



ARTIST

Judy (Judith) Black

TITLE

Dylan, Joanna, Erik (first warm spring day), March 17, 1990

DIMENSIONS

6 in H x 8 in W

MEDIUM

Gelatin Silver Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1997.024

CURRENT LOCATION

1114-15B

JUDY (JUDITH) BLACK

BORN

1945

BIRTHPLACE

Salina, KS

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1995

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 88

Contact Sheet 97

A Just Image: Selections from the Light Work Collection

ESSAYS

In contemporary American households, the photographing of family members is often a heavily mediated practice. In much family portraiture, photography interrupts daily dynamics: Masking real and complex interactions, the subjects are expected to assume poses that break the normal rules of proxemics and to affect facial expressions that romanticize the closeness of the family unit. Judith Black's photographs of herself and her family question such ritualized stagings. In velvety large-format prints, Black's subjects present themselves with a degree of candor unsettling to those who have been habituated to the mythic family image. After 15 years of being photographed, Black's family seems to regard the camera as an extension of the family. Taken together, Black's images form her diary. To Black, the photographs are the products of collaboration. Using a large-format camera on a tripod, and often employing a self-timer alerting her subjects to the moment of exposure, Black allows her subjects to exercise unusual control. Her children are not overtly stage-managed, a fact that undermines the inevitable comparisons that her critics make between Black and Sally Mann. Becoming excited by light or location, Black assembles her equipment and waits for her subjects. Those in the mood to be photographed present themselves. In this, her art reflects her approach to motherhood: 'There are at least two ways of raising kids: get them to do what you want them to do -- but then they perform as extensions of your needs -- or allow them to be themselves. I choose the latter.'¹ Black's three-part titles, providing names and dates while funneling the emotional content through ironic commentaries, function as diary entries. The brief glosses that Black has placed on Laura and Brian (It didn't work out, Mother's Day) May 9, 1993 and Johanna and Dylan (and Our Lady of Guadeloupe) Aug. 8, 1993 lovingly, and with the driest of humor, trace her children's claiming of identity: 'Their behaviors are appropriate for their ages. ...Maybe the reason the kids are so comfortable [displaying themselves] is that what I do with myself is more revealing. It is a harsher view. I do not take a 'Richard Avedon' approach -- I do not attempt to make people look very strange or very beautiful. I take people as they come.'² Black's toughest images are of herself. Self and Rob (On the morning of my 50th birthday), June 11, 1995, represents Black with her husband. In a gesture suggesting presentation and protection, Black places her hands on Rob's shoulders and abuts her head, slightly cropped and out of focus, against his. In Dad and Self (His first visit to Cambridge in ten years, near the anniversary of my mother's death) April 20, 1990, Black, hovering in the background, seems both present and absent. Such subtle nuances of subjecthood, in which Black seems to subordinate herself while physically anchoring her family, acknowledges her complex domestic roles -- lover, daughter, artist, mother -- without resorting to stereotypes. In an era when 'Family' carries moral freight as America's secular religion and binding civic culture, any interrogation of its myths will seem threatening. In this regard, Judith Black's photographs prompt both recognition and displacement: the former, because their stark beauty and ambiguous emotional content provide, in her words, 'Rorschachs' through which to measure our own intimacies; the latter, because our myths of Family (as staged in snapshots), and our experiences in families, are so strongly compartmentalized. With images of formal eloquence, Black asserts that the richness of domestic portraiture resides in the acknowledgment of emotional complexity and the chronicling of the everyday. Patricia G. Berman (c) 1996 1. Judith Black, in conversation, December 28, 1995. 2. Ibid. A Just Image As it plays out in the headlines, justice means equality, fairness, and the rule of law. Yet beyond the events broadcast on television and the news alerts flashed instantly to laptops and PDAs, there is a large realm of justice that eludes reporters. Throughout daily life - at home, in school, doing errands, tending children, making dinner, playing sports - perceptions of justice often float just below the radar. The Light Work Collection offered plentiful proof that photographers frequently make images of routine daily life and its relationship to a sense of justice. However, as members of the Fine Arts 395 "Art and Identity" class noticed, scholars seldom extend the concept of justice into aspects of living that are legal, but sometimes ethically questionable. Counselors, social workers, and therapists seem to take over where the justice system stops. Nevertheless, the line between the legal system's purview and personal life is not fixed. Class members were careful to insist that the law is often less subtle in its grasp of situations and unaware of complexities than are the images included in this show. Nowhere in the law is it written that by embracing a stereotype one can sometimes achieve influence skin to contesting the mold. Thoughts and feelings such as these coalesced as the subject of this exhibition. Work and family emerged as sites where what is fair is not always what is equal. , and what is equal is not always fair. However fair or unfair, the triumphs and annoyances one experiences at work mostly fall below the threshold of the law. It is conventional wisdom, not the IRS, which suggests that wealth carries no guarantee of happiness. Creating this nuanced exhibition about justice in everyday life led the class into hearty and un-nuanced discussions about the slights, snubs, and rebuffs of an ordinary day. The students chose the title A Just Image for this exhibition before they read about the expression in Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida. With the phrase, he and they recognize that art coaxes the world of appearances to create symbols signifying ideas for which there are no words. Just an image becomes A Just Image. Mary Warner Marien A Just Image: Selections from the Light Work Collection is the result of a collaborative effort by thirty-one Syracuse University students enrolled in Professor Mary Warner Marien's "Art and Identity" course. The exhibition examines the Fall 2007 Syracuse Symposium theme of justice. The students chose images from the Light Work Collection, considering the personal and societal meanings of justice. They have created an interactive exhibition, where, as the students write in the exhibition catalogue, "ironically... the viewer is still judging." A Just Image invites viewers to explore the photographs and rethink their definition of justice. As the students of the "Art and Identity" course discovered, though justice is a universal concept, it does not necessarily carry the same meaning for everyone. This can be seen in the different perceptions of stereotypes, families, occupations, and leisure activities, which are some of the topics examined by the class. According to the students, " The Pictures we have chosen require more than just superficial judgment; they require the viewer to acknowledge their own stereotyped projections." Roslyn Esperon