

DEBRA SUGERMAN

Simple Wonders



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

AUGUST 26 - OCTOBER 2, 1999

AUSTIN, TEXAS

SIMPLE WONDERS

"The eye itself, pure vision, becomes tired of looking at solids. It needs to dream of deforming. If sight really accepts the freedom of dreams, everything melts in a living intuition."

—Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

Historically, the camera has been used largely as an intercessionary device, a disembodied "eye" that enables the photographer to arrest a moment in time. We assume the photographer's view point; the tool itself, the camera, falls away. To view the work of Debra Sugerman, however, is to be acutely aware of the tool. To view Sugerman's work closely is to recognize that the character of the tool renders the artist's vision intelligible.

Sugerman has been using a Diana camera almost exclusively in her personal work since the early 1980's. While she was employed as an assistant to a fashion photographer, she picked up the Diana as an alternative to the heavy and exacting equipment she was required to work with every day. Originally introduced in the 1950's as an inexpensive toy, the wholly plastic Diana is famous for the vignetting, light leaks and lens deformations unique to each camera; results are therefore never fully predictable. When viewing a photograph taken with a conventional camera, for example, we tend to look first at what is most sharply defined. With the Diana, the focal point varies as a function of the uneven tautness of the film against the pressure plate (which may shift every time the film is advanced). Thus, a desired composition cannot always be assured; often something else altogether assumes importance as the eye is drawn toward the clearest imagery. As salience



"Dyer-Moor Plantation.", 1998. Photograph, 4' x 4'.

oscillates between "focal point" and "focused point", the intellect simultaneously struggles for resolution, searching for a place to land. Contradictory interpretations may arise, possibly subverting the artist's original intent but yielding a richer, if somewhat less fixed, reading. For the artist willing to relinquish full control, embracing and even manipulating the potential inherent in imprecision and serendipity, the Diana can serve as a liberating device.

Sugerman's choice of subject matter, the abstraction of form that results when an object is relieved of its context, and the absence of contemporary details all contribute to a temporal mutability, a

certain timelessness to the images that is underscored by the Diana's inherently soft focus. With the light source almost consistently at Sugerman's back, the sky frequently becomes a reflective plane muted by the Diana's optics. This is old light, dull with time, evoking the atmosphere of images taken during the gestational stages of photography; it tempts us to situate Sugerman's work almost consistently in the past tense. (Interestingly, Sugerman has recently begun to drop the year from her titles insisting the date is, in fact, irrelevant.) "Hannah in the Garden," for example, cannot be dated by any recognizable feature. Indeed, it

seems to crystallize an arrested patrimonial vision of childhood more appropriate to the mid- rather than the late-20th century although it is one of her more recent pieces. In her photograph of the ageless chapel of "Christ, Dubina" bands of light strike the crucified figure within, illuminating it alone. This conjunction of the metaphorical evidence of God's presence (light) with the physical embodiment (the Christ) elegantly conveys the essence of Gothic thought. Here in this simple chapel, heaven and earth are joined through the artist's mediation.

*"I could not love except where Death
Was mingling his with Beauty's breath"*
—Edgar Allan Poe

The danger of being perceived as simplistic exists in any presentation as spare as Suger's. Her work, however, transcends a one dimensional reading to instead engage the poetic, the poetry of what is evoked or remains as an unspoken query. We are compelled to fill the narrative gaps, and in this way, Suger's photographs become speculative, private dialogues between viewer, photograph and photographer that are as plastic as the components of the Diana itself. Almost an icon of small town America with its white clapboard facade, "Cameron's Schoolhouse", for example, suggests safety and continuity. Yet two windows have been left open and two remain closed. The interior beyond the open sash is dark, unknowable. It emerges as an unhomey house, simultaneously inviting and menacing, more Edgar Allan Poe than Norman Rockwell.

This dark and haunting ambiguity characterizes much of Suger's most provocative work. "Noah Running Around the Lighthouse," an early

image (not in show), at first glance appears to capture the joyful exuberance of childhood, yet what lies behind the lighthouse, which is tenuously sited, is cropped and unknown. The boy is running toward this uncertainty. Likewise the figure perched on the rooftop in "Dyer-More Plantation" could be celebrating the view or considering a suicidal leap: his face is upturned, his expression is hidden, and his posture provides no clues. In "Boy", perhaps Suger's most powerful image (it is certainly her most disturbing), a child stands with two cap pistols pointed at his head. Innocence and foreboding again collide, here in a visually eloquent commentary on American society that recalls Diane Arbus' "Child with a Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, NYC." Even the seemingly positive image of the millennial icon "Angel" turns his back on the viewer.

The ethereal beauty of Suger's images allude to a dream world that often shares this unnerving simultaneity. Her work renders this world impressionistically legible, subjectively intelligible. Exploring the waking and dreaming worlds and reconciling the conscious mind with its subconscious sibling has been a generative force for Suger just as it has for artists throughout the ages. Yet here it is a collaboratively creative relationship: Suger has spoken of the deliberate reconstruction of singular visions that have appeared in her dreams. Similarly, repeatedly revisiting certain thematic motifs suggests the subconscious' desire to draw the obscured archetype into the light. Clearly, "Griffin," with its mythological title, seeks an interpretation beyond the arrested free fall of two jumpers, while fallen leaves begin to trigger associations

and symbolic connotations that again transcend the pictorial.

Although Suger would argue that direct personal experience has not been a motivating force in her work, her images do, nonetheless, give it voice. Following the deaths of a number of friends within the past few years, trees have recently emerged as a subject of investigation in Suger's photography. These are calm images, quiet, almost meditative. Thoreau has displaced Poe. The juxtaposition of the tree (a life-affirming motif), branch, or a group of trees, often with vast areas of sky or water, charges these photographs with a dual message of hope and solitude, together with an almost childlike sense of rediscovery underscored by the show's title, "Simple Wonders." It is a reductive palette composed only of primary elements: sky, water, flora. All incidental matter has been eliminated.

This selective editing is, in fact, everywhere apparent in her portfolio. Despite the unpredictability of the Diana and the often serendipitous nature of unstaged photography, Suger's subject matter is characterized by this "distillation" displaying the artist's concern for clarity and an inherent regard for a minimalist aesthetic. Without visual competition, nothing else demands our attention; personal speculation enters, filling the residual space. Through these images we are urged to look through the mind's eye of the artist; through hers, we are compelled to look into our own.

Judith Birdsong
M.Arch – Austin, Texas
August, 1999

DEBRA SUGERMAN

Resides in Austin, Texas



"Christ, Dubina," n.d. Photograph, 5' x 5'.

EDUCATION

- 1986 The University of Texas at Austin, B.A. in Photography.
- 1988 New York University, International Center for Photography, New York, NY.
One semester completed towards M.A. in photography.

GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 1994 San Antonio Museum of Art, Permanent Collection, San Antonio, TX.
Honorable Mention, The Photo Review.
- 1991 Honorable Mention, "Beyond Photography", Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, TX.
- 1986 Honorable Mention, "East Texas International Photographic Competition", Huntsville, TX.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 **Simple Wonders**, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX.
- 1998 **Debra Sugerman**, Wally Workman Gallery, Austin, TX.
Indicators, Brent Gallery, Houston, TX.
- 1994 **Stuff I've Seen**, Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX.
- 1990 **Ethereal Images** Projex Art Gallery, Austin, TX.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 **Juror's Choice: The 1998 Member Show**, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX. Juror: Lynn Herbert, Curator, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX.
- 1996 **The Dream Auction**, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX.
Reductive Visions, Helm Fine Art Center, Austin, TX.
- 1995 **New American Talent: The 11th Exhibition**, Austin Museum of Art, Laguna Gloria, Austin, TX. (touring)
Juror: Chris Bruce, Senior Curator, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington.
- 1994 **American Photography History in Pictures**, curated by Don Bacigalupi, Director, San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX.
Loop to Loop, Foster Freeman Gallery, San Antonio, TX.
- 1993 **Texas Biennial Exhibition**, Dallas, TX.
Juried Members Show, Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX.
- 1992 **The 20th Anniversary Invitational**, Texas Monthly Magazine,
The Bar-b-que Show Devil Dog Gallery, Houston, TX.

Distinctive Dreams/Street Seen, Acme Art Gallery, Austin, TX.

Texas Round-Up, Brent Gallery, Houston, TX.

African American Portfolio, Projex Art Gallery, Austin, TX.

1991 **Beyond Photography**, Laguna Gloria Museum, Austin, TX.

1989 **Dianas, Brownies and Pinholes**, Sarrat Gallery, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

1988 **Summer Group Show**, Wilkov-Goldfedder Gallery, New York, N.Y.

Through a Plastic Lens, Northlight Gallery, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona.

1987 **Collegiate Show '87**, Allen Street Gallery, Dallas, TX.

1986 **East Texas International Photographic Competition**, East Texas State University Gallery, Huntsville, TX.

PUBLICATIONS

Bohemia Beat Records, CD cover & inside imagery, Michael Fracasso, *World in a Drop of Water*. 1998, Austin, TX

Mercury Records, CD cover & inside imagery, Wamno, *Fat Headed Stranger*, 1998, Austin, TX.

Searobin Records, CD cover & inside imagery, Kim Miller, *Child of the Big Sky*, 1996

Conde Nast TRAVELER, photos published.

Ray Gun Magazine, Jon Spencer, *Blues Explosion*, feature story, photos published.

Turmoil to Turningpoint, Cover Photo, 1996, WW Norton Publishing, New York, N.Y.

This Old House Magazine, Fences, photos, 1996, New York, N.Y.

Wild Rides by Bia Lowe, Cover Photo, Harper Collins Publishers.

American Statesman, 1994, review by Sandra Goldman. Photo published.

Introduction to Government, Harper & Row, 1990-1991, AIDS photograph published.

Austin Chronicle, Feb. 1992, photograph published, Austin, TX.

American Statesman, Feb. 1990, photograph published, Austin, TX.

Shots Magazine, Danville, KY, Issue 19, Jan./Feb. 1990, photographs published.

Art Papers, Volume 13, Number 6, Nov./Dec. 1989, Susan W. Knowles, review.

Nashville Business Journal, June 12-16, 1989, Angela Wibking, review.

COLLECTIONS

- 1994 San Antonio Museum of Art, Permanent Collection, San Antonio, TX.



This Panel: *"Hannah"*, 1998. Photograph, 3' x 3' .
Cover Panel: *"Fork Trees"*, 1999. Photograph, 3' x 3'.
Back Panel: *"School House"*, 1999. Photograph, 5' x 5'.



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

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Now celebrating its 21st anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1586 artists in 189 visual art exhibitions, 94 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 139 workshops, in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and National Public Radio and was the first organization in

Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK
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