



image info

[Berenice Abbott](#)

A Lived Lyrical Moment

Victoria L. Davis

These faces had been honed by the life they had lived and the images they had created; there was nothing superfluous, nothing false in these faces.

WHY DOES ONE WORK OF ART COMMAND OUR ATTENTION, MAKE US FEEL MORE ALIVE, even change us, and another work leaves us untouched? Many critics, philosophers, and artists have struggled with that question, but it was not a question I began to ask myself until my college years. I had not grown up in a family that attended concerts, art museums, theater. Even as a bookworm, I was more insatiable than discerning until high school. Though I have fond memories of family vacations to the Seattle World's Fair, Yosemite National Park, and the Grand Canyon, my father was more apt to stop at the Trees of Mystery tourist attraction than a museum—and to be fair, he was in part responding to his children's clamoring at the sight of the huge Paul Bunyan sculpture and his blue ox, Babe, outside its entrance.

When I did begin posing the question, I found most critics focused on the qualities of the artwork itself, but this answer did not fully satisfy me. It wasn't until I encountered [Maxine Greene's](#) demand that we "attend to" a work of art that I felt I had found an aesthetic guide: "Only if



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[Dorothea Lange](#)

you do take the time for faithful perceiving, for careful attending, will the work become significant enough for you to elaborate on what you see and hear within your own experience, make new associations, find new allusions and new openings, come more and more in touch with your own realities." By the time I encountered her high standards, I had experienced individual works that created the magic that takes place when imagination is coupled by being present. But I have only once responded this way to an entire art exhibit.

It was 1982 and my friend Ronda and I did not know that we would experience such an encounter as we made our way to an exhibit at the Salt Lake Arts Center. It was our habit to go to exhibits and art galleries on our lunch hour or on weekend outings. She was a visual



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artist and I was a writer, and we both felt fed by beauty. I can no longer remember whether we even knew what was currently showing there that day, *Recollections: Ten Women of Photography*, a traveling exhibit conceived by [Margaretta K. Mitchell](#). Certainly we did not know that this exhibit would remain with both of us for the next thirty-seven years.

Mitchell, herself a photographer, chose women who contributed to the history of photography over a span of seventy-five years and who were still alive at the time of the exhibit: **Berenice Abbott, Ruth Bernhard, Carlotta M. Corpron, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Nell Dorr, Toni Frissell, Laura Gilpin, Lotte Jacobi, Consuelo Kanaga, and Barbara Morgan.** As Ronda and I entered the space, the black and white photographs called to us. We moved slowly from one photographer's work to another. Though not all the individual



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images moved us, the diversity and skill stunned us: portraits of the famous and unknown, cityscapes, nudes, landscapes and intimate close-ups of flowers, abstracts, and photos made surreal by a juxtaposition of realistic and manipulated images. A few of them were iconic, and so we had seen them elsewhere in magazines or art books, but most of them were new to us.

We began to linger at different images. **Barbara Morgan's** work fascinated me, particularly her images of the dances of Martha Graham. I had learned about Graham in a modern theater class that introduced me to Meredith Monk, Twyla Tharp, and other dancers, but she captivated me. I had recorded one of her famous statements in my writing journal, and at different times her words found their way to my writing desk, to the door of my refrigerator—a source of inspiration:

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open . . . No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others.



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[Marjory Collins](#)

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[Toni Frisell](#)

Morgan magically captured Graham's energy, her passion, and the spiritual dimension that, to me, is integral to her work. These images felt like standing before a shrine. As a child who had gotten her height early, I felt awkward in my body, self conscious. I could not imagine what it would feel like to be at home in one's body, to be so utterly graceful and expressive. Often artists in one field are inspired by artists from another field. I remembered reading that Georgia O'Keeffe wanted to come back as a "soprano who would sing high, clear notes, without fear." But for me, dancers had become a creative source. Salt Lake City had many fine dance companies, and I had been attending as often as I could afford.

I moved on to the photographs of **Laura Gilpin**. Again, her images were diverse—a beautiful iris, a marvelous photograph of O'Keeffe in front of a windowsill filled with

paintbrushes, but it was her southwest landscapes and Navajo portraits that drew me. I was first drawn to Native American cultures when I was a child, particularly the Navajo, Hopi, Pueblo, and Zuni. I read voraciously, took classes from a Pueblo Indian at Fresno State University, and later bought a Native American Indian flute. Now many people would say I was, I am, a "wanna be." Perhaps that is true. This judgment has certainly made me more aware of the dangers of cultural appropriation. But what place does the mystery of what one is drawn to and nourished by play in this complex issue? When I took sand tray therapy training from Katya Hope, she said that often Christians are drawn to miniature figures of Eastern gods and goddesses and, in turn, those who have grown up with Krishna and Buddha are often drawn to images of Christ and Mary; somehow

the numinous that has sometimes been lost in one tradition is found in a different one. For me, my studies of Native American culture fed a spiritual and aesthetic hunger that Christianity did not feed, even before I could articulate such thoughts.

Somehow Ronda and I arrived at the same time to the photographs of **Nell Dorr** and stood riveted. We did not know then that it was this photographer who was the initial inspiration for the exhibit. Mitchell had first seen Nell Dorr's work in the *Family of Man* exhibit in 1955 and then later was captivated by her "idealized and romantic imagery" in *Mother and Child*. That day we, too, were captivated by the romantic imagery, by the tenderness of her work, by an innocence that should belong to every child. Later, when I worked in pediatrics, it would be this tenderness, this innocence I longed to give to the many abused and neglected children I would encounter. As often happened, Ronda and

I chose the same photograph as our favorite: a little girl, not more than three, and dressed in a lacy long sleeved dress, seen looking down at her sneakers as she walks. The background is one of rocks and trees; the child's body is sturdy, compact, and one feels her movement, that unique way a child moves. And also her

delight. Nell Dorr's photographs call forth a yearning for beauty, for the lyrical moment that is present in the day to day but too often lost to us, whether by our busyness, or our inability to attend.

But what made this exhibit magical, what "incarnated it and made it ours" was the contribution of Mitchell who had taken a portrait of each of the ten women photographers, all then in their 70s or 80s. These faces possessed



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a beauty, a depth of being that moved me deeply.

Though each portrait had been placed by their photographs, I felt if I had been given the ten portraits and been asked to place them by their work, I could have done it, so intimate was the relationship between themselves and the work they created. But it was more. These faces had been honed by the life they had lived and the images they had created; there was nothing superfluous, nothing false in these

faces. To have a face like this at the time of my death would mean I had lived with the integrity I sought, it would mean I had pursued my dreams, deepened my compassion. A face like theirs could not be won cheaply but must be earned.

Before seeing this exhibit, I had written a play called *The Dress Shop* based on my expe-

riences working as a sales girl. I had learned that few women are happy with their bodies; as women stepped out of the dressing room and looked in the mirror, they immediately commented on what they felt was their flaw—a long neck, fat thighs, no waist, breasts too big, breasts too small. Beauty in our culture is defined in a limited way that women internalize at a young age and continue to seek, often rejecting their own bodies, the extremes of which are rampant anorexia and bulimia. Aging only increases the desperation. In graduate school, I had also written a paper on the ways that mirrors are used in women's poetry and fiction. Again, few women characters/narrators look into a mirror and are happy with their reflections; in literature, often the reflection is unacceptable or lacking, or a madwoman or most extreme, as in Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*, there is no image reflected—the ultimate rejection. These portraits offered a different mirror, a vital counterpoint to what I had witnessed in life and literature.

We left the exhibit that day reluctantly, pained by separation. We did not yet know we would carry it with us, speak of it to each other often. We both regretted not buying the book about the exhibition that day. Many years later Powell's Bookstore found a hardbound copy of it for me. It was only then I learned that a core part of Mitchell's inspiration for the exhibit had been her fascination with aging and creativity and her concern that we lack images of great older women. She sought to provide "a vision of the older woman whose strength of character, intellectual energy, and artistic (or other) achievements in the world give white hair and wrinkles an unambiguous beauty."

Another requirement of Maxine Greene's exacting standards for aesthetic encounters is that you enter into an ongoing dialogue with a work of art. Part of my dialogue with



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[Barbara Morgan](#)

this exhibit has been speaking passionately about it to friends, to students in the writing center I directed who wrote essays about their struggles with learning, with their bodies, with self acceptance. Green insists that if we live lyrical moments that art makes possible, the impact is inexhaustible. Now when I look into the mirror at my body, changed by giving birth, my face changed by aging, at emerging wrinkles and at my gray hair that came early and that I did not color, I think of those women photographers, those faces that continue to inspire me, and I do not look for my youthful face but search for some faint trace of a beauty that can only be earned—a form of grace. ❖

1. Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001, p. 46.
2. Agnes de Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*. New York: Vintage, 1991, p. 264.
3. Laura Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1986, p. 437.
4. Margaretta K. Mitchell, *Recollections: Ten Women of Photography*. New York: The Viking Press, 1979, p. 9.