

Challenging the Perception that Photographs Present an Objective Vision

Imagining the photographic print as a singular art object.



by Julia Curl
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Gerard (Gerrit) Petrus Fieret, "Untitled" (ca. 1960s), vintage gelatin silver print. © Fotomuseum Den Haag, Holland (Courtesy Deborah Bell Photographs, New York)

At the dawn of the 20th century, photography exploded in popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. With its meteoric rise came the widely held perception that photographic vision was objective vision. To many people who tried out this new technology, the camera's automatism left no room for subjectivity. *Appearances: 20th Century Portraits*, now on view by appointment at Deborah Bell Photographs, includes a number of works that take the opposite stance. The exhibition — a medley of portraits by 12 different photographers, spanning 1912 to 2011 — showcases human experimentation, and the smudges, cracks, tears, and warping that comes along with it. The strongest works in the show are those that preclude mechanical reproducibility, instead imagining the photographic print as a singular art object.

For instance, the Dutch artist and eccentric Gerard Petrus Fieret, who is represented by five works, rarely printed the same negative more than once. He was notoriously paranoid that his work would be plagiarized, reproduced against his will, and so he stamped every piece multiple times over with his copyright, signing his name in bold letters across the face of the print. (Fieret was also a lover of pigeons, which led to many of his prints being nibbled around the edges — the ultimate trademark.) The resulting photographs, primarily of women, are thus not only significant as aesthetic visions of a past moment in time, but also as records of the print's ongoing life. Fieret once stated, "What I aim at with my photography is anarchy ... Intense life, passion — a healthy passion for life — that is what they are about." The photographs on view convey this intensity with their deep shadows and dynamic compositions, while his female subjects seem remarkably at ease, shot from odd, candid angles.



E. J. Bellocq, "Storyville Portrait" (ca. 1912), printing-out paper print, printed later by Lee Friedlander. © Lee Friedlander (Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco)

The exhibition also features one of E. J. Bellocq's 1912 *Storyville Portraits* masterpieces, which possesses a similarly unique history. Bellocq, born in 1873, remains an enigmatic figure, obscured by conflicting historical accounts, which appear to have [falsely exaggerated his physical appearance](#), describing him as a "[hydrocephalic semi-dwarf](#)." After his death in 1949, 89 glass plate negatives of female prostitutes were found in his desk; these were later purchased and meticulously printed by Lee Friedlander in the 1960s. Although Bellocq was a well-known amateur photographer during his lifetime in New Orleans, these are his only surviving works, largely due to Friedlander's concerted efforts to preserve and promote them.

Many of the negatives were cracked or otherwise damaged when Friedlander got hold of them, and the piece on view at Deborah Bell Photographs is one such example. In it, a beautiful young woman lies nude on a wicker chaise lounge, her gaze directed toward us; a crack in the negative runs across her body like a scar, almost perfectly parallel to the curvature of her spine. She is neither Olympia nor the Venus of Urbino; her pose is slightly stiff, her gaze vulnerable but unafraid. Above her hip, the emulsion has been eaten away in dark patches, like clouds or vengeful spirits. Although Bellocq himself certainly never intended for the image to come out this way, these imperfections contribute to the significance of the piece, like a literal expression of Roland Barthes's concept of the [*punctum*](#).



August Sander, "Actress [Trude Alex]" (ca. 1930), gelatin silver print, printed 1979 by Gunther Sander. © Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung-Kultur-August Sander Archiv, Köln (Courtesy of Galerie Julian Sander, Köln; ARS, New York)

Appearances: 20th Century Portraits is not aesthetically uniform, however: alongside the Surrealist Maurice Tabard's disorienting multiple-exposure portrait of Roger Parry hang three works by August Sander, the photographic pioneer of Germany's New Objectivity movement. Sander is famous for his documentary typologies of the German people during the Weimar Republic, all taken head-on with sharp focus. Sander's subjects are never obscured, nor do his photographs stray from a highly literal depiction of reality. He photographed the spectrum of German society, including those at its fringes; for example, one of his rarer portraits on view, "Actress [Trude Alex]" (ca. 1930) depicts a female stage performer grinning suggestively at the camera. Her provocative stance sets her apart from Sander's other subjects, while the intensity of her gaze seems to puncture the usual distance between subject and observer. Her humanity, with all the idiosyncrasy that it entails, is undeniable.

While the exhibition occasionally strays from its main subject matter — for example, with two long exposures of movie theaters by Hiroshi Sugimoto — it is nonetheless a highly worthwhile visit, featuring a number of gems from the history of photography (too many, in fact, to explore in depth here). Visits by appointment only can seem intimidating, but with the price of museum entry in New York City soaring to nearly twice the city's minimum wage, commercial galleries are increasingly becoming the most accessible way to view these invaluable pieces of art history — at least before they disappear into private collections. Make an appointment today.

[Appearances: 20th Century Portraits](#) continues at *Deborah Bell Photographs* (16 E 71st St #1D/4th Floor, Upper East Side, Manhattan) until January 21.