family members and the information made available in titles and published accounts, the viewer is able to access a narrative that gains meaning through the process of looking. Because photographic images of named individuals implicate the notion of veracity, this narrative may be experienced in the context of biography or, in the case of the photographer's family, autobiography. However, the selection of images in a family album is a form of self-censorship that, be it intentional or not, will invariably lead to the creation of a kind of biographical fiction. Maria Friedlander astutely describes the limitations of photographs in this regard in her introduction to *Family*, a collection of pictures of the Friedlanders made by her husband Lee from 1958 to 2002:

But a book of pictures doesn't tell a whole story, so as biography this one is incomplete. There are no photographs of arguments and disagreements, of the times when we were rude, impatient, and insensitive parents, of frustration, of anger strong enough to consider dissolving the marriage. Lee's camera couldn't record our family dysfunctions....Perhaps this book defies a tidy category, or I can't exactly put it in one. Maybe it will offer a different experience to whoever looks at it. Certainly the pictures stand on their own without the memories they pull from me. Garry Winogrand might have looked at the book and said, It's about what you guys look like photographed.<sup>64</sup>

When family albums are experienced in a gallery or publication, e.g., in the context of art, then the implied biographical narrative might easily trigger associations

---

<sup>64</sup>Friedlander, *Family* (San Francisco: Fraenkel Gallery, 2004), 6-7.

with the familiar in order to convey for the viewer a sense of the familial. Coleman describes this phenomenon in a rejoinder to an audience member at one of his lectures who was upset that Sally Mann had turned from photographing her children to the landscape. This excerpt is from his review of Mann's *Mother Land* exhibition in 1997:

I found (made, actually) an opening in the verbal cascade and essayed a useful response, in which the prior case of Emmet Gowin came up. Back in the late '60s and early '70s Gowin began showing a work-in-progress comparable in many ways to Mann's – thoughtful, lyrical large-format images of his wife, children and extended circle of relatives – that quickly became a lot of people's surrogate-family album, many of us eagerly awaiting each new installment. Then, without concluding or resolving in any way, it simply stopped. Gowin turned his attention elsewhere – to landscape, as it happens, and even to aerial photography – and went on to make perfectly respectable pictures about which I've heard no one speak passionately.<sup>65</sup>

Disregarding Coleman's pronouncement on the landscapes, it is significant that he describes "us eagerly awaiting each new installment" of Gowin's "surrogate-family album." Art historians John Christie and Fred Orton write about how narrative is profoundly integrated into the human experience:

Humans are irreducibly narratable and narrating beings....Stories indeed, are the primary device through which we first begin to apprehend consciously the possible connected meanings of the world. We not only internalize and retain these stories, but the idea of story, too, and we never abandon it.<sup>66</sup>

The family is, among other things, the site of an ongoing and interactive narrative: family histories evolving through the telling and retelling of stories with continuous character

---

<sup>65</sup>Coleman, "Sally Mann: Mother Land, A Review," *New York Observer* 11, no. 4 (20 October 1997): 1.

<sup>66</sup>John Christie and Fred Orton, "Writing on a Text of the Life," *Art History* II (1998): 545-64, 556. Quoted in Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 59-60.

development. Coleman seems to suggest that the success of the subject of the artist's family in the oeuvres of Gowin and Mann, and by implication other fine-art photographers, stems in part from the public acceptance of an implied narrative that can be imaginatively appropriated in the manner of television serials or soap operas. It would then follow that the predominance of the subject in fine art-photography, more so than in painting or sculpture, is based upon the ubiquity of the medium in general and family photographs in particular. As such, the photographer's creation of a public fiction from private fact provides viewers with an experience that is on some level recognizable, and thus relatable to their own private world. Even so, most of the audience for works of this kind are looking at photographs of people that they do not know and the public display of images of family members, sometimes in the nude, and occasionally quite sexualized, is not within the realm of what is generally considered normative behavior. Interplay emerges between the familiar and unfamiliar, stemming, in part, from the differing expectations of family and fine-art photography, resulting in an inherent tension in the viewer's experience of the works.

Gowin has noted an interest in the concept of "defamiliarization" as developed in the writings of the early twentieth-century Russian formalist poet and critic, Victor Shlovsky. In an article written for *Darkroom 2*, Gowin quotes from Shlovsky's essay on "Art and Technique":

In order to restore us to the sensation of life...art uses two techniques: the defamiliarization of things, and the distortion of form, so as to make the act of perception more difficult and to prolong its duration.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup>Kelly, *Darkroom 2*, 39.

Literary scholar Lily Feiler summarizes defamiliarization as “Shlovsky’s concept of ‘plot’ as the sum-total of related events shaped by different and often ‘displaced’ artistic devices.”<sup>68</sup> She notes that as Shlovsky’s favorite literary device, defamiliarization “transmits the message indirectly through a metaphor, a seemingly unrelated story or unusual detail.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, in his examination of *Transgressions of Reading*, literary critic Robert D. Newman notes, “Art which deliberately indulges in heterogeneous discourses unsettles cognitive boundaries so that its viewers’ emotions may no longer be suppressed within their response.” Citing “[French critic Roland] Barthes’ claim for the polysemy of images,” Newman indicates that methods of invoking heterogeneous discourses include the narrative use of “multiplicity, fragmentation, and repetition,” and “hybridization as a narrative technique and...images which are themselves hybrids.”<sup>70</sup> The rationale behind applying methods such as defamiliarization and hybridization to the reading of Gowin’s family series becomes evident when one examines the works within the context of the categories that they most readily suggest: the family album (and the correlative snapshot), documentary, and fine-art photography. For example, Gowin’s photograph *Edith, Ruth, and Mae, Danville, Virginia, 1967* [Figure 23] is a family photograph depicting three sisters and Ruth’s son Dwayne, however its possible readings

---

<sup>68</sup>Lily Feiler, in her introduction and translation of Victor Shlovsky, *Mayakovsky and His Circle* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1972), xix.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>70</sup>Newman, 30-33.

extend beyond the commonly accepted parameters of that genre. The disjuncture that is created between the field of expectations and the image's divergence from those expectations provides the locus for much of the photograph's effectiveness as an image.

Though the three women in *Edith, Ruth, and Mae...* are sisters, this information is not readily apparent in either the photograph or the title. A familial interaction is implied, however, by the physical intimacy of the women and the casual circumstances of the image. The cotton housecoats worn by Edith, whose sleeve is frayed at the elbow, and Ruth, who is wearing curlers in her hair, suggest that the photograph was made in the morning hours. Although the informality of the scene is indicative of a snapshot, a formal cohesion undermines the sense of immediacy associated with that method in a manner that is similar to *Family, Danville, Virginia, 1970*. Gowin notes that there were four versions of *Edith, Ruth, and Mae...* but that this was the only one that "had all of the ingredients working together" to make a successful photograph.<sup>71</sup> Utilizing a triangular structure, an implied line is drawn through Edith's extended elbow up to Ruth's shoulders and then back down through Mae's shoulders to the rake held by Dwayne in the background. The sisters' positions in relation to each other and within the picture present us with three distinct personalities, and though the reading is purely speculative, we are invited to entertain a narrative nonetheless. Edith is closest to the viewer and is taking up almost half of the picture plane. Her aggressive stance, with both hands in fists and right hand placed firmly upon her hip, combines with a stern visage as she directly confronts the gaze of the photographer/viewer. The lightness of her housecoat, which she

---

<sup>71</sup>Gowin, interview.



deliberately pulls across her pregnant belly, visually sets her off in contrast to the sisters' darker garments and the richly textured ground. Ruth's patterned housecoat allows her to blend visually into the grass and foliage, and even though Gowin describes Ruth as "the explosive one," her subordinate visual placement, downcast expression, and the protective flanking positions of the other women suggest a sense of self-consciousness or discomfort at being included in the picture. Mae engages the camera, albeit in a much less aggressive manner than Edith, her hesitancy suggested by a tilt of the head and a slight smile on her lips, relaxed arms and hands, and the subtle movement of her left shoulder away from the viewer. Gowin recalls that during this time Mae's husband became aware of the degree of vulnerability inherent in the process of posing for these pictures, and Mae was asked not to allow herself to be photographed.<sup>72</sup>

A comparison can be made between *Edith, Ruth, and Mae*...and any of the photographs that were made annually by Nicholas Nixon of his wife Bebe and her three sisters between 1975 and 1999 [e.g., Figure 24]. Published as *The Brown Sisters* by the Museum of Modern Art in 1999, curator Galassi wrote in the accompanying essay,

Nixon's pictures do what all family photographs do: they fix a presence and mark the passage of time, graciously declining to expound or explain. Or perhaps that is not quite true. Perhaps the obvious similarity between Nixon's series and our family photographs invites us to discount a crucial difference. We bring worlds of knowledge and feeling to our own snapshots, but we know next to nothing about the Brown sisters. The depth of Nixon's mute allusion to the living of four linked lives rests on the alertness and delicacy of his attention.<sup>73</sup>

Like Gowin, Nixon made black and white images using a large format camera on a tripod

---

<sup>72</sup>Gowin, interview.

<sup>73</sup> Galassi, *Nicholas Nixon: The Brown Sisters* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999).

and thus, similar to the subjects in Gowin's family series, the Brown sisters are clearly aware that they are being photographed and are actively participating in the process. The four women placed themselves in the same order each year, and in the photographs they are always physically connected as they line up facing the camera. Although their clothing and hairstyles change in accordance with age, fashion, and the passage of time, the sisters' general appearance consistently suggests a suburban, middle-to-upper-middle class, college-educated professional background. In this way, Nixon's photographs of Heather, Mimi, Bebe, and Laurie provide a sharp contrast to the rural, blue-collar environment evoked in Gowin's photograph of Edith, Ruth, and Mae. And though their position was predetermined and their awareness of the camera clearly evident, the Brown sisters posed in a casual and unaffected manner. The narrative that emerges from these images consists of four women genetically and emotionally connected as they progress from youth to middle age. Nixon's motivation and stylistic framework for his series was the family album. As Galassi explains,

[Nixon was inspired by] the collection of annual Christmas-card snapshots of their children that Sally and Fred Brown, parents of the four sisters, had been sending to family and friends since the birth of Bebe, their eldest.<sup>74</sup>

Although Gowin, like Nixon, was interested in family photography and also influenced by it, his references extend far beyond that or any other single source. The intertwined gesture of the sisters in *Edith, Ruth, and Mae*...appears simultaneously choreographed and yet quite natural. We have no doubt of the authenticity of their bond and this relationship is literally at the forefront of the picture. The configuration suggests,

---

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

however, other female triads of mythological derivation, i.e., the three goddesses in the Judgment of Paris and, perhaps more appropriately, the Three Graces – sisters who were handmaidens of Venus – a subject depicted in numerous artworks, including paintings by Rubens and a c. 1814 sculpture by the Italian Neoclassical artist Antonio Canova [Figure 25 ].<sup>75</sup> By evoking a classical theme, Gowin’s photograph alludes to the history of art in much the same way that Stieglitz made reference to artistic tropes such as the fragment and Woman as Nature in his photographs of O’Keeffe.

A layered reading of *Edith, Ruth, and Mae*...continues with an examination of Dwayne in the background, barefoot and wielding a garden hoe. The child’s subordinate position is made evident not only by placement and scale, but by the exclusion of his name from the photograph’s title. Nonetheless, Dwayne functions on one level as a necessary element in the composition, and on another as a symbol of the family’s continued connection to the land. It was suggested at the beginning of this chapter that the narrative of Gowin’s family series of photographs, as it evolved over the decades in the critical literature on his work, has alluded to the aesthetic of Southern literature with its emphasis on the subjects of family, place, and religion. In accordance with this tradition, we have seen how Edith’s family was presented in the series as being integrally connected to their home in Danville. In the Corcoran catalogue, Bunnell offers the following statement by Gowin reflecting on how changes in the family affected his work:

If things happen to our advantage and we find ourselves in a situation we really love and cherish, and it nourishes us, it would be a mistake to hope that we would

---

<sup>75</sup>Although there has been some question about the association of this image with the Three Graces, many have read it as such and it is consistent with Gowin’s conscious use of artistic tropes as a means of enriching the work’s symbolic content.

find that exact situation again. Everything belongs to its season, to its place. I think of the family, for instance, and that family had a different sense at that time. Then the grandmother died, then two uncles died, and the children who were the babies in the pictures having their own babies; there is that sense of change and our job is simply to take things the way they are. We have to accept what nature presents us.<sup>76</sup>

Photographs fix time onto a piece of paper, and hence there is always the implication of memory especially when viewing images of ourselves or of people and places with which we are familiar. The sensation of recognition, however, can transcend particular knowledge of the subject(s), as Barthes suggests in *Camera Lucida*:

The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*. This distinction is decisive. In front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory (how many photographs are outside of individual time), but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty: the Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents.<sup>77</sup>

Represented in Gowin's family series are people and a place known to a majority of viewers only through the titles appended to the works. Even so, feelings of nostalgia can emerge from these images through identification with the encoded beliefs and behaviors evident in the photographs and/or through the narrative to which the observer might respond as a serialized work of fiction. The Southern rural milieu depicted so clearly in *Edith, Ruth, and Mae...*, and in other works within the series such as *Raymond Booher and Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1969*, [Figure 26] evokes associations with books and films such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and television shows such as *The Waltons* (1972 – 1981). Both of these works were situated in an earlier era, the 1930s and

---

<sup>76</sup>Bunnell, *Emmet Gowin*.

<sup>77</sup>Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 85.

1940s respectively, and a number of Gowin's black and white photographs similarly appear to transcend any specific time period. Mae's dress and hairstyle in *Edith, Ruth, and Mae...* are indicators of 1967, the year in which the photograph was made, but Edith's and Ruth's appearance, in conjunction with the rural locale, seem to evoke an earlier time. Many of the family images bring to mind the FSA documentary photographs of the 1930s. In particular, the use of rich textural detail in defining a sense of character and place, and the straight-forward demeanor expressed by Gowin's subjects suggest works such as Evans' iconic 1936 portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, the *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife* [Figure 27].

### **Reading the Family Series**

When Gowin photographed Nancy with her dolls in Danville in 1965, he was operating within the established artistic practice of imaging family members while concurrently formulating an approach to the subject that would incorporate aspects of family, documentary, and fine-art photography. As we have seen, these genres, as delineated and described in this study, were developed under the rubric of a history of photography. The framework of that history has been constructed by individuals and institutions responding to personal taste and ideology as well as to public practices. German literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss notes that "a genre exists for itself alone as little as does an individual work of art."<sup>78</sup> Genres can thus be described through the structuralist operation of not only ascertaining what they are but also by assessing what

---

<sup>78</sup>Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, in *Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 105.

they are not. Jauss contends, “From a diachronic perspective the historical alternation of the dominating genre manifests itself in the three steps of canonization, automatization, and reshuffling.”<sup>79</sup> Gowin’s family series of photographs coincides with a process of “reshuffling” amidst photographic genres taking place in the 1960s and ‘70s. Genres that had been instituted within the field of serious photographic practice (e.g., fine-art and documentary photography) were forced to work in tandem with the reality of vernacular practice, specifically the casual, often family-oriented photograph which, in sheer numbers, far surpassed other manifestations of the medium.

Earlier in this chapter, the reception of Gowin’s photographs was examined with regard to the heterogeneous discourses invoked by Shlovsky’s technique of defamiliarization and Newman’s references to the narrative use of hybridization. The effects of these techniques, including the reflexivity that has been described as occurring within the medium during the period of Gowin’s family series, and the concurrent elision of genre boundaries that is attributable to the viewer’s reception, can be examined utilizing Jauss’ notion of a “horizon of expectations” as a model. Jauss states,

The new text evokes for the [viewer] the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, altered, or even just reproduced. Variation and correction determine the scope, whereas alteration and reproduction determine the borders of a genre-structure.

Genre blurring may be characterized by Jauss’ observation that,

Works that evoke the reader’s horizon of expectations, formed by a convention of genre, style, or form, only in order to destroy it step by step – which by no means

---

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 106.

serves a critical purpose only, but can itself again produce poetic effects.<sup>80</sup>

This method of reading allows Gowin's photographs to undercut superficial interpretations, thus diverging from viewer expectation and creating a tension that provides additional layers of meaning. Rather than being undifferentiated in the manner of Steichen's *The Family of Man*, the component elements of Gowin's family series remain distinct within the broader framework of fine-art photography so that defined genres conjoin and viewer expectation is disrupted, thereby foregrounding the dialectical process of photographic looking. Based upon his understanding of Shlovsky, Gowin concludes that, "The challenge of photography is to show the thing photographed so that our feelings are awakened and hidden aspects are revealed to us."<sup>81</sup> This interpretive model stems from Gowin's insistence upon an anagogical reading of his work. For him, the impetus for making photographs is less the self-conscious decision to make "art," which is certainly in place, but rather the ability of the photograph to communicate something symbolic. What is revealed on a discursive level is the potentiality of representations of the photographer's family members to transcend specific identification in order to communicate multiple levels of meaning simultaneously and to a broad audience. In this manner, these works exemplify the disruption of the binary of art and life, and the blurring of established artistic and photographic genres, that characterize the subject of the artist's/photographer's wife.

---

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 23-4.

<sup>81</sup>Kelly, *Darkroom 2*, 39.

### Chapter 3

## Representing Edith as the Photographer's Wife

Through my marriage to Edith Morris, in 1964, I entered into a family freshly different from my own. I admired their simplicity and generosity, and thought of the pictures I made as agreements. I wanted to pay attention to the body and personality that had agreed out of love to reveal itself. My attention was a natural duty which could honor that love.

Through the lives of new relatives, my more whole family, I returned to the mood that finds solemnity in daily life. As a child, one has the time for such pastimes as sunlight on water or the weave of the porch screen and the openings and closings of doors. I wish never to outgrow that leisure.

*To Edith:* My mind and heart follow her through gestures, rooms and days. At night, we have curled together as foxes for warmth.

Emmet Gowin, *Photographs*, 1976

In early 2001 Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York City exhibited forty-four of Gowin's images from the *Edith* series in a show entitled "Close to Life – Photographs of Edith." Included in the label copy were excerpts from Gowin's statements in the 1976 Knopf monograph, as quoted in the above epigraph. Additionally, Gowin provided this response:

These words, written almost twenty-five years ago, continue to embody an ideal, which I do not wish to outlive. Although all creative work requires an encounter with the unknown, and a visitation to places we do not yet understand, making the images of Edith continues to be the central thread and redeeming experience within my life. It is, in large measure, the central poem within my work. These pictures are how I feel about the world.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter on Representing Edith as the Photographer's Wife will examine the *Edith* series both within the context of Gowin's anagogical reading of the work and the

---

<sup>1</sup>Gowin, label copy from "Close to Life – Photographs of Edith," (January/February 2001).



discourse of the subject of the wife in fine-art photography. This structure, as developed in the previous chapter, will be used in the analysis of the series as Nature, as Mother, and as Wife.

### Edith as Nature

The one cornerstone of belief upon which the Society of Friends is built is the conviction that God does indeed communicate with each one of the spirits he has made, in a direct and living inbreathing of some measure of the breath of his own life; that he never leaves himself without a witness in the heart as well as in the surroundings of man; and that in order clearly to hear the divine voice thus speaking to us we need to be still; to be alone with him in the secret place of his presence; that all flesh should keep silence before him.

Caroline Stephen, *Quaker Strongholds*, 1890

We begin as the intimate person that clings to our mother's breast, and our conception of the world is that interrelationship. Our safety depends on that mother. And now I'm beginning to see that there's a mother larger than the human mother and it's the earth; if we don't take care of that we will have lost everything.

Emmet Gowin, *Emmet Gowin/Photographs*, 1990

Frederick Sommer writes, "Life is the longest 45 minutes close to nature. Some speak of the return to nature. I wonder where they could have been."

Emmet Gowin, *Arts in Virginia*, 1972

In 1998 Gowin related a story of a recent graduation at Princeton where the father of one his students asked, quite conversationally, "By the way, what do you shoot?" Realizing the questioner was referring either to subject matter or to the type of camera that he used, Gowin felt nonetheless compelled to point out that he does not "shoot" anything: "We make, we find, we discover, but we don't shoot."<sup>2</sup> This anecdote not only illustrates Gowin's firm adherence to the Quaker principles of nonviolence and deliberate speech, but is consistent with a belief that his endeavors as a photographer are integrated into the larger context of a moral imperative. Over the past three decades, this imperative has been directed toward the interrelationship of humanity and nature. He made this

---

<sup>2</sup>Gowin, interview.

position very clear in a 1989 interview by stating, “We are products of nature. We are nature’s consciousness and awareness, the custodians of this planet.”<sup>3</sup> The conscious integration of photography and environmentalism in Gowin’s oeuvre began in 1980 with a grant from the Seattle Arts Commission, which provided him with an opportunity to make aerial photographs of devastation wrought by the recently erupted Mount Saint Helens. From that point in time, creating topographical views of nuclear test sites, strip mines, pivot agriculture, and other locations visibly scarred by human activity dominated his work, culminating in *Changing the Earth*, a touring exhibition organized by the Yale University Art Gallery in 2002. Gowin’s intention for these works is revealed in the catalogue’s prefatory statement:

In a landscape photograph, both the mind and heart need to find their proper place....Even when the landscape is greatly disfigured or brutalized, it is always deeply animated from within. When one really sees an awesome, vast, and terrible place, we tremble at the feelings we experience as our sense of wholeness is reorganized by what we see. The heart seems to withdraw and the body seems always to diminish. At such a moment our feelings reach for an understanding. This is the gift of a landscape photograph, that the heart finds a place to stand.<sup>4</sup>

Gowin notes in several interviews that the family series from the 1960s and 1970s provided the origination of his interest in landscape photography and he often cites the year 1972 as a pivotal point in his life with the death of Edith’s ninety-seven-year-old grandmother, Rennie Booher, and several other elderly family members:

[This left me] the oldest male member of the family. I couldn’t have been more than about twenty-five. Something in that winter season turned my thoughts from

---

<sup>3</sup> Chahroudi, 15.

<sup>4</sup>Jock Reynolds, ed., *Emmet Gowin: Changing the Earth* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 4.

the family that had supported me, had been my subject for so long, to what was still there – the place they had been rooted in so strongly....Their lives had been poured into that piece of land and the land was what was left....Very quickly I became a custodian of that place....No longer would it be an ideal or abstraction of a landscape, but a particular living example.<sup>5</sup>

He marks a 1973 photograph of Rennie Booher's house taken from a nearby tree house built by the children as indicative of a shift in subject matter that would lead to a greater emphasis on the landscape. From the early 1970s until 1980 he traveled with Edith and their sons through parts of Europe, making "working landscapes" as he called them.<sup>6</sup> In a 1997 interview, he stated that when thinking about these excursions, the memory of the boys asleep in the back seat of the car are just as powerful and as relevant as the creation of the images themselves and that, in his mind, the two are inseparable.<sup>7</sup> For Gowin, the photographs of family members and those of the landscape derive from the same source, perhaps best summarized as a quest for authenticity through lived experience. He states,

I am not driven by the idea of the responsibility of the artist to the culture. I am more working from my empathy for what it is to have lived my life and how I feel about those connections, which are so vital.<sup>8</sup>

This segment of Chapter Three on the *Edith* series and nature will examine how Gowin's theological attitudes about the natural world have been integrated into his work and how the images of Edith both derive and diverge from the Symbolist paradigm of Woman as Nature.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>6</sup> Chahroudi, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Emmet Gowin, telephone interview by author, Richmond, Virginia to Princeton, New Jersey, 16 October 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds, 157.

*A Theology of Science and Art*

As indicated in the previous chapter, Gowin associates the Vietnam War with his experiences in Danville during the 1960s and 70s and believes that he was “on clear moral grounds” to stand aside from a war that he felt was “morally corrupt...and humanely wrong.”<sup>9</sup> During this period Gowin was also introduced to the photographer, poet, painter, composer, landscape architect and philosopher Frederick Sommer and to the poems of William Blake. These encounters would guide the coalescence of his dual interest in nonviolence and the natural world and would profoundly influence the articulation of his beliefs about spirituality, photography, and the creative process.

A visionary poet and artist, Blake sampled freely the many esoteric sources available to him in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London to create an idiosyncratic cosmology that has clearly resonated with Gowin. Although the production of the family series had come to an end when he first read *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790) in the 1970s, Gowin sensed an immediate correlation between the ideas expressed in the poem and those that had emerged from his own work, suggesting that “these things were being put together [even] before I read Blake.”<sup>10</sup> Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* ends with the character of Orc, who represents revolution and the positive necessity of destruction, announcing “For every thing that lives is Holy,”<sup>11</sup> a

---

<sup>9</sup> Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>10</sup> Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>11</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Works*, ed. Alicia Ostriker, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985), 195.

concept that corresponds with the Quaker principle of “God-in-all.”<sup>12</sup> Considering Gowin’s predilection toward the use of theological language, it is no surprise that he would be particularly drawn to Blake’s steadfast belief in the redemptive power of the imagination (referred to in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as “Poetic Genius”), as proclaimed in the annotated engraving of the *Laocoön* (1818):

A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect:  
the Man or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian.  
The Eternal Body of Man is THE IMAGINATION.  
ART is the Tree of Life.<sup>13</sup>

In reference to Blake’s principal notion that “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans,”<sup>14</sup> Gowin states,

It was so clear to me that Blake’s personal vision was one that he had to create because the world’s vision didn’t suit him.... Why give up what is living inside you for something you don’t understand or don’t feel, when in fact you’re already situated in a life that you feel intensely.<sup>15</sup>

By the time that Gowin discovered a strong affinity for the works of Blake, his friendship with Frederick Sommer had most likely predisposed him to the idea of creating a personal cosmology. Often referring to Sommer as a “teacher,” Gowin’s close relationship with the older man lasted from their first meeting in 1967 until Sommer’s death in 1999 at the age of ninety-three. In texts on the history of photography Sommer is

---

<sup>12</sup> Noted Blake scholar S. Foster Damon writes that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is Blake’s manifesto in which the contraries of Good and Evil work together to create a dynamic and unified “non-moral universe of the psyche.” Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1979), 262.

<sup>13</sup> David Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1974), 271-2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., from “Jerusalem,” 151.

<sup>15</sup> Gall, 23.

often aligned with such Expressionists as Callahan, Siskind and White, and was featured in several issues of White's *Aperture* during the 1950s and early 1960s. In *American Photography* Jonathan Green succinctly delineates White's precepts regarding the "reading" of a photograph as they took shape in *Aperture*. The following excerpt from Green's study illustrates a concept that is fundamental to Sommer's intention and, by and large, to the critical reception of both his and Gowin's artistic output:

A photograph, like any work of art, is a complex whole composed of similes, metaphors, symbols, and forms that refer both to the visual world and to the perceptions and feelings of the photographer....The primary aesthetic values of insight, intuition, control of form, and personal expression are as much a part of photography's birthright as the inherently photographic virtues of documentation and description.<sup>16</sup>

This summation coincides with Gowin's belief that the definitive source of meaning in a photograph originates within the viewer's "unconscious realm." He observes,

I always thought that what we called a good picture opened a person to their own unconscious. It is there by virtue of all the particulars but it opens us to something that we know, but we don't know how we know it.<sup>17</sup>

Despite a reputation as a recluse during his decades of life spent in the Arizona desert, Sommer had a rapacious and catholic curiosity often expressed by a fascination with the natural world. He translated his perceptions about art and life into a poetic language, exemplified by the following excerpts from "Poetry and Logic in a Nutshell, 1980 – 1983":

Poetry is not logic and logic is not poetry yet together they are poetic logic / the infinitely near is as far as the infinitely far / all things linger where time builds

---

<sup>16</sup> Green, *American Photography*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> Gowin, Danville interview.

eternity / .... / art and photography order our visual perception / aesthetic logic is the ordering of our feelings / choice and chance structure art and nature / poetry is the quality of our acts and art is the evidence that survives / .... / poetry and art are the logic of emotions basic to instincts and fundamental to life.<sup>18</sup>

The full integration of the creative life of the artist, a concept espoused by both Sommer and Gowin, is described by Sommer in *The Constellations that Surround Us: The Conjunction of General Aesthetics and Poetic Logic in an Artist's Life*:

We cannot afford to do anything less well than we can do. It is important to take this attitude because we are environment making toward ourselves. We are what we make of ourselves and what we contribute to this environment.<sup>19</sup>

Gowin has stated that Sommer's greatest contribution as a teacher and mentor was his introduction of science.<sup>20</sup> This process began with Sommer giving him a copy of Werner Heisenberg's *Physics and Beyond*, which Gowin then added to the reading list for his photography courses at Princeton. Soon after, Jacob Bronowski's *Science and Human Values* and Richard Rhode's *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* also became required reading for Gowin's students. He wrote in 1978,

I find that I am in harmony with the physicists, the scientists. I find them to be the most poetic people of our age. I feel a great kinship with the values of the scientist-writers, with Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, Jacob Bronowski, and Heinz Pagels. In each case, my knowledge of their work is an incomplete thing, but I feel the most tender language coming from them. Perhaps I'm at fault for not having read enough in the arts, but I rarely find in the history of art the subject of life expressed in such a nonaggressive fashion. I require a nonaggressive approach to positive solutions that have as their subject the unity of life.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Fredrick Sommer, *Words* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1984), 23.

<sup>19</sup> Sommer, *The Constellations that Surround Us: The Conjunction of General Aesthetics and Poetic Logic in an Artist's Life*, ed. Michael Torosian, (Toronto: Lumiere Press, 1992), 28.

<sup>20</sup> Gall, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Kelly, *Darkroom 2*, 43. Also quoted in Chahroudi, 11.

In explaining his preference for scientific theory over art theory, he stated in a 1997 interview:

I realized that everything that I had expected from the poetics of the artist's life was in the poetics of the scientist's life – a theology within a conceptual framework. It put me in touch with a foundation that couldn't be easily rocked.<sup>22</sup>

Because the practice of photography is a complex amalgam of chemistry and physics, Gowin's affinity for the language of science makes sense, even if his interest overlooks the mundane realities of research for the more esoteric realm of theory.

If the *Edith* series does, indeed, represent the “central thread and redeeming experience” within Gowin's life, then the pictures may be seen to embody his theology of science and art as it has evolved throughout the past four decades. Perhaps nowhere is this more clearly evident than in the images of Edith depicted as being both in nature and as a symbolic referent of the natural world. This connection is illustrated in the following statement by writer and environmental activist Terry Tempest Williams in her essay for *Changing the Earth*:

What I know about Emmet Gowin is that he loves the land. From his native Virginia to the mountain wildlands of the Wind River Range in Wyoming to the redrock canyons of the American Southwest, he sees the Earth as beloved; that is his word, not mine. *Beloved*. I recall a photograph he gave to Brooke and me, as a gift. It is an image of his wife, Edith, in profile, crouched on a log, her feet perfectly balanced one in front of the other. The interior space of her body is made up of the vines and tendrils of a vegetal world. This is more than merely the double exposure of a photograph. It is the truth of an artist who sees the body of his beloved as one with the Earth. No separation.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Gall, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Reynolds, 125.



*Woman as Nature*

Gowin describes a costume party that he and Edith attended during his years at RPI, for which Edith dressed as a Minoan snake goddess, wearing a jacket with painted breasts to simulate the figure's open bodice. He sees this event in retrospect as the unconscious ritual reenactment of a symbol, a point of view that extends to the viewing of his photographs: "The sharpness of the yearning is reenacted when you're looking at the picture, particularly in nature," thus allowing you to "put yourself in harmony with nature."<sup>24</sup> *Edith and berry necklace, Danville, Virginia, 1971* [Figure 28] may be viewed as a ritual reenactment in the manner of the Minoan snake goddess. Edith stands with a wreath of vines arranged around her feet. The circular format of the image is echoed by the wreath and a trellis of leaves and berries that frames her image. A loose white garment is pulled down to the waist and a berry necklace hangs between exposed breasts. Rather than confront the viewer, Edith looks to the side: her sense of reserve befits an ideal, a goddess of nature. Edith's presence in the image is clearly staged. Gowin has said that the trellis was constructed for another piece he had in mind and that the berry necklace, assembled a month earlier, was added at the last minute. He notes that this piece represents "a rare instance of a priori awareness,"<sup>25</sup> suggesting that most of the images he made of Edith had greater spontaneity and were less predetermined.

The circular format was used extensively by Gowin at this time and is echoed by repeated circles within the composition. This reiteration of the form creates an awareness

---

<sup>24</sup> Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>25</sup> Gowin, Danville interview.

of its presence and suggests that the viewer is looking through something – a microscope, a telescope, a peephole – further accentuating a sense of remove. Edith, presented almost anecdotally in the family images, here enters into the realm of the symbolic. From the fertility fetishes of the Paleolithic to current packaging design, round forms connote nurturance, abundance and, by association, the feminine. A marketing study found that,

Feminine forms – circles and ovals that suggest completeness, receptiveness and enclosure – provide the underlying theme for many packages, because these forms have the most positive associations.<sup>26</sup>

Such connotations are not lost on Gowin, and what began as an accident of expediency in 1967 when he placed his only available lens, a 4 x 5” Angulon, onto a donated 8 x 10” Eastman view camera, soon became an integral aspect of many of his images. He wrote in the 1976 monograph in which *Edith with berry necklace* was published:

Eventually I realized that such a lens contributed to a particular description of space and that the circle itself was already a powerful form. Accepting the entire circle, what the camera had made, was important to me. It involved a recognition of the inherent nature of things.<sup>27</sup>

Joseph Campbell writes about the symbolism of the Goddess as the ultimate source of origination, the Great Mother, the body of the universe:

The female represents what in Kantian terminology we call the *forms of sensibility*. She is time and space itself, and the mystery beyond her is beyond all pairs of opposites. So it isn't male and it isn't female. It neither is nor is not. But *everything* is within her, so that the gods are her children. Everything you can think of, everything you see, is a production of the Goddess.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Hine, “Seduced in the Supermarket,” *Reader's Digest* (July 1995): 97. Condensed from Hine, *The Total Package: The Evolution and Secret Meanings of Bottles, Boxes, Cans and Tubes* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Gowin, *Photographs*, 101.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth, with Bill Moyers* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 167.

In Chapter 1 of this study we examined the subject of the symbolic female in the context of Clark's "nude" vs. "naked," exemplifying what Nead describes as a hierarchical and gender-inflected binary of mind-over-matter and culture-over-nature in Western discourse, which strategically places the male in a dominant position. This ideology maintains that the transformation of the female body into a symbol is a process of purification wherein physical matter becomes subordinated to a culturally circumscribed mode of understanding, e.g., Kant's "forms of sensibility." Art historian Tamar Garb describes a slightly different process of the transmutation of the female body in her discussion of nineteenth-century Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Bather* series:

Renoir's identification with a tradition in which the idealization of the naked female body is seen as the metaphoric realization of Beauty, Truth and Purity is well documented. In the critical writing he is repeatedly linked to such artists as Titian, Rubens and Boucher in an apparently unbroken tradition of celebration of female beauty through what is called pure painting. In such accounts, the "body of woman" operates as an undeclared extension of matter – earth, nature, pigment – so that the rendering of her flesh is seen to be outside of an ideological construction of womanhood and exists rather as a natural extension of a natural will to form.<sup>29</sup>

When Stieglitz declared that "Woman *feels* the world differently than Man feels it...The Woman receives the World through her Womb,"<sup>30</sup> he was in large part inspired by the prevailing Symbolist elevation of spiritual and emotional sensation over Positivism's emphasis on optics. As Bunnell notes, "Science versus art [was] the

---

<sup>29</sup> Tamar Garb, "Renoir and the Natural Woman," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 295.

<sup>30</sup> Peters, 272.

conspicuous issue underlying pictorialism.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it can be argued that when Pictorialist photographers such as Stieglitz looked upon the woman as an embodiment of natural forces, it was not with the intention of subjecting her to the control of art as culture, but as a means of liberating art, and photography as a practice of art, from the constraints of science/culture/intellect. The artistic contrivance of the photographic process corresponds to the tactile brush stroke of Titian, Rubens, et al., connoting the literal hand of the artist in the creation of what Garb describes as “a natural extension of a natural will to form.” Viewed in this light Stieglitz’s highly sensualized fragments of O’Keeffe’s body and, subsequently, Callahan’s double exposures of Eleanor’s pubis over fields of grass can be viewed not only as an evocation of embodied feminine nature but as a proclamation of art as a byproduct of that embodiment.

Over time Gowin has consciously situated himself in the tradition of artistic practice as defined by Stieglitz and Callahan, and the critical reception of his work follows accordingly. As Bunnell writes in the 1983 Corcoran catalogue:

The pictures of Edith are crystallizations of enlightened human experience. The expressions range from Edith...as the goddess of fertility, to the earth-mother herself, reveling in the ecstasy of pregnancy. These depictions originate in the most fundamental and collective pictorial tradition known to our culture, though for Gowin, they are perhaps less antique in source than an inheritance of the Renaissance.<sup>32</sup>

The passage from Bunnell could clearly be used to describe *Edith and berry necklace*, but there are many other works where the sense of personality and/or place is too specific, too authentic, to be subordinated to an “enlightened” ideal. As has been indicated, the

---

<sup>31</sup> Bunnell, *Degrees of Guidance*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Bunnell, *Emmet Gowin: Photographs*, 3.

family series consistently conveys a strong connection to the environment in which the family lived, and many of the *Edith* photographs do the same. In *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1971* [Figure 29 ] she is on a porch dressed in mismatched clothing, her bare feet protruding from beneath a screen door behind which she stands. Peeling paint on the ceiling, rags hanging from a clothes-line dotted with clothes-pins, a dangling bulb, and an old Crisco can serve to evoke a rustic quality enhanced by trees dissolving into mist in the background. Similarly, in *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1970* [Figure 30 ], she lies with her eyes closed upon the floor of a tent, the door and window flaps are open, allowing a glimpse of the surrounding landscape as a dog peers inside. Both of these images are filled with humble details and yet the effect is made slightly unreal by the distorted perspective created by the 4 x 5" lens. And while the black and white images with their rural associations might suggest WPA photographs by Lange and Weston, Edith's clothing and environment connect her to the communal and back-to-the-land movements of the 1960s and 70s. Though clearly linked to tradition in these images, Edith is simultaneously conveyed as a woman of her own time and place.

Inspired perhaps in part by Callahan's and Sommer's extensive use of multiple exposures and his own experiences with that technique, Gowin in 1986 made several photographs of Edith superimposed with root vegetables and vines, two of which were published in the 1990 Philadelphia catalogue. Bringing to mind the works of sixteenth-century Italian mannerist Guiseppe Arcimboldo, Edith in Figure 31 is transformed into an allegorical representation of the earth, a quality enhanced by the sepia tone of the prints and a textural encrustation that seems to cover her skin in the manner of caked-on dirt.

These images diverge more than any in the *Edith* series from the expectations of portraiture. In them the individual literally becomes subsumed by vegetation, resulting in a transformation of the female form into an image of elemental generation in a way that suggests Callahan's insertion of Eleanor's silhouette into an egg-shaped form. However, that transformation is incomplete as details of the specific body emerge to indicate the presence of Edith. These photographs were taken when Edith was forty-three years old and had been married for over twenty years. Always quite slender in build, the effects of aging and childbirth are nonetheless evident in the slight sag of flesh, particularly on the lower stomach. Although she turns her head sharply away from the camera, her legs are opened widely to the viewer, an expression of her stated confidence that her husband will not expose, either literally or figuratively, that which she prefers to keep private. And though seen only in profile, Edith's sharp features and determined expression, familiar to those having viewed the series as it is presented through display or publication, remain clearly evident. In this way she is both an ideological construct and yet undeniably a person, the lover and partner of the man who created the image.

A reviewer wrote the following about a 1982 exhibition of Gowin's works at

Light Gallery:

Gowin depicts his wife as archetypal, symbolizing the same view of nature expressed in the photographs of Mt. St. Helens or the deserted Italian town. It is traditional to equate women with nature – mythical, powerful, unpredictable and mute. Edith is provocative and compelling, but man must enter at his own risk.<sup>33</sup>

This response illustrates the inherent contradictions evident in Gowin's symbolic

---

<sup>33</sup> *Art News* (summer 1982): 200.

representations of Edith within the context of nature. Just as Hélène Fourment can be viewed in Rubens' *Het Pelsken* as both goddess and wife, thereby existing interstitially within the regimes of culture and nature, Edith is simultaneously a metaphor and a person; her transformation can be viewed as either a subordination of the woman to the controlling ideology of art or as an elevation of art by an evocation of the female principle as an ultimate source of creativity. It is perhaps no surprise that given Gowin's cosmology of science, art and nature, the latter point of view prevails in his own analysis of the work. Either way, as the figure of representation, Edith has provided a means by which her photographer-husband can both examine and communicate his vision about the natural world.

## Edith as Mother

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there." "I cannot realize it, but it goes on." Motherhood's impossible syllogism.

Julia Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," 1975.

In the end it is beyond reason, beyond argument. In the end, the devotion to Mary is the objective correlative of all the primitive desires that lead human beings to the life of faith. She embodies our desire to be fully human yet to transcend death. The hatred of women is the legacy of death; in Mary, Mother and Queen, we see, enfolded in a human form that touches our most ancient longings, the promise of salvation, of deliverance, through flesh, from the burdens of flesh.

Mary Gordon, *Mother of God*, 1982.

A woman's experience of herself as a sexual person is profoundly shaped by the reproductive choices she makes and roles she assumes. Does she create her life as a childless woman? Does she attempt to have children but find she is unable to? Does she become a mother? Whatever procreative choices a woman makes, and whether she even perceives that she has a choice, will be shaped by the powerful pragmatic and symbolic cultural link between women's sexuality and reproduction.

Judith C. Daniluk, "Creating a Life," 1998.

In a study of the social constructions of mothering, sociologist Evelyn Nakano

Glenn poses the question, "Is women's fate tied to their biological role in reproduction, or is biology only a minor factor?"<sup>34</sup> Deriving a definition of gender from feminist theory as practices and relationships that are continuously in flux, Glenn suggests that mothering, above all other gender roles, is subject to an essentialist interpretation in that it is seen as "natural, universal, and unchanging."<sup>35</sup> In an attempt to broaden the definition of

---

<sup>34</sup>Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview," in Glenn and others, eds., *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 1.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 3. About essentialism, Broude and Garrard write, "In feminist art-historical writing, the idea of stereotypical femininity was joined in the later 1980s by a corollary cultural construct perceived by feminists as damaging to women: the idea of 'essentialism,' or the belief in characteristics or qualities that are inherent in woman's nature and not socially produced. The cultural belief that women are especially endowed with certain qualities (which can in fact be positive ones, such as intuition, flexibility, altruism) found reinforcement in the 1970s, during an early phase of the most recent women's movement, when new-found pride in women's identity was a necessary spur to political action. Today, proponents of this doctrine



mothering to include beliefs and practices that extend beyond the dominant image presented in the media and in political and legal doctrine, Glenn offers a description of the role as a “historically and culturally variable relation” of nurture, thereby constituting mothering as a social rather than biological construct.<sup>36</sup> Many of the photographs in the series depict Edith as pregnant or with one of the Gowins’ two sons. This section on *Edith* as mother will examine these images with regard to the discourses of pregnancy and motherhood, and also in association with traditions of maternal imagery in Western art.

### *Pregnancy*

Bourdieu notes the following comment by a manual laborer viewing an image by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, “A photograph of a pregnant woman is fine as far as I’m concerned, but no-one else is going to like it.” As Bourdieu explains, “If certain public exhibitions of photographs...are felt to be improper, this is because they are *claiming for private objects the privilege of the art object, the right to universal attachment* [emphasis mine].”<sup>37</sup> In the mid-1980s photographer Sandra Matthews and women’s studies scholar Laura Wexler began a collection and study of photographs of pregnancy. Noting that “pregnancy currently occupies a marginalized and devalued discursive space” in feminist writing on representations of the female body, they asked, “What has photography, the

---

are hardly to be found; the idea of essentialism is kept alive mainly by its detractors, who argue that any characterization or definition of woman that is biologically based is inherently limiting and repressive.” Broude, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Glenn, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Bourdieu, 87.

apotheosis of the visible, to do with pregnancy, the very archetype of the hidden?" They found that "popular notions of pregnancy are carnal, often sentimental; sometimes grotesque....The swollen womb is an atavistic protuberance of body fluid, blood and tissue." Echoing Bourdieu, they note, "Camera work, on the other hand is tasteful, an appropriate topic for the dinner table conversation, the museum symposium, the chic magazine." Matthews' and Wexler's findings suggest that this fissure between subject and medium has resulted in images of pregnancy that are "extremely limited, idealized, and dehistoricized."<sup>38</sup>

In "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini" (1975) French writer and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva examines the mother as both subject of and subject to the pre-lingual process of gestation that is contained within her body while remaining separate from it: "Motherhood's impossible syllogism."<sup>39</sup> She contends that the pregnant woman (*femme enceinte*) is "within an *enceinte* [protective wall] separating her from the world of everyone else." She continues,

Enclosed in this "elsewhere," an *enceinte* woman loses communital meaning, which suddenly appears to her as worthless, absurd, or at best, comic – a surface agitation severed from its impossible foundations.<sup>40</sup>

Kristeva notes further that the two methods of describing maternity in Western culture, science and Christianity, are inadequate. Her argument is succinctly summarized by

---

<sup>38</sup> Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler, *Pregnant Pictures* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," in Kelly Oliver, ed., *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 303.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

philosopher and feminist writer Kelly Oliver:

Science explains maternity as a natural, and therefore presocial, biological process. Yet where is the mother in this process?....Although Christianity does address the move from nature to culture in the maternal body with the image of the Virgin Mary,...with the Virgin, the maternal body is reduced to silence.<sup>41</sup>

Kristeva's pregnant woman thus operates in the liminal space between nature and culture, between the semiotic (body) and symbolic (language), at the site of what she calls maternal *jouissance* (joy). This model can be used as a means of analyzing the discourses of pregnancy and motherhood in Gowin's photographs of Edith, particularly with regards to the degree that Edith's presence in the images is either individualized and specific (e.g., "vocal") or essentialized and symbolic (e.g., "silent), or a combination of the two.

The photograph *Edith, Ruth, and Mae, Danville, Virginia, 1967* [Figure 23], discussed in the previous chapter, was selected by Gowin as the first image in the 1990 catalogue of the Philadelphia Museum exhibition of his work. Edith's stance seems quite aggressive and the manner in which she pulls her housecoat diagonally across her abdomen suggests that she wants the viewer to be aware of her pregnancy, still in an early-enough stage to be just barely apparent. Also taken that summer while pregnant with her older son Elijah is *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1967* [Figure 32], an interior shot that presents her standing frontally and in the foreground, her head and torso bisecting the picture plane. Again, she looks directly at the viewer, who cannot help but be aware of

---

<sup>41</sup>Oliver provides a succinct analysis of Kristeva's thesis as developed in the essays "...Bellini" and "Stabat Mater": "Kristeva's thesis that pregnancy and childbirth reunite a woman and her mother and bring back primal homosexual bonds is radically opposed to Freud's theory that childbirth is motivated by penis envy. Kristeva suggests a notion of the maternal body that locates its *jouissance* in femininity and maternity itself rather than the Freudian notion of the maternal body, which is always defined in relation to masculine sexuality and a phallic economy of desire." *Ibid.*, 296.

the visible insect bites that dot her body. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes writes about the *punctum*, which he defines as a “sting, speck, cut....A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me.)”<sup>42</sup> Although it may come precariously close to being a pun, those bites can be viewed as a source of *punctum* in that they force recognition of the specificity of time, of place, and of Edith’s body. This specificity belies the requisite universality of the pregnant body as a container or of the mother as a generative force of nature.

*Edith and Elijah, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974* [Figure 33] shows Edith reclining in a shallow streambed, her stark white body contrasting against the dark water rushing over the rocks below her. Heavily pregnant with second son Isaac, she looks down at the stream while behind her six-year-old Elijah mimics his mother’s pose, albeit looking directly at the camera/his father. The two of them are clearly posed so that Edith’s round belly serves as a central axis in the enframing circle of the composition. Her obvious state of pregnancy, Elijah’s presence as evidence of generational continuity, and the elemental association of water and stone work in conjunction with the image’s circular format to underscore Matthews’ and Wexler’s observations regarding depictions of the “natural” pregnant body:

Many [photographs] place the pregnant figure in visual relation to aspects of the natural world, particularly bodies of water, domesticated animals and trees. In so doing, they comment on the natural power and mystery of pregnancy, choosing to de-emphasize historical or social dimensions of the experience.”<sup>43</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that this quality of “natural power and mystery” emerges as a

---

<sup>42</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Matthews and Wexler, 98.

major characteristic of Gowin's images of maternity, and that this approach to the subject is often treated symbolically as in Figure 28.

Another example is *Edith, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974* [Figure 34], taken that same summer, which offers Edith as a reclining Venus on the floor of a tent in a nude variation of Figure 30. She is located in the bottom half of the picture plane and we look down upon her through the circular lens. Her "muteness" in this image is enhanced by the arm draped back over her head and barely evident face, and the relaxed extension of her other arm leaves her open to the viewer's gaze. The swelling of Edith's belly is apparent, but not overtly so as it seamlessly melds with the smooth contour of the rest of her body. The netting of the tent window through which the image was made creates a gauze-like overlay, reminiscent of the "vaselined" lenses once used by filmmakers to disguise signs of aging in the faces of older actresses. In this work the fact of the pregnancy is almost secondary to the romanticized setting and pose, as if to say that even a woman in her third trimester can be a seductress. By evoking the pose of the recumbent nude, both of these images of Edith are clearly delimited within the context of the art photograph, described by Matthews and Wexler as a system that "privileges optical over other kinds of experience while at the same time infusing the optical with ideology."<sup>44</sup> An example they provide is Callahan's *Chicago, 1950*, which has Eleanor's pregnant torso emerging from the surrounding darkness, her breasts in the shadows hanging above a roundly highlighted abdomen [Figure 35]. Callahan's is a clearly aestheticized image not of an individual, but of a form; however, as Matthews and Wexler indicate, the sense of visual

---

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 20.

mastery offered by scopic photographs can be undercut by the subject, which is too “exotic and familiar, strange and intimate” to be easily contained by modernism’s scopic frame.<sup>45</sup> The ungainly protrusion of the pregnant belly is invariably transformed into a cathected object incapable of being contained within the regulating aesthetics of either the classical nude or formalist abstraction.

*Edith, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974* [Figure 36], placed directly opposite the similarly titled work discussed above in the Philadelphia Museum catalog, shows Edith standing nude in a lushly wooded setting. However, though she has portrayed an earth goddess in other images, Edith does not appear to be comfortably assuming that role in this depiction. The convex distortion of the lens creates an awkward foreshortening, forcing her hip and limbs to jut out at odd angles and causing the glamour-girl pose that she affects to seem a parody that borders on the grotesque. In place of an expression of rapture or docile acquiescence as would be expected in such portrayals, she directly returns the viewer’s gaze with tightened lips and a solemn countenance. A petite woman, particularly in comparison to her tall husband, here Edith is monumental and she rises above the camera/her husband/the viewer with an expression of defiance. The articulation of Edith’s personality is heightened by evidence of her corporeal body – underarm hair, protruding navel, and mottled flesh on the thigh – serving to obstruct her complete transformation into aestheticized vision or a silent goddess. Her visceral presence prevents the viewer from seeing a depiction of pregnancy; we see instead an image of a very pregnant Edith. Thus, particularly when viewed as a whole, e.g., through exhibition

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

or publication in a catalogue, Gowin's photographs of Edith in pregnancy span the divide between universal and specific, nature and culture, and are in this way both silent and spoken. She is never a mute shape as is Eleanor in Figure 35, or purely metaphorical as is Eleanor in Figure 12; neither can representations of Edith be described as straightforward snapshots in the manner of Friedlander [i.e., Figure 37]. Rather, by defamiliarizing both the art photograph and the document, Gowin creates an interval between the two genres allowing the works to be viewed intertextually, that is, as both contained by and outside of the boundaries of genre formation; and, it is in this fashion that Gowin contributes to the discourse of the maternal image.<sup>46</sup>

### *Motherhood*

Placed directly after the photograph of Eleanor's pregnant belly in Callahan's *Eleanor* catalogue is a picture of their newborn daughter Barbara's head as viewed from the top and surrounded by a blanket [Figure 38]. Identically titled *Chicago, 1950* it serves as an adjunct to the previous image of the mother both in narrative and composition. The ovoid shape of pregnancy gives way to the ovoid shape of infancy; both are specific and yet removed from their specificity through subordination to the function of abstraction. Callahan's titling of the images by place and date without reference to Eleanor or Barbara clearly accentuates the distancing effect of deemphasizing individual associations. Conversely, though Friedlander similarly titled his images of Maria and their children by location and date, these designations reference the family album and represent a record of

---

<sup>46</sup> This aspect of defamiliarization was discussed in conversation with Robert Hobbs on 11 February 2005.

the family's circumstances throughout the years. Friedlander's images clearly emphasize Maria's role as the central hub of the nuclear family; in Figure 19 she waits patiently, perhaps with some anxiety, to read the thermometer in her sick daughter's mouth, and in Figure 39 daughter Anna brushes her mother's hair, while son Erik, clad in striped slacks almost identical to those of his mother, pets the family dog. The viewer is allowed access into these intimate moments only because the husband/father is a photographer who acknowledges that what is in front of him "starts to get photographed."<sup>47</sup> For the Friedlanders, as for the Callahans and Gowins, it seems that "the dad who makes pictures" was just another integral part of the family dynamic. As Friedlander observes,

Well, I'm always around. They're stuck with me and I'm stuck with them, in some way. I mean the kids always grew up knowing that there would be a camera around once in a while....[The photographs of the family] are almost not about events. They're intimate pictures. They're intimate in that I'm there in all of them.<sup>48</sup>

Like Friedlander's images of Maria, Anna and Erik, *Edith and Elijah, Danville, Virginia, 1968* [Figure 40] is clearly linked to the snapshot aesthetic in its straightforward depiction of mother and child. The rag curlers in Edith's hair suggest the kind of intimate circumstance available only to close family members. She is not nude nor does she seem to be affecting a pose. Yet the white of Edith's curlers simultaneously reiterates the pattern of the roses behind her and creates a frame of light around her head, allowing for a clear definition of her face. As evident as the baby's presence is in the photograph, the focus is nonetheless on Edith's face and sharply defined features. Ollman observes

---

<sup>47</sup> Friedlander, *Maria*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.



that generally in photographs of Edith and child, “Emmet’s scrutiny is on Edith as mother, rather than on the babies.”<sup>49</sup> Another image of Edith and Elijah from 1968 [Figure 41] appears, in contrast, to be deliberately posed and composed, with the diagonal slant of the wooden beam to the left completing a triangular formation comprised of the vertically aligned figures and the board that extends horizontally behind them. Reminiscent of the ovoid forms in the Callahan photographs, the concentric circles of a white metal bowl reinforce the shapes of Edith’s and Elijah’s heads, and might also suggest the recent shape of Edith’s pregnancy. Held upside down over her chest and stomach in a way that intimates the birthing position, the child’s merging with his mother doubles her form – head-head, arm-arm – and also suggests the close physical bond that remains in tact almost a year after his departure from her womb.

A series of photographs entitled *Edith and Isaac, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974* [e.g., Figures 42 and 43] comprise the final three works in the 1976 monograph. Taken not long after the images of a very pregnant Edith that summer, *Edith and Isaac* illustrate the maternal bond immediately after giving birth, when the bodies are still connected to the degree where they become almost indistinct. Figure 42 is readily comparable to Figure 36 in terms of location and the angular formation of Edith’s elbow in the composition. Although Gowin abandons the enframing circle in the second picture, the extreme foreshortening of the figures creates a distortion that similarly produces a sense of monumentality; these bodies loom large in the picture plane and, one can easily infer, in the eyes of the photographer. Isaac’s open mouth hovers just above Edith’s erect

---

<sup>49</sup> Ollman, 122.

nipple, underscoring the sustentative aspect of their connection. The baby's head completely obscures his mother's, and is located in its place. The cathected belly of the mother is replaced in this instance by the presence of the child. In Figure 43 the crevice of Isaac's plump derriere flows vertically to merge with the darkened line extending from Edith's navel which, along with her misshapen and still distended abdomen, provides the unmistakable sign of recent childbirth. Though we see Isaac only from the back and a partial glimpse of Edith's face, the physical presence of their bodies completely undermines any chance of the figures' being subsumed into abstraction or symbolism.

The emphasis on unity of form – on two-in-one – and its attendant emblematic connotations in depictions of mother and child is not unique to Gowin, and is characteristic of the subject as seen in a wide range of examples as diverse as Bamana wood carvings from Mali, the paintings of late-nineteenth-century American Impressionist Mary Cassatt, and the woodcuts and lithographs of twentieth-century German Expressionist Kathe Köllwitz. However, in Western tradition the paradigm for the subject is the image of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child. Gowin's acknowledged source in this respect is Renaissance art, particularly the Northern Renaissance paintings he was first exposed to in undergraduate art history courses at RPI.<sup>50</sup> He writes in *Darkroom 2*,

I want to mirror in the work I produce the feeling that stimulated me to think working was worthwhile; it has to do with a density of implication and the intensity of feeling that I recognize in the works of Bruegel the Elder,

---

<sup>50</sup> Gowin, Danville interview. He states, "I was conditioned by Renaissance painting. It was my introduction to art history and something I never forgot."

Hieronymus Bosch, and Albrecht Dürer.<sup>51</sup>

Even though Figure 40 conveys the casual look of a snapshot, Edith and Elijah may also be viewed as referents to the Virgin and Child; the white curlers are Edith's halo and the implication of bare feet suggests the barefoot Virgin, a sign of humility.<sup>52</sup> Photographer Karen Kachele, a former student of Gowin's at Princeton, suggests that depictions such as these establish a religious context against which all other images of Edith must be understood, even ones in which she is nude. Kachele writes,

Photographs of Edith without clothes always reference these holy images, thereby transforming Edith into something sacred and separate from the mundane, ordinary (and erotic) world of common humanity.<sup>53</sup>

The discursive intersections of Christianity, maternity, and art were described by Kristeva in "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini" and "Stabat Mater." Oliver observes that in these essays, Kristeva uses the inherent alterity of the maternal body as a model for all subjective relations.<sup>54</sup> For example, in "...Bellini," Kristeva suggests that the language of art acts in accordance with maternal *jouissance*:

---

<sup>51</sup> Kelly, *Darkroom 2*, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Karen Kachele, "Two Men and Their Wives: The Photographs of Harry Callahan and Emmet Gowin" (MFA dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1996), 28.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Oliver, "Kristeva and Feminism," *Center for Digital Discourse and Culture* (Blacksburg: Virginia Tech University, 1999); available from <http://www.cdde.vt.edu/feminism/Kristeva.html>; Internet; accessed 4 February 2005. Oliver writes, "By insisting that the maternal body operates between nature and culture, Kristeva tries to counter-act stereotypes that reduce maternity to nature. Even if the mother is not the subject or agent of her pregnancy and birth, she never ceases to be primarily a speaking subject. In fact, Kristeva uses the maternal body with its two-in-one, or other within, as a model for all subjective relations. Like the maternal body, each one of us is what she calls a subject-in-process. As subjects-in-process we are always negotiating the other within, that is to say, the return of the repressed. Like the maternal body, we are never completely the subjects of our own experience. Some feminists have found Kristeva's notion of a subject-in-process a useful alternative to traditional notions of an autonomous unified (masculine) subject."

At the intersection of sign and rhythm, of representation and light, of the symbolic and the semiotic, the artist speaks from a place where she is not, where she knows not. . . . [T]hrough a symbiosis of meaning and nonmeaning, of representation and interplay of differences, the artist lodges into language, and through his own identification with the mother (fetishism or incest) [he traverses] both sign and object. . . . At the place where it obscurely succeeds within the maternal body, every artist tries his hand, but rarely with equal success. . . . Such is the artist's debt to the maternal body and/or motherhood's entry into symbolic existence.<sup>55</sup>

Gowin is unlikely to make reference to Kristeva's notion of *jouissance* (total joy in the presence of meaning), but in a similar fashion he often refers to the concept of "body wisdom." Having gleaned this personalization of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology from his reading of Joseph Campbell, Gowin describes "body wisdom" as follows: "Perception comes out of your own body. We don't have a mind separate from our bodies." He adds, "I am somebody who thinks that their body knows just as much as any thought they ever had. And I like for my body to listen to my mind when it has a good idea."<sup>56</sup> He is fascinated, for instance, by Edith's decision to wait seven years between giving birth to their two sons, something he notes was completely her decision and based upon her intuitive knowledge that she would need that long to be "totally. . . present for that first child, and to absorb the lessons of that child and not be diverted by that child." He adds, "I don't know how she knew that." Not unsurprisingly, Gowin takes a rather mystical view of the mystery of childbirth: "The secret of the body producing a life is not something comprehensible. You can participate in it, but you cannot comprehend it. You don't know how the body knows."<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, 308.

<sup>56</sup> Gall, 23.

For Gowin this “secret of the body” or body wisdom extends beyond the creation of life and, like maternal *jouissance*, can be applied to all artistic endeavors. Both of these notions have been characterized in this study as liminal, as spoken and unspoken, thereby reflecting an inherent duality in representations of the maternal body. If Gowin’s images of Edith in pregnancy and of Edith as a mother may be described as deriving from an essentialist view of motherhood and, as such, are beyond language, beyond history, and thus mute, then it should be acknowledged that for Gowin, so too was the very act of their creation. Rather than viewing essentialism as a strategy of patriarchal oppression, Gowin would more likely see its underlying assumption of universalism as a form of liberation from the constraints of socio-political interpretation and the dictates of art theory, concerns that he finds irrelevant to his own practice of making photographs.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, it can be noted that essentialism and universalism are constituent to the modernist enterprise and, as such, may easily be ascribed to the mid-twentieth-century, middle-class, American milieu from whence the photographs derive.<sup>59</sup> If anything, the stated duality/liminality of the subject of maternity is emphasized in images of Edith, who is simultaneously depicted as a symbol of fecundity and a very strong-willed individual existing within a specific time and place.

---

<sup>57</sup> Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>58</sup> He admits to being “very much a stream-of-consciousness worker,” and contends that as far as he is concerned, “Anything that is not intimately true is not worth telling. If it doesn’t concern one on the most intimate of levels it isn’t worth knowing.” Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>59</sup> These terms were clarified in a conversation with Robert Hobbs on 11 February 2005.

## Edith as Wife

Each artist has very particular needs of his wife and far more limited needs of his model. At moments these roles intersect and are occasionally congruent. The person central to his life may be his muse, his object of sexual desire, his ideal of virtue or strength, or a tantalizing unfathomable mystery, the mother to his children, a convenient partner in the laboratory of invention, and the guardian of his legacy. The camera may be the erotic tool of foreplay, an abstracting intermediary, a shield, a microscope, or a container of preserving amber.

Arthur Ollman, *The Model Wife*, 1999

Mr. Gowin loves his wife. He loves her not as an adolescent who sees only himself in everything, but as an adult who wants to learn and understand. And the evidence of these pictures is that this particular "lover" uses his camera as a means to that understanding.

Brian Peterson, "Emmet Gowin and the Poetics of Intimacy," 1994

That Gowin's intentions were loving rather than exploitative was made clear to me during our conversation those many years ago. "I'm interested in your work," I began lamely, "because I photograph nudes myself." "*I don't photograph nudes,*" he shot back, *I photograph my wife.*"

Stewart Harvey, "Speaking of Pictures," 1994

In the first chapter of this study the institution of marriage was described as a process of "doing gender," that is, a series of interactions predicated, in part, on expectations derived from socially encoded roles and practices based on gender. The Gowins' marriage reflects what might be considered a norm for couples who were married in 1964. The husband received a college degree, became established in a career, and served as the sole breadwinner for the family. The wife curtailed or delayed her education to stay at home and take care of the children and the running of the household. Not revealed in this description is the real balance of power that exists between the two partners in this relationship. Evidence of Edith's assumed subordinate position in the partnership is at least partially undermined by many of the photographs that Emmet made of her and by the circumstances of their creation. Her involvement in the process is often articulated in the images themselves and her resistance to mute representation generally

confounds viewer response. For example, poet and critic Mark Strand makes the following observations about his reaction to photographs of Edith:

There is a certain detachment about her, an oddly sustained dourness that immediately engages the viewer's interest, and [the viewer] finds himself wanting to rescue Edith from the camera. Her gloominess is not only rendered vulnerable by exposure, but it becomes the source of the pictures' eroticism. Edith seems to have allowed herself to be photographed not to be documented but to be transformed. In fact, the viewer gets the uneasy feeling that such a transformation is imminent.<sup>60</sup>

Less charitably, an unnamed reviewer in *Art News* described Edith as “usually angry and rarely beautiful....Man must enter at his own risk.”<sup>61</sup> That the unflinching directness of her gaze is sometimes regarded as “dour” or “angry,” or even as implicitly threatening, reveals the extent to which these images diverge from general expectations regarding the depiction of the wife and mother. As has been previously noted with regard to the discourse of the artist's/photographer's wife, the intersection of art and life inherent in this subject results in a convergence of gazes – the husband's, the wife's, the viewer's – that cannot be readily contained within the prevailing modality of artist-model interaction. In order to fully consider the extent to which defamiliarization affects the dynamics of viewer expectation in these images, Edith's representation as a wife will be examined under the subheadings of *Erotics & Transgression* and *Identity & Narrative*.

### *Erotics & Transgression*

In a study of the psychological significance of the nude, Hudson describes the

---

<sup>60</sup> Mark Strand, “Surface Tension,” *Vogue* 174 (March 1984), 131.

<sup>61</sup> Emmet Gowin, “*Art News* 81 (summer 1982), 199.

problematic nature of the male artist displaying nude images of his wife. Using the example of Weston's photographs of Charis Wilson he notes,

For what Weston made public, and he was among the first members of his species to do this, were precisely detailed and sexually revealing portraits of a young wife whom, in some sense, he must have wanted to keep to himself....By making images of his model public, he gives other men access to her; but an access that is only symbolic, and constrained by limits he himself has set.<sup>62</sup>

With regard to this "symbolic access," Bunnell describes the Gowins' relationship as he finds it revealed in the *Edith* series:

The underlying energy in all of these pictures is warmly sexual, but the relationship between the partners is so totally natural and trusting that its depiction is singularly poetic....These two people know more than what they render in these images and they do not reveal what they know about each other.<sup>63</sup>

Just as Rubens' *Het Pelsken* was demonstrated in this study as existing in an uneasy space between public and private, in like fashion the photographs of Edith allow access into the intimate interactions of a couple. The depictions within the series that are erotically charged transmit a sensation of authenticity emanating from viewer recognition of the enactment of the sexual bond conveyed within the image. Even so, this voyeuristic glimpse into a private world is ultimately specious in that it is framed by the deliberate and controlling aesthetic of artistic practice. As Bunnell suggests, they "know more than what they render," thus redirecting viewer participation in Edith and Emmet's narrative of sexual tension to what Matthews and Wexler call a "scopic framework" offering a

---

<sup>62</sup>Hudson, 133.

<sup>63</sup> Bunnell, *Emmet Gowin: Photographs*, 3.



“pleasurable sense of visual mastery”<sup>64</sup> over the subject that allows the viewer to be both drawn into the marital interaction suggested in the photograph and removed from it.

In *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1971* [Figure 44] Edith is depicted in a bedroom dressed in a nightgown and posing in a highly romanticized, even clichéd position of sexual availability; a position which can also be described as awkward and affected. The details of the room – horizontally paneled walls, antique brass bed and textured bedspread, lace curtains, and floral linoleum carpet – create a strong impression of a 1930s-era Virginia farm house, however, the placement of a plastic toy horse on the windowsill adds to an overall sense of incongruity. By way of the family narrative we know that this is Edith’s home, the environment of her childhood, and we understand her connection to the room, and yet her presence seems oddly anachronistic. Gowin has a characteristically anagogical response to the mixed messages embedded within this photograph. Noting that the room is imbued with what Blake called “minute particulars,” he observes, “Now, with distance, I hear Blake saying that wherever a person moves, the dome of heaven that encloses them travels with them.” In this room, says Gowin, “[Edith is] occupying a cosmos which is not her own.” Instead of a portrayal of sexual enticement, a proffering of the body as suggested by pose and location, Gowin describes Edith as “symbolic knowledge. She stands in for what people know, for what the body knows.” Therefore, any potential (and expected) erotic response to this image is doubly undermined by overlays of incongruity and by Gowin’s own displacement of arousal for

---

<sup>64</sup> Matthews and Wexler, 20.

a symbolic representation of “the wisdom of the body.”<sup>65</sup>

In *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1978* [Figure 45] Edith’s softened features and disheveled hair evoke the post-coital dishabille found in many of Stieglitz’s early photographs of O’Keeffe [i.e., Figure 4]. And like the 1918 print that offers O’Keeffe’s splayed legs and pudendum [Figure 5], the darkened area between Edith’s legs captures viewer interest and provokes one to wonder what, if anything, she is wearing under that dress. This perverse fascination with his wife’s crotch is not lost on Gowin who, when asked, noted that Edith had been playing on the lawn with the children and, at the moment when this photograph was taken, Isaac was just outside the frame. He added, “It was sheer luck that Edith decided to put on dark underwear that morning.”<sup>66</sup> Hudson observes that the anatomical confusion between the sites of human amatory and excretory functions leads us to perceive of the body as “inherently ‘dangerous’; we run the risk of confusing desire with disgust.”<sup>67</sup> Stieglitz’s manipulation of light and the processes he employed in making the palladium print completely shield O’Keeffe’s vaginal opening from our sight; any anatomical details are obscured by shadow merging with thickly blackened pubic hair. The image of Edith is more discrete but no less provocative. These photographs seem to convey a sense of mystery regarding female genitalia, which Blake refers to as the “fleshy Tabernacle,”<sup>68</sup> made even more compelling by its hidden

---

<sup>65</sup>Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>66</sup>Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>67</sup>Hudson, 10.

<sup>68</sup>Blake, *Jerusalem*, in Erdman, 204.

properties. Barthes writes that for him there is no *punctum* in pornography, which offers the sexual organs as motionless objects of display. He continues,

The erotic photograph, on the contrary...does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond* – as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see....the photographer has found the *right moment*, the *kairos* of desire.<sup>69</sup>

Viewer response to images such as those indicated above can be described as being conditioned both by an awareness of the intimate sexual relationship at their source and by an acknowledgement that the photographer controls exactly what is revealed and that this revelation is only partial.

*Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1971* [Figure 46] shows Edith engaging in a highly transgressive act. She stands illuminated from behind with her legs spread wide apart in the doorway of a ramshackle shed on the family property. Edith lifts her transparent white cotton gown up around her hips, allowing visual access to her pubic area as she urinates on the floor. The optical clarity of the photograph, with its detailed textures, exquisite light, and cohesive compositional unity, vies for viewer attention with the stream of liquid descending from between Edith's thighs and the reflected puddle flowing along the wooden floorboard. In her discursive examination of the female body Nead cites noted twentieth-century anthropologist Mary Douglas' analysis of concepts of purity. Douglas contends that the power of the body is determined by its perceived unity and that this desired quality of coherence extends from the physical to the social body.

---

<sup>69</sup>Barthes, 59.

Nead quotes Douglas' observation that, "Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. ....Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body."<sup>70</sup> Drawing in part on the writings of Douglas and French essayist and theorist Georges Bataille, Kristeva developed her concept of the abject body in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) in which she observes that abjection "preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be."<sup>71</sup> Like Douglas' notions of unity and taboo, abjection is linked to "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules;"<sup>72</sup> and thus can be experienced through an exposure to corpses, open wounds, and all manner of body fluids such as urine. Nead succinctly compares Douglas' and Kristeva's arguments:

For both writers power lies at the margins of socially constructed categories, for it is here that meaning is called into question and challenged. The main distinction between their positions is that whereas for Douglas bodily boundaries are not privileged in any way but are seen as symbols of and responses to social orderings, for Kristeva the body's margins are primary as the site for the subject's struggle for attainment of identity.<sup>73</sup>

And for Kristeva abjection is closely tied to religion and art, in that,

The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup>Nead, 5.

<sup>71</sup>Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 10.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>73</sup>Nead, 32.

<sup>74</sup>Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.

The dynamics between Edith's action of urinating on the floor and viewer reaction to it can be framed as a disruption of boundaries; not only the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable social behavior, but that between public and private in the life of a family. It is not unusual for families to be open about their bodies and bodily functions within the confines of the home where cleansing and bathroom activities can be performed in the presence of others without traversing any lines of propriety. But by opening the door to that private world, in a shared moment between spouses, both Edith and Emmet Gowin crossed the line with the result that *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1971* defamiliarizes both the fine-art and family photograph. This puncturing of genre formations is similar to that found in nineteenth-century-French Impressionist Edgar Degas' bather images of the 1880s, of which art historian Norma Broude writes,

The subjects of Degas' bather and toilette scenes, though more traditional in their art-historical origins and evocations than the brothel scenes, nevertheless caused confusion and controversy among the artist's contemporaries and continue to do so today.<sup>75</sup>

Though they allude to both prostitutes and the tradition of the bathing Venus, Broude contends that these women can be viewed as "naked for no one but themselves. And therein lay their potential to disturb and repel male audiences." In this way,

[These depictions] are among the very few representations of the female nude by male artists in the Western tradition that challenge (albeit mildly and obliquely from our point of view today) the societal assumption that nude women can exist only for the pleasure and purposes of dominant males.<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, Edith's deed is enacted before her husband and implicitly before the camera

---

<sup>75</sup>Broude, 283.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 284.

and potential viewer, but it is still, ultimately, hers and hers alone. Gowin admits that it was Edith's idea; they were in the midst of making photographs in the shed and she had to go to the bathroom – so she went. With regard to the success of the image, he credits sheer luck and timing.<sup>77</sup> It is Edith's ownership of the image, through the moment depicted within, that precludes an easy classification as either fine-art or family photograph, and that also prevents it from being described as pornographic.

Art historian Carol Armstrong observes that a viewing situation traditionally ascribed to the subject of the female nude has been extended, by some feminist writers, to the medium of photography:

The camera has frequently been named as a phallus; “shooting” films and “taking” photographs have often been described as acts of predation and violation, forms of symbolic possession.<sup>78</sup>

As previously indicated, Gowin is averse to the use of violent language with regard to any of his activities. Even so, in an examination of the discourse of the artist's/photographer's wife, the perceived “ownership” of the image in terms of identity (and, by extension, the person depicted) reflects the degree to which an encoded patriarchal power structure is evident within the representation. In other words, to what extent does the work reflect or reject a binary formation of husband/wife, artist/model, active/passive, possessor/possessed? Regarding the appropriation of their own images by women artists, art historian Lucy Lippard suggests that, “When women use their own bodies and faces in their artwork, they are using their selves; a significant psychological factor converts these

---

<sup>77</sup>Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>78</sup>Carol Armstrong, “The Reflexive and Possessive View: Thoughts on Kertesz, Brandt, and the Photographic Nude,” *Representations* 25 (winter 1989), 59.

bodies or faces from object to subject.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, to the extent that the wife collaborates in, or has control over, the creation of the image, it can be said that she has a degree of ownership. It is, admittedly, an ownership shared with the person who framed the image, snapped the shutter, developed the print, and appended his name, but ownership in the sense that the person represented in the photograph is based not solely on the husband’s vision of his wife, but to some degree on the wife’s knowledge of herself.

This aspect of ownership can be examined in *Edith and Rennie Booher, Danville, Virginia, 1970* [Figure 47], another work that may be described as transgressive, Edith stands before the camera/the viewer clearly aware of being photographed. With regard to this awareness, Barthes states,

Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of “posing,” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. *This transformation is an active one* [emphasis mine].<sup>80</sup>

The projected sense of intentionality in Edith’s gesture as she opens her sweater and reveals her breasts in the presence of her grandmother enhances the perception that meaning within the image converges upon her, and that this meaning resides both in the act of photographing and in the resultant image. What can be read as her conscious participation in the creation of this photograph forces the viewer into an interaction with her imaged personality.

---

<sup>79</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American’s Women’s Body Art,” (1976). Quoted in Trevor Richardson, ed., “Fictions of the Self: The Portrait in Contemporary Photography,” (Greensboro, NC: Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Amherst, MA: Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 1993), 8.

<sup>80</sup> Barthes, 10-11.

Rennie Booher's age and infirmity provide a stark point of contrast to Edith's ripe and powerful sexuality. Edith stands firm and in sharp focus. Rennie is seated, and the blurring of her head suggests a rapid turning away from Edith's provocative display in shock or revulsion. Her movement also references a tradition of unintentional blurring in early photographic portraiture, i.e., daguerreotypes, deriving from the protracted exposures required by the medium.<sup>81</sup> Although the bedroom belongs to Rennie, the camera captures Edith in the act of taking possession of the space and of the image. Edith's aggressive gesture, stance and countenance are displayed before the camera; her gaze, which seems to lock onto the viewer's, is directed at the camera/her husband. That the photographer is her husband calls attention to our understanding of the work as a family photograph, a function underscored by Gowin's archival approach to titling. Edith is in the presence of her grandmother, the enfeebled and dying matriarch of a close-knit clan, and thus the image suggests a transfer of authority from one generation to another, a shift of focus (literally and figuratively) from old to new, from past to present. Gowin records this transition allowing the viewer access to both a personal drama and a symbolically universal rite of passage. Additionally, placed between the two women is a photograph – a framed studio portrait of a man and woman, presumably a husband and wife – that calls attention to the generational shift. The couple in the picture is Rennie and her deceased husband from many decades earlier and, as a relic from the elderly woman's past, the image serves to mediate between grandmother and granddaughter. It is

---

<sup>81</sup>The reason behind Rennie Booher's blurred image is actually quite prosaic. She was dipping snuff and the photograph captures the moment she turned her head to spit into the can. Gowin indicates that Booher had no idea that her granddaughter's breasts were exposed in her presence. Gowin, Danville interview.



also a photograph within a photograph, and, more specifically, a family photograph within a family photograph – one traditional, the other openly transgressive – and as such it serves as a subtle referent to the reflexively photographic framework of meaning established within the piece.<sup>82</sup>

It has been noted in this study that the practice of photography holds a uniquely ambivalent position in the relationship between fiction and reality. The specific information provided in the title *Edith and Rennie Booher, Danville, Virginia, 1970* allows the viewer to subscribe easily to the authenticity of both the people depicted in the image and their relationship. Two additional images of Edith and her grandmother are placed directly after this work in the 1976 monograph. Though taken at separate times, their placement suggests that Gowin wanted them to be viewed in a narrative sequence. Both photographs show the women in Rennie's bedroom with Edith wearing a white cotton nightgown. In the picture made in 1970 [Figure 48] Edith's garment is open at the bodice, but the closeness of the two figures and the younger woman's gesture of affection indicate that there is a high degree of physical comfort and tolerance between the two of them. Edith is similarly dressed in the 1971 version [Figure 49] and is seated on the bed next to Rennie, making a funny face as if still a child in the presence of the family matriarch. The latter images serve as a counterpoint to the transgressive nature of the first by providing a more complete narrative of family interaction. Whether viewed

---

<sup>82</sup>The photograph can be described as a "metapicture" in accordance with criteria developed by W. J. T. Mitchell in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). He defines it as "a picture about itself, a picture that refers to its own making, yet one that dissolves the boundary between inside and outside, first- and second-order representation, on which metapictorial structure depends." Mitchell, 42.

individually or as a whole, these photographs document a time and place when Edith was in her late twenties and Rennie was still alive, and the focus on Edith in the representation of their relationship enhances her role as the centrifugal point of meaning within the images.

### *Identity and Narrative*

The social constructivism described by Stuart Hall in the introduction to this study suggests that representations are not fixed but are subject to a discursive reading. In an article on the subject of identity he writes,

Identities are never unified... [but are] multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions....Identities [are] constituted within, not outside, representation....They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material, or political efficacy.<sup>83</sup>

With regard to the representation of identity in portraiture, art historian Ernst van Alphen suggests that the genre's supposition of the uniqueness of the individual portrayed "doubly cherishes the cornerstone of bourgeois western culture." He contends,

In the portrait, originality comes in twice. The portrait is highly esteemed as a genre because, according to the standard view, in a successful portrait the viewer is not only confronted with the "original," "unique" subjectivity of the portrayer, but also that of a portrayed.<sup>84</sup>

This notion that traditional viewing accords the dual identities (subjectivities) of artist and subject a presence within the depiction is relevant to the discourse of the artist's/photographer's wife. The spousal relationship at the core of the depictions allows

---

<sup>83</sup>du Gay and Hall, 4.

<sup>84</sup>Ernst van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in Woodall, 239.

the perceived identities of husband/artist and wife/model to be at once symbiotic and conflated, so that perceptions of portrait and self-portrait simultaneously coalesce and diverge. In the Getty symposium on Stieglitz described in Chapter 1 of this study, panel members all readily agreed with Naef's assertion that, "Of course, every picture Stieglitz made of O'Keeffe is really a portrait of himself."<sup>85</sup> In similar fashion, Harry Callahan's photographs of Eleanor have been considered to be a natural extension of his desire to integrate all areas of his life. He was quoted as saying,

I am interested in relating the problems that affect me to some set of values that I am trying to discover and establish as being my life. I want to discover and establish them through photography.<sup>86</sup>

The reflexive presence of the photographer is noted as a consistent theme in all of Friedlander's oeuvre. And, along those same lines, in 1970 Gowin wrote, "I feel that whatever picture an artist makes is a picture of himself – a matter of identity."<sup>87</sup> This section on *Edith* as wife will consequently examine various issues of representing identity, particularly though the development of narrative.

Ollman finds the absence of images of women working in the selection of photographs in *The Model Wife* to be somewhat troubling. He writes,

One suspects that men simply refuse to retain an image of a wife who is not paying full attention to them. The time a woman spends on her profession is time during which the husband exercises no control. Her professional identity may carry little weight among the characteristics with which he defines her. It is also a domain in her control that stands distinctly apart from these photographic

---

<sup>85</sup> Naef, 128.

<sup>86</sup> Greenough, 181.

<sup>87</sup> Gowin, *Album 5*, 40.

episodes, where the photographer dominates.<sup>88</sup>

Over the past four decades, Edith Gowin's working domain has been the home, and yet with the exception of a very few family images with children, the series does not portray her within that context. We do not see her cooking, cleaning, paying bills, or any of the myriad tasks associated with that job. Moreover, her role in the partnership with her husband also extends to his photographic practice. She provides the organization and business acumen that allows him to concentrate on his two jobs, teaching and photography, thus fulfilling the classic role of the art-wife as creative enabler. As such, her involvement in the creation, display, publication, and sale of the photographs extends far beyond her participation as model. This collaboration began with Gowin's senior thesis at RPI. Entitled *Concerning "America and Alfred Stieglitz" and Myself*, the thesis was comprised of fourteen original photographs juxtaposed against seven pages of the 1934 Festschrift *America and Alfred Stieglitz*.<sup>89</sup> Gowin was assigned the task of making one hundred copies. Choosing to eschew the viable option of duplicating a single original, he ended up having to make one hundred versions, each comprised of fourteen original prints, calling it "a good exercise."<sup>90</sup> Edith participated in the arduous process of assembly, thus allowing him to complete one or two editions each day.

The narrative that develops through the later family series has Edith at the nucleus since her family, home, and connections become Emmet's only through her. When asked

---

<sup>88</sup> Ollman, 29-30.

<sup>89</sup> A copy of Gowin's senior thesis is now in the photographic collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>90</sup> Gowin, Danville interview.

about the aspect of collaboration and the degree of control exerted by Edith in the photographs made of her, Gowin responded, “We’ll probably never know absolutely, but what one perceives is... a person who’s in control of their own destiny, in touch with their own destiny.”<sup>91</sup> He describes Edith’s family as “a matriarchal clan, where the women totally outnumbered the men,” and all worked and functioned very independently from the influence of men. He observes that, given her surroundings,

[Edith] couldn’t have been in a more supportive setting, and I think that [regarding] her sense of self-certainty – I don’t know that she was self-conscious of it – but she certainly wouldn’t stand back from anyone.... And I never saw her meet anyone who was superior to her on moral grounds, on humane, psychological grounds.<sup>92</sup>

As indicated in the previous section, a significant theme present in the three depictions of *Edith and Rennie Booher* is the inevitable passage of time within a family; this is evident when images are viewed individually and, particularly, when they are seen as a sequence. The photographs themselves serve as a kind of effigy, a combined presence (tangible evidence of the moment of creation) and absence (a moment that was several decades ago). Apropos this contradictory role, Woodall writes that,

The desire which lies at the heart of naturalistic portraiture is to overcome separation: to render a subject distant in time, space, spirit, eternally present. It is assumed that a “good” likeness will perpetually unite the identities to which it refers.<sup>93</sup>

That uniqueness that we, as viewers, identify as Edith derives from a sense of an acquired

---

<sup>91</sup> Edith prefers to remain silent on the subject of her participation in the creation of the images. Gowin suggests it is because she looks upon them as a part of her past, and that her interest is in the present. Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>92</sup>Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>93</sup>Woodall, 8.

knowledge of the imaged person, i.e., her appearance, personality, relationships, and environment, and it is gleaned from a familiarity with the series as a whole. Because they are presented in a manner that suggests a family album, there is a strong tendency to view the images within the context of time and to compare the visible signs of change just as one would do with one's own collection of family photographs. This underlying element of the passage of time is constituent in viewing photographic series that occur over an extended period, and as such, it forms an integral aspect of the discourse of the photographer's wife.

Ollman observes, "It is noteworthy that none of these wives [in *The Model Wife*] have been photographed as old women yet."<sup>94</sup> As of this writing both Edith Gowin and Maria Friedlander are in their sixties and are presumably still being photographed by their husbands. Literary scholars Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janie Rossen write in the introduction to their study of aging and gender in literature that "aging is a missing category in current literary theory," and that because it is a significant voice "in which writers and characters speak, . . . critics and readers must learn to read its messages."<sup>95</sup> In a compendium of photographs entitled *The Body*, photographic historian William Ewing offers the following description of *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1973* [Figure 50]:

That flesh is a burden which inevitably accompanies age is the message conveyed by Emmet Gowin's frank study of his wife Edith. It comes as a shock to realize how rarely in photography we are allowed to share in such intimacy. Here is a body seen by a lover and husband of long standing, a vulnerable body, weary and resigned, and without a shred of vanity or self-consciousness. Edith's whole-

---

<sup>94</sup>Ollman, 32.

<sup>95</sup>Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janie Rosen, eds., *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 1.

hearted trust in her spouse is evident; she virtually embraces the camera.... There is a certain beauty here too, not the stock, formulaic beauty of the glossy magazine, but a radiance nonetheless.<sup>96</sup>

Edith was thirty-years old when this photograph was taken, still in her sexual prime. The next summer she would be pregnant with Isaac. Ewing's account of *Edith, Danville...* illustrates the rigor with which the firm flesh of youth is maintained as a benchmark in assessments of the human body.<sup>97</sup> Given his final observation, one wonders if Ewing would apply the same standards to the male figure and if the aging male body would be deemed quite as "shocking." Sociologist Judith Daniluk observes that "The experience of aging represents the intersection of the biological and social." She adds, "The biological and physical changes associated with the climacteric and aging process are set against society's largely negative perceptions of the aging woman."<sup>98</sup> Gowin provided his own consideration of the image when he initiated a comparison between the 1973 photograph and a version of *Edith, Danville...* from 1967 in which Edith's body is softened not only by relative youth but by pregnancy [Figure 32]. Noting that the works are six years apart, he observed the "non-defensive gesture of openness" common to both and, perhaps in an acknowledgement of the physical changes present in the latter photograph, he stated that

---

<sup>96</sup>William A. Ewing, *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form* (Chronicle Books, 1994), 143.

<sup>97</sup>Kathleen Woodward writes, "Our disregard of age is all the more curious because age – in the sense of *older* age – is the one difference we are all likely to live into." She notes that the term "ageism" emerged in the late 1960s concurrently with the terms "sexism" and "racism" and that it describes how a "repression of aging – the denial of old age – characterizes our culture as a whole.... [This is] rooted largely in people's personal fears of their own aging and death." Woodward, ed., *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), x-xi.

<sup>98</sup>Judith C. Daniluk, *Women's Sexuality Across the Life Span: Challenging Myths, Creating Meanings* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 295.

“the body is a piece of nature”<sup>99</sup> and thus subject to the natural processes of time’s passage. In looking at the two images, he was seeing the same woman from within a much broader and more deeply personal context than would be afforded to an outside viewer.

That “the body is a piece of nature” is certainly the underlying theme of *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1983* [Figure 51], which provides an even more striking point of comparison with the 1973 version. In this work the forty-year-old Edith sits in the same location, and much the same position, as in the root-vegetable photographs that will be taken three years hence [Figure 31]. Signs of aging and the impact of pregnancy are much more evident, and in that way perhaps Ewing’s commentary regarding flesh as a burden is more appropriate here. There is a high degree of vulnerability in this image, and West notes that concern about an unflattering portrait may prevent a sitter from having one made during the later stages of life. However, she adds, “Artists and sitters have also found [in] the signs of age and experience a stamp of character, wisdom, and experience, and thus potent material for expressive portraiture.”<sup>100</sup> In a photograph made in 1996 [Figure 52], the now fifty-three-year-old Edith fills the frame with her head and nude shoulders. Although her eyes are downcast and the shallow depth of field places her nose and the contours of her casually disheveled hair slightly out-of-focus, Edith’s indomitable personality still emanates from the image deriving, in large part, from the unapologetic signs of age. Similar photographs of Edith in the 2001 Pace/MacGill exhibition inspired a

---

<sup>99</sup>Gowin, Danville interview.

<sup>100</sup>West, 139.



female reviewer to write the following:

Mr. Gowin is a superb printer, and the light and textures of his photographs are enhanced by his skill at coaxing film to give its all. What is most moving in these shots is the faithful recording of life's changes in the face, from the fresh anticipatory look of early youth to the weary, no-more-surprises expression with which age inexorably stamps it.<sup>101</sup>

The narrative of aging in the *Edith* series has been described in this study as biographical, but it is also autobiographical; since their first meeting in 1961, Edith's life has been inextricably bound with Emmet's. In a study of autobiography, writer Kim Worthington acknowledges the fictive element inherent in the genre, noting that, "To a certain degree, when remembering, we make, rather than retrieve, our past."<sup>102</sup> Yet, a photographic autobiography is different from one that is written; instead of being created from memory the photograph is always made in the present. Literary theorist Frederick Garber describes the process as follows:

No matter what we entitle a photograph, its subtextual subtitle is always "once upon a time." Whatever the extent of the preparation involved, the photograph freezes a moment that is immediately and forever absent, and grows in degrees of absence as the moment of taking recedes. But the past is past only in relation to the present. The present is that punctual scene which defines and gives meaning to the past, gives it, in effect, its pastness, which means the moment of the taking of the photographic image is the reference point through which one always reviews the image.<sup>103</sup>

Presumably, as Gowin has made the photographs that comprise the *Edith* series, and as these images have recorded visible evidence of the physical, psychological, and

---

<sup>101</sup> Grace Glueck, "Art in Review: Emmet Gowin," *New York Times* (26 January 2001), 37.

<sup>102</sup> Kim L. Worthington, *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>103</sup> Garber, Frederick, *Repositionings: Readings of Contemporary Poetry, Photography, and Performance Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University 1995), 169.

circumstantial changes in their shared lives, he has consciously marked his own passage through time. Edith's aging is a direct reflection of Emmet's advancing years, a process that, at least according to the images, neither spouse seeks to hide, deny, or diminish.

The contention that Stieglitz was basically photographing himself through his extended portrait of O'Keeffe indicates an emphasis placed on his controlling vision as an artist and an assumption that, within in the images, O'Keeffe was imaged solely through his eyes. The early works c. 1917-19 describe an illicit and fiery passion (Stieglitz was still married to his first wife) that defied the boundaries of convention while simultaneously exploring and expanding the boundaries of art. As the two of them aged, both individually and as a couple, the circumstances of their relationship changed quite radically, and the photographs subsequently reflect O'Keeffe's growing independence and her move to New Mexico, as well as her physical changes. Though Stieglitz may be said to have remained the dominant subjectivity in *A Portrait*, as O'Keeffe always contended, the photographs nonetheless project the other subjectivity that was their relationship, which in the later years remained quite separate from the rest of their lives. O'Keeffe's firm control over the display, publication, and sale of the photographs after Stieglitz's death indicates that in the end literal, if not authorial, ownership of the images of her was assumed by her. The dual placement of the portrait series and the individuals involved in their creation within the histories of photography and art underscores how *A Portrait* is now viewed as a vivid representation of two personalities, both artist and subject, husband and wife.

Callahan's tendency to subsume the images of his wife in an overarching

abstraction and/or symbolic content prevents the *Eleanor* series from conveying a similar narrative construction. We cannot see her aging because the details of her face and body are not clearly indicated. We see their daughter Barbara as an infant and young child, and only then in conjunction with her mother and generally within the vast expanse of a surrounding landscape [Figure 16]. Ollman was quoted earlier as stating that Callahan “was well known to encourage his students to turn their cameras on their lives, and he led by example,”<sup>104</sup> and certainly his family, particularly his wife, did not escape his lens. However, by the time that Barbara was old enough to go to school and Eleanor went back to work, Callahan’s practice of photographing them had by and large come to an end. His appetite for subject matter and stylistic experimentation was voracious, and he created many thematic series in a career that spanned over half a century. Perhaps due to the relative brevity of the series (c. 1941-59) within the context of Callahan’s career, or to the distancing quality of his style, the narrative of the wife as developed in his *Eleanor* photographs and her overall construction have neither the breadth nor depth that can be ascribed to other series discussed in this study.

Presented as a family album in both *Maria* and *Family*, Friedlander’s snapshots of his wife and children serve as a stark contrast to those of Callahan. *Maria* begins with a photograph of the couple taken in 1958, the year of their marriage, and ends with another image of the Friedlanders from 1991. The first image in *Family* is of Maria in 1959, and the final picture is of the grandchildren in 2000 (though there are also works from as late

---

<sup>104</sup>Ollman, 96.

as 2003). The roughly chronological narrative sequence allows the viewer to follow Maria from bride to young mother to parent of adolescent children and young adults and finally to grandmother, thus representing the Friedlander family over a period of five decades and three generations. Maria eloquently summarizes her response to the images in the introduction to *Family*:

I've come to think of the book as Lee's gift to me of my own private memoir in pictures. I look at it and feel the moments both revealed and evoked, the joy and the hard times – it's all in there. I recall the stories, I feel the yearning for the less complicated times of years gone by, and I'm grateful that the difficult periods when our family was young survived. I feel nostalgia for our youth. I am fearful for what life now has in store. It can't be as good as this was, even when it wasn't always good. For me, in image and in memory summoned, it is The All of It of forty-five years.<sup>105</sup>

Friedlander's presence as husband/father/grandfather can be literal as in Figure 53, or suggested as in Figure 17, but is nevertheless continuous in his role as the photographer.

Like Gowin, Friedlander emerged on the scene of American fine-art photography in the 1960s, and it has been noted in this study that both artists were influenced by Evans' vernacular imagery and the personal journalism of Frank's *The Americans*. In particular, Frank's approach to documentation and the emerging snapshot aesthetic were at the core the period of *New Documents*, during which Green notes the pervasive influence of the writings and photographs of Szarkowski and Winogrand. He summarizes their aesthetic as follows:

The camera cannot lie, neither can it tell the truth. It can only transform. The very nature of the medium forces a disjuncture between the photograph and the world, yet the habits of perception – our everyday use of photography – force us to see the image as a surrogate reality. *Disjuncture* yet *resemblance* are photography's

---

<sup>105</sup>Friedlander, *Family*, 7.

defining characteristics.<sup>106</sup>

Green suggests that Friedlander's photographs are "perhaps the most successful embodiment of [this] aesthetic."<sup>107</sup> The photographs in *Maria* and *Family* are clearly snapshots and, within the context of the family, Maria, Erik, and Anna Friedlander clearly maintain their identities; their appearance and surroundings are simply what they looked like and where they were at the inchoate moment of the image's creation.

Gowin's family photographs, on the other hand, while also evoking the immediacy of the snapshot, often suggest additional layers of content and, in some works, a vaguely anachronistic sense of nostalgia. And yet, although Gowin was literally "given permission" by Callahan to reference his personal life in his work, the images of Edith are too individualized to be completely transmuted into the symbolic evocations of Woman found in the *Eleanor* series. That Gowin's work straddles the divide between documentation and fine-art in a manner characterized by its own distinctive voice is perhaps the photographer's greatest contribution to the subject.

Stieglitz's portrayal of O'Keeffe as mistress and wife was viewed as openly transgressive and can be understood as a reaction to the prevailing strictures of social behavior and as a bold pronouncement of both artists' avant-garde agenda. Unlike the Stieglitz series, the family scenarios created by Callahan, Friedlander, and Gowin conform to a normative idea of familial interaction, and yet it can be argued that they remain distinctly outside of its boundaries. The photographer's choice of what images to

---

<sup>106</sup> Green, *American Photography*, 99.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

make, print, and publish provides a framework for the family narrative, and it is clearly an edited portrayal. The viewing of these series is governed by a construction of family that is as indebted to fictional depictions (i.e., through television, film, and novels) as it is to personal experience. And though the narrative of wife and mother may adhere to certain cultural expectations, it is certainly not standard practice for a father to publicly exhibit and publish pictures of his family or for him to openly display nude images of his wife. Art historian Linda Nochlin writes with regard to Courbet's nudes of the 1860s:

The female nude is the contested site of vanguard versus conservative practices in the nineteenth century...[In] the case of Courbet's more excessively eroticized nudes...we are invited by a certain modernist discourse, or, perhaps, more accurately, a postmodern one, to read the transgressive content of the work as a metaphor for the transgressive formal practices involved.<sup>108</sup>

As has been suggested, the Stieglitz series coincides with Nochlin's description and in this way *A Portrait* not only provided a template for other photographers to emulate, but helped to establish a precedent for the perception of artistic practice as existing outside the bounds of normative behavior. This aspect of the work illustrates how images of the photographer's wife can be viewed at the interstices of public and private, of art and marriage, and across photographic genres while maintaining their locus firmly within the history of twentieth-century American fine-art photography.

---

<sup>108</sup>Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 141.

## Conclusion

### Edith as a Photograph

Emmet Gowin is a contemporary photographer who takes old-fashioned-pictures. They are old-fashioned for both their content and their craft, and that is precisely what makes them appealing.

Alan G. Artner, "Positive Pictures," 1992

When asked to make a statement about art, I find it hard to say too terribly much, because art is so mysterious. However, when asked to name another photographer's work I think about, I'd have to name Emmet Gowin. Emmet was one of many wonderful students I had and he has certainly gone on to make his own work: the fulfillment of the greatest challenge any artist can face.

Harry Callahan, "Harry Callahan on Emmet Gowin," 1998

Peter Bunnell begins his introductory catalogue essay to Gowin's 1983 Corcoran exhibition with the following query:

Can a photograph have the significance of art? Alfred Stieglitz asked this question just over sixty years ago and like a Zen koan, there are many ways to consider the statement.<sup>1</sup>

Though apparently more than rhetorical, the mere invocation of Stieglitz's name suggests that for Bunnell the answer to this question was never in doubt. The essay would never have been written, indeed, the exhibition would never have been organized, had not Gowin's status been firmly established within the tradition of fine-art photography.

Bunnell continues,

One way to extract its wisdom might be to reflect upon the photographs of Emmet Gowin, whose approach to photography is to relate significance to tradition.... This proven set of practices is the starting point for his efforts and the locus of his identity as an artist.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Bunnell, *Emmet Gowin: Photographs*, 1.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

An even more direct answer is provided by Bunnell in the introduction to *Degrees of Guidance*, a collection of his writings that includes the Corcoran essay:

A photograph can have the significance of art if we, as an attentive audience, truly desire that it do so. We can praise a photograph in terms of its craftsmanship or innovation, but without reaching for its inner content we will not be truly rewarded. Only if we allow the artist to enter our lives with a shared trust will we be fulfilled.<sup>3</sup>

Bunnell's modernist construction of art as a canonized tradition has been roundly refuted by postmodern discourse. Art historian John Tagg succinctly summarizes this opposing critical position in a 1988 interview with Joanne Lukitsch:

I've certainly never wanted to be an historian of photography as such. I've always tried to pose the issues more widely as those of visual culture, histories of representation, representational practices. It's true, however, that it was possible to talk about things in the area of photography it wasn't possible to talk about in the area of art history. But it's impossible to teach the history of photography as a canon, as a discrete or coherent field or discipline...without talking about family photography, without talking about the photographic industry, advertising, pornography, surveillance, documentary records, documentation, instrumental photography – whole areas of production in which there is no common denominator...[It] is the historical emergence of [a] canonized archive in relation to others of a more lowly sort that constitutes the real problem.<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation has examined Gowin's photographs *vis-à-vis* their location in the constructed history of twentieth-century American fine-art photography. His own acknowledgement of indebtedness to several photographers within that canon and his insistence upon a subjective reading of the work helped to establish this framework. The subject of the photographer's wife has been similarly described within the context of that history, and its involvement, beginning with Stieglitz, in the establishment of the medium

---

<sup>3</sup>Bunnell, *Degrees of Guidance*, xiv-xv.

<sup>4</sup>Joanne Lukitsch, "Practicing Theories: An Interview with John Tagg," in Carol Squires, ed., *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 224.



as fine-art implicates the subject in the canon's formulation. However, this study has also undertaken a discursive examination of the subject matter in order to distinguish some of the various historical and ideological constructs that guide our reading of images of the photographer's wife. Particularly in Gowin's series of photographs of Edith, the images' placement within the genres of family, documentary, and fine-art photography readily allows for a process of defamiliarization that broadens our understanding of the work by offering a means of seeing it extrinsically, in comparison with other works and other genres. By piercing the boundaries of public and private, the subject brings into question Kenneth Clark's ideology of "naked and nude" as well as the reification of form that is part and parcel of the modernist program. In this way, Gowin's representations of his wife can be seen simultaneously to uphold and undermine Bunnell's contentions about photography and art.

An awareness of the spousal relationship at the core of the depictions provides for a sometimes conflicting intersection of subjectivities that includes the viewer's own experience with marriage and family interaction. The overarching power that ideologies of marriage have over this viewing is clearly evident in the critical writings where the discourse of the artist's/photographer's wife has, until this study, remained largely unexamined. Designated simultaneously as artist and model as well as husband and wife, the relationship of Emmet and Edith has generally been described in accordance with the binary construction of active/passive, possessor/possessed, and creator/created, although the circumstances of the images' making may not bear out this simplistic division. Nevertheless, the influence wielded by the gender-inflected imbalance of power

suggested by the phrase “the photographer’s wife” on the process of viewing can be illustrated by asking a simple question, “What about the photographer’s husband?” With the possible exception of Sally Mann’s photographs of her husband Larry, a project that has yet to be exhibited and published as a series, nothing readily springs to mind. An investigation into this question implicates various notions regarding both representations of the female and gendered viewing.

In posing this question about her own work, photographer Diane Neumaier formulated the following response in an article aptly entitled “Alfred, Harry, Emmet, Georgia, Eleanor, and Me”:

My inability to share the accomplishments of Callahan, Stieglitz, and Gowin in photographing our spouses was primarily based on sexist gender differences. To possess one’s wife is to honor and revere her. To possess one’s husband is impossible or castrating. . . . Strong feminist conclusions became unavoidable. These awe-inspiring, beautiful photographs of women are extremely oppressive. . . . Less personal female nudes, which are most often presented as fetishized, dismembered female body parts are obviously oppressive to women, but the subtle practice of capturing, exposing, and exhibiting one’s wife is praised as sensitive. The danger in this seemingly loving possession of another was revealed to me by the impossibility of its gender reversal. Hidden under domestic covers, these are images of the domination of women. Their authority as art provides frighteningly effective models for both women and men as, respectively, the victim and the victor, the possessed and the possessor, the captive and the captor, the framed and the framer, the passive and the active.<sup>5</sup>

In his introduction to *The Model Wife*, Ollman observes that one needs to be both compelled and permitted to make such images and, bearing out Neumaier’s assertion, “Having power of one’s own, in and outside the marriage, seems to be the *sine qua non*.” He argues, “It also seems necessary to be able to objectify one’s subject [and] the mental

---

<sup>5</sup> Diane Neumaier, “Alfred, Harry, Emmet, Georgia, Eleanor, and Me,” *Exposure* 22 (summer 1984): 7.

gymnastics required to do this have been ascribed most often to men.”<sup>6</sup> Ollman quotes Bebe Nixon, a long-term subject of her husband Nicholas’ series of photographs, as noting,

Men do not show themselves and their feelings as readily. They learn early on to be more hidden, to not exhibit themselves or their emotions. This is grossly generalized but it is also sadly true.<sup>7</sup>

And considering his stated intentions of “honoring” and “revealing” Edith, it is no surprise that Gowin heartily refutes Neumaier’s contention with regard to his own work.

He had the following response to her question:

It’s interesting to reflect on why [the husband] is a closed dynamic and [the wife] is open. I think it’s primarily biological, and the only time that it works where the male body functions transcendently is with homosexuals.

Ultimately, he said, “the trick is to find really great pictures. It’s not to illustrate the principle.”<sup>8</sup> So, whether it is the problematic inversion of male/female possession, men’s presumed inability to project their emotions, or the difficulty in depicting a transcendent male body, an assumption of gender difference seems to lie at the crux of the issue. In these arguments, men and women are perceived as being *essentially* distinct from each other.

Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey observes, “The image of the woman has

---

<sup>6</sup>Ollman, 29.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Gowin, Danville interview.

become conventionally accepted as very often something other than herself.”<sup>9</sup> One might ask if the male is not equally subject to metaphorical interpretation and artistic transformation. Clark notes that depictions of Apollo, the Greek god of reason and light, were “perfectly beautiful....because his body conformed to certain laws of proportion and so partook of the divine beauty of mathematics.”<sup>10</sup> This description illustrates Clark’s association of the male with order and culture in contrast to his signification of the female as disorder and nature, as described earlier in this study. Nead’s insightful critique of the binary as discussed in Chapter 1 suggests that in the practice of art the male is associated with the dominant patriarchy and the female, as “both *mater* (mother) and *materia* (matter), [is] biologically determined and potentially wayward.”<sup>11</sup> She summarizes Clark’s theory in this regard:

The female body has become art by containing and controlling the limits of the form – precisely by framing it. And by giving frame to the female body, the female nude symbolizes the transforming effects of art generally. It is complete; it is its own picture, with an inside, outside and frame. The female nude encapsulates art’s transformation of unformed matter into integral form.<sup>12</sup>

Nead describes this process as a deployment of cultural (male) control. Gowin’s comment about the transcendent body suggests that he would subscribe to Clark’s argument that the rounded forms of the female are more in keeping with the visual

---

<sup>9</sup>Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 64.

<sup>10</sup>Clark, 53.

<sup>11</sup>Nead, 18.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

requirements of artistic practice.<sup>13</sup> However, as has been previously suggested, Gowin's position on the artistic transmutation of the female form may also be understood as the obverse of Clark's. As an exemplar of embodied formalism, the "transcendent" female body and the association of woman with nature reflects nature's liberating ascendancy rather than the controlling dominion of culture.

The approaches to viewing that have been described seem to presume a male perspective and that the requisite process of artistic transformation of art must occur on the site of the desired body (female). Otherwise, why would Gowin suggest that only a male homosexual could find the male body transcendent? Art historian Whitney Davis describes the distinction between enunciation and inflection with regard to gendered viewing. For example, in Stieglitz's portrait of O'Keeffe the enunciated gender *of* representation is female (O'Keeffe), whereas "the male inflection spread[s] through the enunciation." He adds that it is "crucial to recognize that the gender(s) *in* representation cannot be understood without reference to the gender(s) *of* representation and *visa versa*."<sup>14</sup> The potentially problematic nature of gendered viewing is illustrated by Nochlin's response to Courbet's nudes as both an art historian and a woman. Concluding that the opposing positions provide no comfortable middle ground, she writes,

Surely I cannot simply take over viewing positions offered to me by men – either the creator of the picture or his spokesmen – nor can I easily identify with the women in the picture as objects of the gaze, which would necessarily involve a degree of masochism on my part; nor can I easily invent some other, alternative, position. Once more, I find myself at once invited into, but shut out of, the house

---

<sup>13</sup>Nead writes, "According to [Clark's] rationalization, the female body is naturally predisposed to the contours of art; it seems simply to await the act of artistic regulation." *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>14</sup>Whitney Davis, "Gender," in Nelson and Shiff, 220.

of meaning.<sup>15</sup>

Although maintaining the viewer's assumed association with the male artist, Carol Armstrong offers a slightly different response to Bill Brandt's photographs of female nudes from the 1950s, in which,

There are almost always body parts looming up in the foreground so close to the viewer's domain that they almost seem to belong to the viewer – to be "his" own body parts, extensions of "his" own body.<sup>16</sup>

She adds that the images call upon "tactile desires that are as reflexive as they are possessive, as self-oriented as they are outwardly directed." Armstrong concludes that, with regard to the distortions of the female body in photographs by Brandt and André Kertész,

I am really speaking of empathy for the *object* of a kind of sadomasochistic regard – that one really crosses the boundary of difference by identifying with the object of regard, by changing places, effectively, and imagining oneself as the (female) object rather than the (male) subject of a possessive gaze. Such an argument, of course, would simply maintain the structures of gender difference and "male gazing" – for all it really means is cross-undressing.<sup>17</sup>

Neumaier's difficulty in photographing her husband reflects Nochlin's discomfort at being wholly a (male) art historian while viewing Courbet's nudes and Armstrong's perception of sadomasochism. The presumption of male inflection can place the female artist/viewer in a highly unstable position regarding her own agency. Neumaier confesses, "I simultaneously wanted to be Alfred, Harry, or Emmet *and* I wanted to be

---

<sup>15</sup>Nochlin, 144.

<sup>16</sup>Armstrong, 66.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 67.

their adored captive subjects.”<sup>18</sup> We have seen how the artistic transformation of the female in representations of the photographer’s wife can be undermined by the infusion of the real – the specific body, the enacted relationship – into the ideal. And yet, it can be argued that in this subject the ruptured framework exemplified by Clark’s “naked and nude” is replaced by a prevailing ideology of marriage. If the female viewer (presumably) identifies with the woman in the photograph and the relationship(s) narratively depicted throughout the series, then how can she imagine herself on the active side of the camera making the picture? And, conversely, there is the male viewer who must place himself in the passive position of being adored but controlled. Davis notes the extreme lability of gender in visual representation, suggesting,

It makes little sense to speak of the gender *in* or even *of* a visual representation without determining how that representation subsists in ideal, partial, or negligible concord with its many viewers, many of whom have had numerous and variable encounters with the work.<sup>19</sup>

One can argue that, regardless of sexual orientation, a female viewer can respond to tactile clues and see a woman’s body as an object of desire without imagining herself as male. And that a male can correspondingly view a female *from* the body and find a corporeal empathy in addition to, or in place of, a sexually derived desire to possess.

Perhaps the question about the photographer’s husband can be restated to ask if a husband can successfully function as a muse. Whether it is in the role of divine inspiration or creative enabler, the muse suggests a subordinate position reflected by Ollman’s contention that the objectification of the subject, in this case the male, requires

---

<sup>18</sup>Neumaier, 6.

<sup>19</sup>Davis, 233.

a concession of power; and in this post-feminist era, neither partner in most relationships seems likely to concede. Arlene Croce suggests that this assumption of an imbalance of power may have rendered the role of the muse obsolete. In 1996, she wrote:

At the end of the American century, making art and thinking about art seem increasingly wistful, not to say futile, occupations. Mention the Muse and people smile. We don't know who that is any more, and we may never know.<sup>20</sup>

In the early years of their relationship, Georgia O'Keeffe was undoubtedly Stieglitz's muse. She inspired him to create images based upon their mutual passion for art and for each other, and though theirs was a symbiotic relationship of mutual artistic influence, he played, by all accounts, the dominant role in the creation of the photographs. Eleanor Callahan justified the intrusion of her husband's camera into her private domain and the subsequent objectification of her body as an enactment of her role as muse. Her statements suggest that the process of artistic transformation rendered those images as something unrelated to her own sense of self. In this study, Eleanor is the wife who most clearly reflects the classical definition of the muse, as one who inspires a transmutation of matter into eternal form.

To suggest that Maria is Friedlander's muse would be problematic, because all of the people and places in his life have, to some extent, served in that capacity. He is quoted earlier in this study as observing, "I suspect it is for one's self-interest that one looks at one's surroundings and one's self," admitting that, "[this] is indeed my motive and reason for making pictures."<sup>21</sup> Although the works have not often been exhibited,

---

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Prose, 8-9.

<sup>21</sup>Friedlander, *Self Portraits*.



Maria is the subject of innumerable photographs by her husband primarily because she has been his constant partner for almost fifty years. Green writes that in Friedlander's photographs "the self appears overtly or covertly as the ultimate metaphorical presence."<sup>22</sup> The image of Maria DePaoli Friedlander that emerges from the series is based solely upon the photographer's experience of her within the family as a wife and as the mother of their children. The role that she plays in the creation of the images seems to extend no further than her presence. When asked whether the images are about the couple's relationship, Friedlander responded,

I suppose so. I don't know. I pick up the camera and I take a picture. I'm not a big brooder. They're a bunch of pictures of Maria, that's the way I think of them...I don't know what they mean or if they mean anything different than what I thought.<sup>23</sup>

With the uninflected quality of the casual snapshot, the images of Maria resist artistic transformation in the manner of Eleanor Callahan, and yet they are clearly art in the context of *New Documents* and the autobiographical tendencies of the 1960s and '70s. It is perhaps quite telling that one of the photographs in *Self Portrait* is of Maria superimposed with the shadow of her husband. [Figure 17]

It is characteristic of Gowin's work that the question regarding Edith's role as muse in the creation of that series has no definitive answer. Certainly, she has been his inspiration and his statement on the label copy of the 2001 Pace/MacGill exhibition that she is "the central poem within my work," and that "[these] pictures are how I feel about the world," suggests that she continues to be. When viewed as an active participant in the

---

<sup>22</sup>Green, *American Photography*, 108.

<sup>23</sup>Friedlander, *Maria*, 6.

creation of the images, the role of muse seems less like that of a passive model and more that of collaborator. Edith has been described as being to some extent involved in every facet of her husband's career as a photographer from his years at RPI to the present. Many of the photographs of her involve activities, places, and relationships that reflect her identity as an individual. She urinates on the floor of the shed because she feels the need to, she brazenly bares her breasts in the presence of her grandmother, she appears to be looking at the camera (and thus at the viewer), but she is really looking at her husband. The expression on Edith's face in many of these images reflects an authentic projection of a very specific personality. The period in which the majority of the photographs were made was one of incipient feminism but, according to Gowin, his wife's independent spirit was a natural outgrowth of a matriarchal family whose members all had to work hard and contribute to the upkeep of its many extended members. The communal living experienced by the Gowins during those summers in Danville was not a counter-culture conceit but a tactic of survival. Given that background, it is no wonder that in Gowin's experience, his wife has never met anyone, be it royalty or heads of state, that is not her equal.

Gowin contends that:

A pictorial structure is a non-linguistic event. And it's not surprising that when we try to point at it, it doesn't spring into words. Because it isn't words. It isn't a set of want-to-be words. It's a powerful thing.<sup>24</sup>

In a recent interview he referred to himself as a "lyric visual poet," whose work is "a call

---

<sup>24</sup>Naef, 117.

for a reflection, meditation, and consideration to be on a more intimate basis with the world.”<sup>25</sup> He includes his entire oeuvre in this description, and thus the *Edith* series can be understood as a part of Gowin’s larger quest for self-awareness and spiritual revelation. But, as this study has shown, the images are more than that, because even though we see Edith through Gowin’s eyes and lens over a period of forty years in the guise of family member, nature goddess, mother, and wife, the visage that emerges from the photograph is unequivocally Edith’s. Because the imprint of her presence and personality is so strong, questions are raised about collaboration and identity, and the intrasubjectivity of photographic practice and photographic looking. In 1976 Gowin wrote that he wanted, through his marriage to Edith Morris, to “pay attention to the body and personality that had agreed out of love to reveal itself.”<sup>26</sup> The question arises as to what exactly is being revealed and to whom. The *Edith* series has been described as a family narrative comprised of fragmentary and partial disclosures. This study contends that in the process of attempting to reveal Edith through photographs and through time, Gowin simultaneously reveals parts of himself; in imaging Edith, Gowin tacitly images himself. Although the question regarding identity and representation is relevant to all areas of photographic portraiture, this dissertation has examined and described its particular resonance when the individual being represented is the photographer’s wife.

---

<sup>25</sup>Reynolds, 156.

<sup>26</sup> Gowin, *Photographs*, 100.

## **Bibliography**

### Selected Bibliography

- Ackley, Clifford S. *Private Realities: Recent American Photography*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1974.
- Alpers, Svetlana. *The Making of Rubens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Armstrong, Carol. "The Reflexive and the Possessive View: Thoughts on Kertesz, Brandt, and the Photographic Nude." *Representations* 25 (Winter 1989): 57-70.
- Artner, Alan G. "Positive Pictures: Emmet Gowin's Photos Celebrate the Everyday." *Chicago Tribune* (November 29, 1992): 10.
- Awards in Visual Arts 2*. Winston-Salem: Southeastern Centre for Contemporary Art, 1983.
- Baker, Clark Grahame. "Photography as Document: A Study of Family Photography and its Viability as a Truth Telling Medium." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alabama, 1995.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist, ed., trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- "The Baptist Faith and Message." Adopted 14 June 2000. Available from <http://www.utm.edu/martinarea/fbc/bfm.html>. Internet: accessed May 23, 2003.
- Baron, Robert A. and Donn Byrne, eds. *Social Psychology*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2003.
- Barrow, Thomas F., Shelly Armitage, and William E. Tydeman, eds. *Reading Into Photography: Selected Essays, 1959 – 1980*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

- Bassin, Donna and Margaret Honey and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, eds. *Representation of Motherhood*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1936, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968, 217-253.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Bernard, Miriam, Judith Phillips, Linda Machin, and Val Harding Davis, eds. *Women Aging: Changing Identities, Challenging Myths*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Bernardes, Jon. *Family Studies: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Works*, ed. Alicia Ostriker. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Brennan, Marcia. *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.
- Brilliant, Richard. *Portraiture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Broude, Norma and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.
- Brown, Mikell. "The Divine Imagination: Correlations Between the Kabbalah and the Works of William Blake." M.A. thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1991.
- Bry, Doris. *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographer*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1965.
- Bunnell, Peter C. *Degrees of Guidance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Emmet Gowin, Photographs, 1966-1983*. Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *A Photographic Vision: Pictorial Photography, 1889-1923*. Salt Lake: Peregrine Smith, 1980.

- Callahan, Harry. *Eleanor*. Carmel, CA: The Friends of Photography and New York: Callaway Editions, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Harry Callahan on Emmet Gowin." *Aperture* 151 (Spring 1998):24-33.
- Callahan in New England*. Providence: Brown University Press, 1994.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth, with Bill Moyers*. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
- Caponigro, John Paul. "Dialogs – Emmet Gowin." Originally published in *Camera Arts* (December 1998 – January 1999). Available from [www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/dialogs/dialogs\\_a-m/emmet\\_gowin.html](http://www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/dialogs/dialogs_a-m/emmet_gowin.html). Internet: accessed July 19, 2004.
- Chahroudi, Martha. *Emmet Gowin: Photographs*. Boston, Toronto, London: Bullfinch Press, 1990.
- Chave, Anna. "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze." *Art in America* 78 (January 1990): 115-125.
- Clark, Kenneth. *The Nude: a Study in Ideal Form*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1959.
- Clarke, Graham. *The Portrait in Photography*. London: Reaktion Books, 1992.
- Clifford, Timothy, Hugh Honour, John Kenworthy-Browne, et al. *The Three Graces: Antonio Canova*. Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1995.
- Coleman, A.D. "Breaking the Barriers." *Art News* (May, 1999):150.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "His Spirit is Gravely Innocent." *New York Times* (January 23, 1972).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Presence Through Absence." *The Village Voice* (January 13, 1972): 25-26.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Sally Mann: Mother Land, A Review." *New York Observer* 11, no. 4 (October, 20, 1997).
- Cornell, Daniell. "Camera Work and the Fluid Discourse of Pictorialism." *History of Photography* 23/3 (Autumn 1999): 294-300.
- Coontz, Stephanie. "Marriage: Then and Now." *National Forum: The Phi Kappa Phi Journal* 80 (Summer 2000): 10-15.

- Croce, Arlene. "Is the Muse Dead?" *The New Yorker* (February 26 – March 4, 1996): 164-69.
- Damon, S. Foster. *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*. Boulder: Shambhala, 1979.
- Daniluk, Judith C. *Women's Sexuality Across the Life Span: Challenging Myths, Creating Meanings*. New York: Guilford Press, 1998.
- Degler, Carl N. *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Desmaris, Charles, ed. *The Portrait Extended*. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980.
- du Gay, Paul and Stuart Hall, eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, 1996.
- Ehrlich, Richard. "Emmet Gowin." *Creative Camera* 313 (December/January 1992): 36.
- Eisler, Benita. *O'Keeffe and Stieglitz: An American Romance*. New York and London: Doubleday, 1991.
- Elsen Albert and J. Kirk T. Varnedoe. *The Drawings of Rodin*. New York, Washington,; Praeger Publishing, 1971.
- "Edith and Emmet Gowin." *Camera Mainichi* 10 (October 1972):49-64.
- "Emmet Gowin." *Album* 5 (1970):40-48.
- "Emmet Gowin." *Art News* 81 (Summer 1982):198.
- "Emmet Gowin." *Arts in Virginia* 13 (Fall 1972):18-31.
- Enyeart, James ed. *Decade by Decade: Twentieth Century American Photography from the Collection of the Center for Creative Photography*. Boston: Bulfinch, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Twentieth-Century American Photography*. Boston: Bulfinch, 1989.



- Erdman, David. *The Illuminated Blake*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1974.
- Evans, Patricia. "Southern Literature: Women Writers." Available from <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/southwomen.htm>. Internet: accessed 10 August 2004.
- Ewing, William A. *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form*. Chronicle Books, 1994.
- Fadiman, Clifton, ed. *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1985.
- Fictions of the Self: The Portrait in Contemporary Photography: A Traveling Exhibition*. Curated by Michael E. Coblin and Trevor Richardson. Greensboro, NC: Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Amherst, MA: Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 1993.
- Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Kristeva: On the Abject." From *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Purdue University. Available from <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html>. Internet: accessed 12 February 2005.
- Foerstner, Abigail. "Gowin's Vision Glides from Back Yard to Whole Planet." *Chicago Tribune* (November 20, 1992): 79, 82.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.
- Frank, Robert. *The Americans*. Introduction by Jack Kerouac. New York: Grove Press, 1959. Revised eds., Millerton: Aperture, 1969, 1978.
- Friedlander, Lee. *Family*. New York: Fraenkel Gallery, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Maria: Photographs*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nudes*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Portraits*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Self Portrait*. New York: Fraenkel Gallery, 1998.
- Frisbee, Philip. "Visual Verse." *Style* (March 3, 1992).

- Galassi, Peter. *American Photography: 1890-1965*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Photography's Great Divide." *Art News* 98 no. 2 (February 1999): 86-89.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Walker Evans & Company*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000.
- Gall, Sally. "Emmet Gowin." *Bomb* (Winter 1997): 20-25.
- Garber, Frederick. *Repositionings: Readings of Contemporary Poetry, Photography, and Performance Art*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1995.
- George, Alice Rose, Abigail Heyman, and Ethan Hoffman, eds. *Flesh and Blood: Photographers' Images of Their Own Families*. New York: Picture Project, 1992.
- Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait by Alfred Stieglitz*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, eds. *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, Agency*. New York, London: Routledge Press, 1991.
- Glueck, Grace. "Art in Review: Emmet Gowin." *New York Times* (January 26, 2001): 37.
- Gombrich, E. H. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1961.
- Gowin, Emmet. *Concerning "America and Alfred Stieglitz" and Myself*. Richmond: By the Author, 1965. Limited edition of 100.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Elijah and Donna Jo, Danville, Virginia, 1968." *Afterimage* 18 (November 1990): 12.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Emmet Gowin: Photographs*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Petra, in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*. New York: Pace MacGill Gallery, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Pivot Agriculture, Washington." *American Photographer* 23 (August 1989): 45.
- Green, Jonathan. *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present*. New York: Abrams, 1984.

- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology*. Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1973.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *The Snapshot*. Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, Inc., 1974.
- Greenough, Sarah. *Harry Callahan*. Washington, D.C.: The National Gallery, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Juan Hamilton, eds. *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings*. New York: Callaway Editions, 1982.
- Grundberg, Andy and Kathleen McCarthy Gauss. *Photography and Art: Interactions Since 1946*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1987.
- Glueck, Grace. "Close to Life: Photographs of Edith." *New York Times* (January 26, 2001): 27.
- Hall, Stuart, ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997.
- Halle, David. "The Family Photograph." *Art Journal* 46 (Fall 1987): 217-225.
- "Harry Callahan: A Need to See and Express." Video. Mt. Kisco, New York: Silver Productions, 1982.
- Harvey, Stewart. "Speaking of Pictures: [Notions on the Creative Process] Emmet Gowin: The Camera's I." *Lens Work Quarterly* 5 (Spring 1994): 22-26.
- Held, Julius S. *Peter Paul Rubens*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1953.
- Hinson, Tom E. "Contemporary American Photographs: An Exhibition." *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 79 (November 1992): 306-351.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Familial Gaze*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Post-Memory*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Hirsch, Robert. *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography*. Boston and New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
- Hobhouse, Janet. *The Bride Stripped Bare: The Artist and the Female Nude in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1988.

- Hoffman, Katherine. *Concepts of Identity: Historical and Contemporary Images and Portraits of Self and Family*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Celebration of Music and Dance*. New York: George Brazillier, 1997.
- Hoy, David Couzens, ed. *Foucault: a Critical Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986.
- Hudson, Liam. *Bodies of Knowledge: The Psychological Significance of the Nude in Art*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1982.
- Jauss, Robert Hans. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated by Timothy Bahti. Vol. 2: *Theory and History of Literature*. Ed. Wlad Godich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- Johnson, Brooks. *The Family as Subject: Photographs by Emmet Gowin and David Levinson*. Norfolk: The Chrysler Museum, 1985.
- Kachele, Kristina E. "Two Women and Their Wives: The Photographs of Harry Callahan and Emmet Gowin." MFA dissertation. University of New Mexico, 1996.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. "The Jazz Wife: Muse and Messenger." *The New York Times* (July 21, 2002).
- Kelly, Jain, ed. *Darkroom 2*. New York: Lustrum Press, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Nude Theory*. New York: Lustrum Press, 1979.
- Knight, Christopher. "In Living Black and White: Mid-Career Retrospective of Gowin Photos at LACMA." *Los Angeles Times/Washington Edition* (July 25, 1992): B8, B11.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- Lesser, Wendy. *His Other Half: Men Looking at Women Through Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Lifson, Ben. "Americans Abroad." *The Village Voice* (April 4, 1979).
- Lowenthal, Anne W., David Rosand, and John Walsh, Jr., eds. *Rubens and His Circle: Studies by Julius S. Held*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

- Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Rubens*. London: Spring Books, 1967.
- Lynes, Barbara Buhler. *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz, and the Critics, 1916 – 1929*. Ann Arbor, London: UMI Research Press, 1989.
- Lyons, Nathan. *Photographers on Photography*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966.
- Magum, Ruth Saunders, ed. and trans. *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991.
- Mann, Sally. *Immediate Family*. New York: Aperture, 1992.
- Matthews, Sandra and Laura Wexler. *Pregnant Pictures*. New York, London: Routledge Press, 2000.
- Mee, Jr., Charles. *Rembrandt's Portrait: A Biography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.
- Merritt, Robert. "Photographer Proves You Can Go Home Again." *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (February 16, 1992).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "There's Two Sides to Gowin's Work." *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (February 23, 1992).
- Mitchell, W. J. T. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Mora, Gilles. *Photo Speak: A Guide to the Ideas, Movements, and Techniques of Photography, 1839 to the Present*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1998.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Fetishism and Curiosity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, 1 (1975). Reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism*. 3rd ed., Marshall Cohen and Gerald Mast, eds. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Naef, Weston, ed. *In Focus: Alfred Stieglitz*. Malibu, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995.
- Nelson, Robert S. and Richard Schiff, eds. *Critical Terms for Art History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

- Neumaier, Diane. "Alfred, Harry, Emmet, Georgia, Eleanor, Edith, and Me." *Exposure* 22 (Summer 1984): 5-8.
- Newhall, Beaumont. *The History of Photography*. Revised ed. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Photography: Essays and Images*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980.
- Newman, Robert D. *Transgressions of Reading: Narrative Engagement as Exile and Return*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.
- Nixon, Nicholas. *The Brown Sisters*. Ed. by Peter Galassi. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999.
- Nochlin, Linda. *Representing Women*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999.
- Norman, Dorothy and Alfred Stieglitz. *Beyond a Portrait: Photographs*. Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1984.
- Oliver, Kelly. "Kristeva and Feminism." *Center for Digital Discourse and Culture*. Blacksburg: Virginia Tech University, 1999. Available from <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/Kristeva.html>. Internet: accessed 4 February 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *The Portable Kristeva*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Ollman, Arthur. *The Model Wife*. Boston, New York, London: Bulfinch Press, 1999.
- Peters, Sarah Whitaker. "Georgia O'Keeffe and Photography: Her Formative Years, 1915-1930." Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1987.
- Peterson, Brian. "Emmet Gowin and the Poetics of Intimacy." *Photo Review* 17 (Spring 1994): 2-9.
- "The Photographer's Eye." Video. Washington, D.C.: PBS Video.
- "Photographs: Emmet Gowin." *Aperture* 16:2 (1971): 38-53.
- Pomeroy, Sarah B., ed. *Plutarch's "Advice to the Bride and Groom" and "A Consolation to His Wife,"* trans. Donald Russell. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

- Proctor, Roy. "People/Places: Art and Insight in the Photographs of Sally Mann." *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (April 16, 2000).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Show Surveys Gowin's Career." *Richmond News-Leader* (February 22, 1992).
- Prose, Francine. *The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women & the Artists They Inspired*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002.
- Pultz, John. "Harry Callahan and American Photography, 1938-1990." Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Harry Callahan: The Creation and Representation of an Integrated Life." *History of Photography* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 222-227.
- Reynolds, Jock, ed. *Emmet Gowin: Changing the Earth*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Rice, Shelley. "It's All Relatives." *The Village Voice* (December 6, 1976): 93.
- Risman, Barbara J. *Gender Vertigo: American Families in Transition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Rosenblum, Naomi. *A World History of Photography*. 3rd ed. New York: Abbeville Press, 1997.
- Rouse, W. H. D., trans. and ed. *Great Dialogues of Plato*. New York: Mentor Books, 1956.
- Sandeen, Eric J. *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995.
- Shlovsky, Victor. *Mayakovsky and His Circle*, trans. Lily Feiler. New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1972.
- Shaw, Louise E., ed. *Harry Callahan and His Students: A Study in Influence*. Atlanta: Georgia State University, 1983.
- Sischy, Ingrid. "Self Portraits in Photography." In Thomas F. Barrow ed., *Reading Into Photography: Selected Essays, 1959 – 1980*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982.
- Skinner, B. F. *Walden Two*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1948, 1976.

- Sommer, Frederick. *The Constellations that Surround Us: The Conjunction of General Aesthetics and Poetic Logic in an Artist's Life*, ed. Michael Torosian. Toronto: Lumiere Press, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Mistress of This World Has No Name*. Denver, CO: Denver Art Museum, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Venus, Jupiter and Mars: The Photographs of Frederick Sommer*. Wilmington, DE: Delaware Art Museum, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Words*. Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1984.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Strause and Giroux, 1977.
- Squiers, Carol, ed. *The Critical Image*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1990.
- Stebbins, Theodore E., Jr. *Weston's Westons: Portraits and Nudes*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989.
- Steichen, Edward. *The Family of Man*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955.
- Steere, Douglas V., ed. *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*. New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1984.
- Steinberg, Leo. *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Strand, Mark. "Emmet Gowin Photographs: 1966-1983." *Vogue* 174 (March 1984):131.
- Szarkowski, John. *Callahan*. New York: Aperture in association with the Museum of Modern Art, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Photographer's Eye*. New York: Museum of Modern Art; Doubleday and Company, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Photography Until Now*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989.
- Thøfner, Margit. "Helena Fourment: *Het Pelsken*," *Art History* 27, No. 1 (February 2004): 1-28.



- Thorson, Victoria. "Symbolism and Conservatism in Rodin's Late Drawings." In Albert Elsen and J. Kirk T. Varnedoe, eds. *The Drawings of Rodin*. New York and Washington: Praeger Publishing, 1971.
- Trachtenberg, Alan, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980.
- Watkins, Nicholas. *Bonnard*. London: Phaidon Press, 1994.
- Wedgwood, C. V. *The World of Rubens 1577 – 1640*. New York: Time Life Books, 1967.
- West, Shearer. *Portraiture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Weston, Edward. "Seeing Photographically." In Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980.
- White, Christopher. *Peter Paul Rubens: Man and Artist*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Rembrandt*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Rembrandt and His World*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1964.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Rubens and His World*. New York: Viking Press, 1968.
- Woodall, Joanna. *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Woodward, Kathleen, ed. *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1999.
- Woolfolk, Anne. "Lessons in Perception." *Princeton Alumni Weekly* 11 January 1984, 12-15.
- Worthington, Kim L. *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Wyatt-Brown, Anne M. and Janie Rossen. *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1993.
- Zelevansky, L. "Emmet Gowin." *Art News* (1982).

## Figures

## Figures



Fig. 1 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait with Saskia*, c. 1635



Fig. 2 Peter Paul Rubens, *Self Portrait with Isabella Brandt*, c. 1609



Fig. 3 Rubens, *Het Pelsken*, 1635 – 40

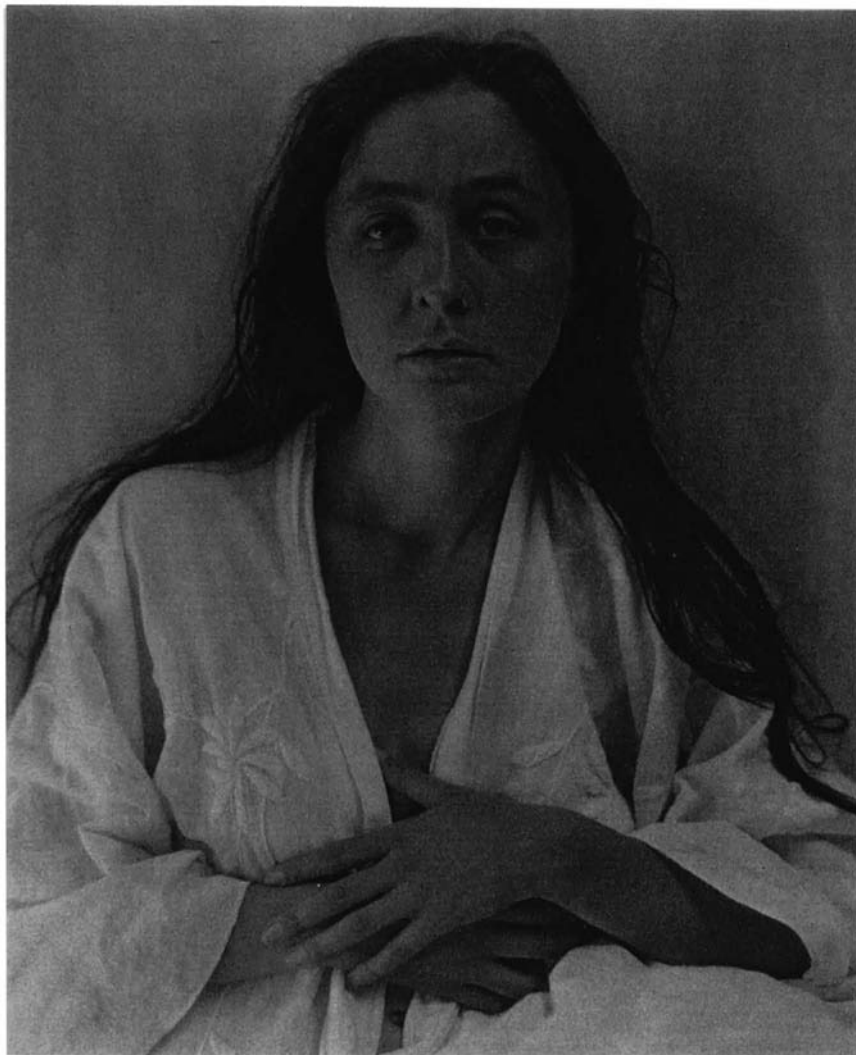


Fig. 4 Alfred Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1918



Fig. 5 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1918



Fig. 6 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1919





Fig. 7 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1917



Fig. 8 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1918



Fig. 9 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Music - Pink and Blue No. 2*, 1919



Fig. 10 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1930



Fig. 11 Stieglitz, *A Portrait*, 1933

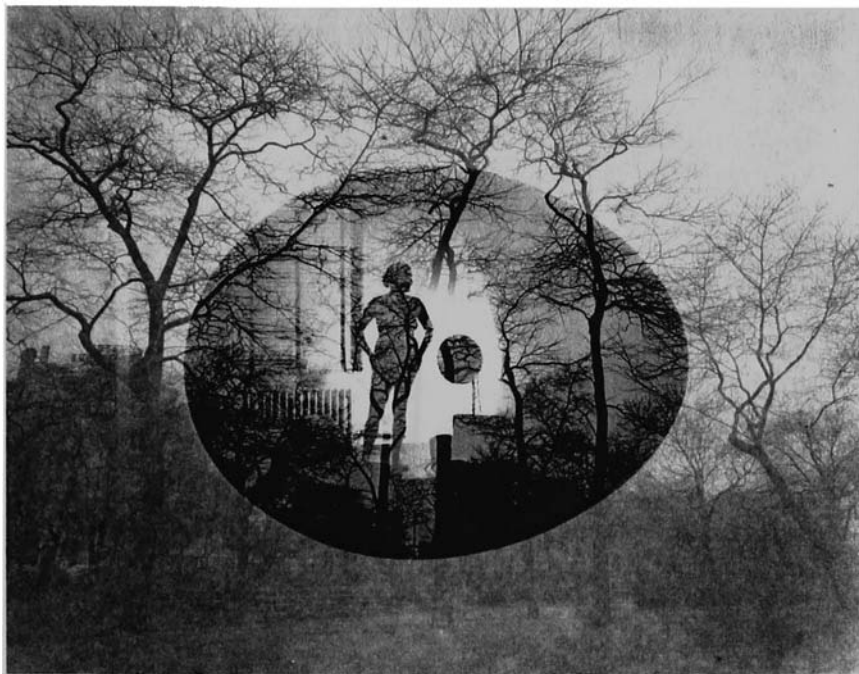


Fig. 12 Harry Callahan, *Chicago*, 1953



Fig. 13 Callahan, *Chicago*, 1948

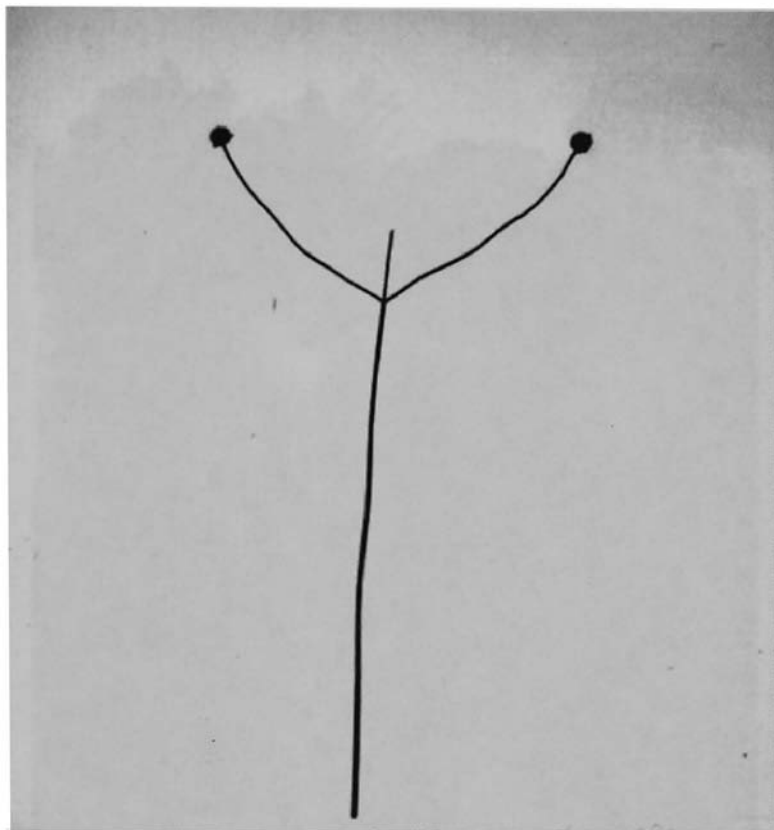


Fig. 14 Callahan, *Weed against Sky*, Detroit, 1948





Fig. 15 Callahan, *Aix-en-Provence*, 1958



Fig. 16 Callahan, *Chicago*, 1953



Fig. 17 Lee Friedlander, *Minneapolis, Minnesota*, 1966



Fig. 18 Friedlander, *Las Vegas*, 1970



Fig. 19 Friedlander, *Mexico City*, 1974



Fig. 20 Friedlander, *Nude, Phoenix, Arizona*, 1978



Fig. 21 Emmet Gowin, *Nancy, Danville, Virginia, 1965*



Fig. 22 Gowin, *Family*, Danville, Virginia, 1970





Fig. 23 Gowin, *Edith, Ruth, and Mae, Danville, Virginia, 1967*



Fig. 24 Nicholas Nixon, *The Brown Sisters*, 1976



Fig. 25 Antonio Canova, *The Three Graces*, c. 1815

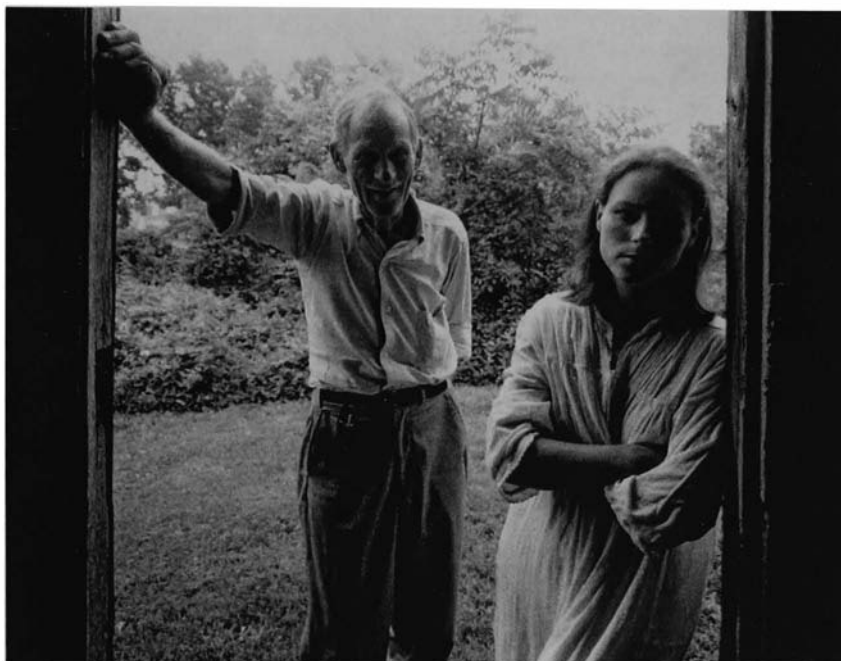


Fig. 26 Gowin, *Raymond Booher and Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1969*

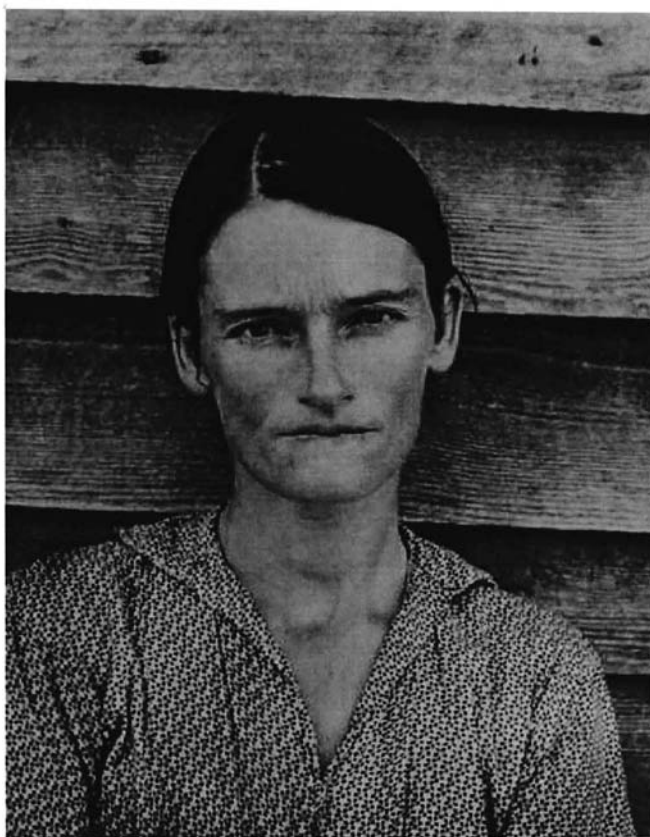


Fig. 27 Walker Evans, *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife*, 1936



Fig. 28 Gowin, *Edith and berry necklace*, Danville, Virginia, 1971



Fig. 29 Gowin, *Edith*, Danville, Virginia, 1971



Fig. 30 Gowin, *Edith*, Danville, Virginia, 1970





Fig. 31 Gowin, *Edith*, 1986

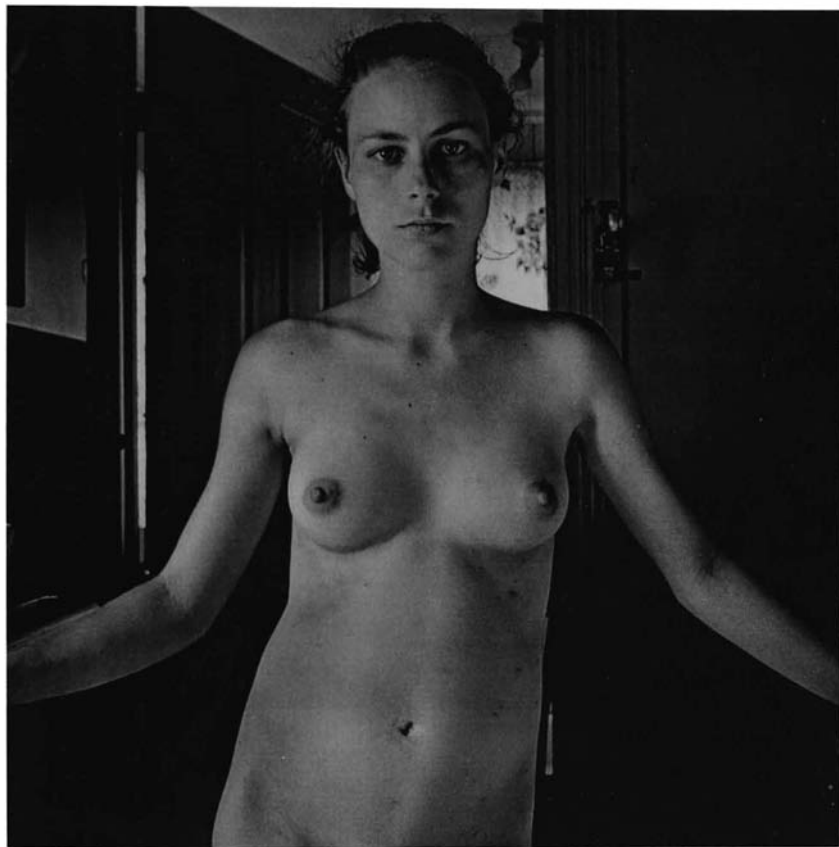


Fig. 32 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1967*



Fig. 33 Gowin, *Edith and Elijah*, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974



Fig. 34 Gowin, *Edith, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974*

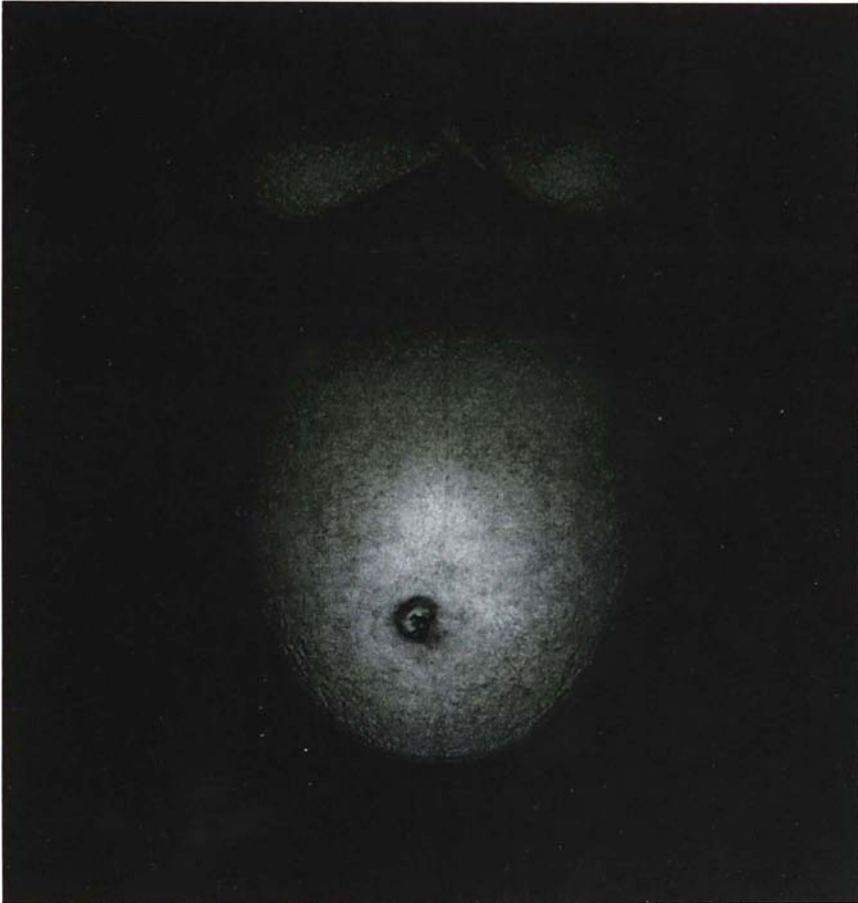


Fig. 35 Callahan, *Chicago*, 1950



Fig. 36 Gowin, *Edith*, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974



Fig. 37 Friedlander, *Portland, Maine*, 1962



Fig. 38 Callahan, *Chicago*, 1950





Fig. 39 Friedlander, *New City, New York*, 1972



Fig. 40 Gowin, *Edith and Elijah*, Danville, Virginia, 1968



Fig. 41 Gowin, *Edith and Elijah*, Danville, Virginia, 1968

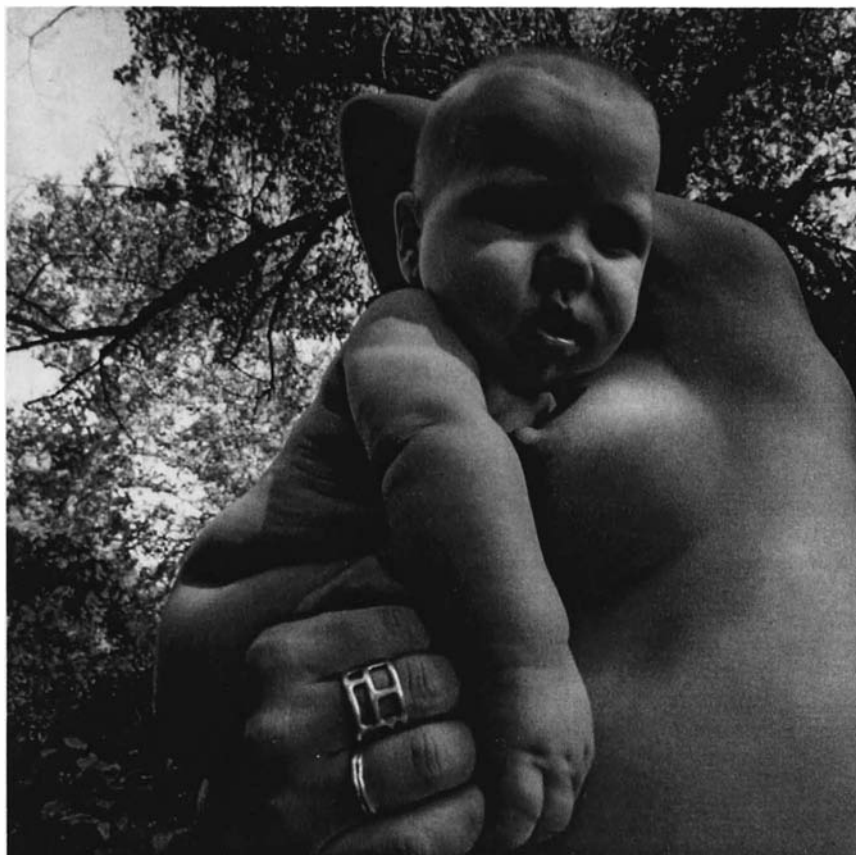


Fig. 42 Gowin, *Edith and Isaac*, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974



Fig. 43 Gowin, *Edith and Isaac*, Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1974



Fig. 44 Gowin, *Edith*, Danville, Virginia, 1971



Fig. 45 Gowin, *Edith*, Danville, Virginia, 1978



Fig. 46 Gowin, *Edith*, Danville, Virginia, 1971





Fig. 47 Gowin, *Edith and Rennie Booher, Danville, Virginia, 1970*



Fig. 48 Gowin, *Edith and Rennie Booher, Danville, Virginia, 1970*



Fig. 49 Gowin, *Edith and Rennie Booher, Danville, Virginia, 1971*



Fig. 50 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1973*



Fig. 51 Gowin, *Edith, Danville, Virginia, 1983*

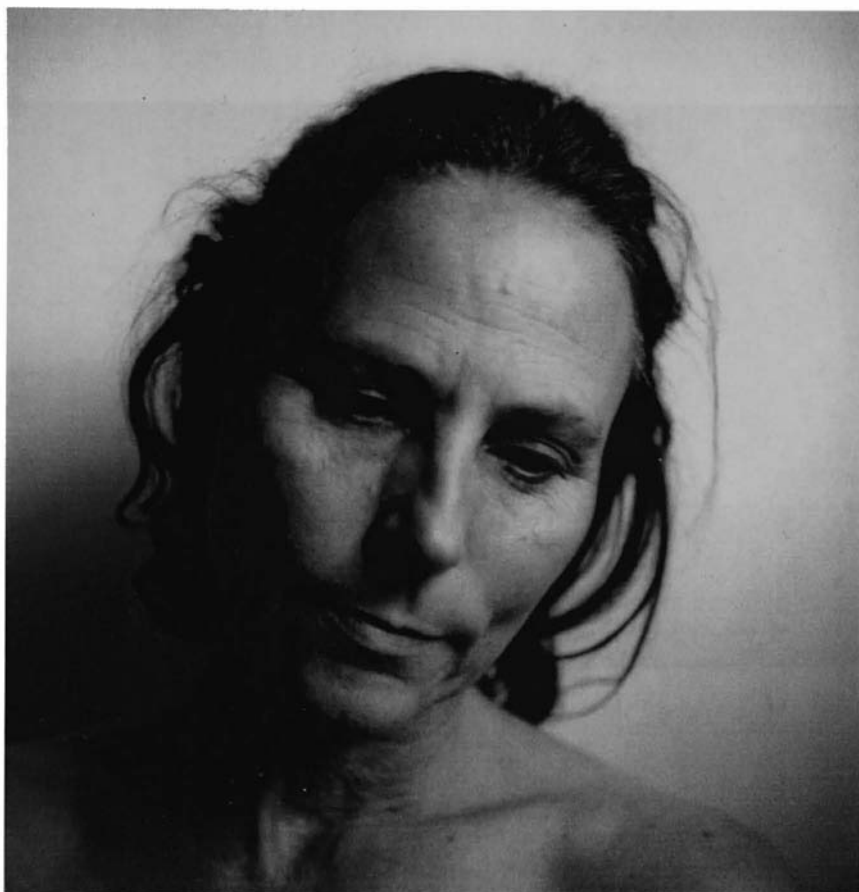


Fig. 52 Gowin, *Edith*, 1996



Fig. 53 Friedlander, *New City, New York*, 1971

**Vita**