

Portraits open up poignant ways of looking

Photographic collection ranges from the early 20th century to the present, showing how the camera can both reveal and conceal individual identity

VISUAL ARTS

EYE TO EYE

At Presentation House Gallery until July 26

◀ In *Eye to Eye*, we encounter a wondrous array of portrait photographs—and a broad spectrum of approaches to the idea of portraiture. The work on view, curated by Helga Pakasaar from the stellar collection of Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft, ranges from the historic to the contemporary and from the local to the international. Old or new, here or there, the images ask us to consider the dynamics of looking that exist between the photographer and the subject of the portrait. They also (subtextually) invite us to question the nature of representation and the ways it is shaped by time, place, culture, class, and gender. The way it's inflected, too, by the formal and technical capacities of the photographic medium.

Among the impressive historic and modernist works here are prints by Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Diane Arbus, Eugène Atget, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, and Helen Levitt. The show's contemporary contingent of artists includes Raymond Boisjoly, Katy Grannan, Christos Dikeakos, Evan Lee, Richard Learoyd, Kevin Madill, and Al McWilliams. Techniques vary from early cyanotype, as seen in Edward Curtis's 1912 *Cowichan Masked Dancer*, to digital video, as in Owen Kydd's impressive *Night*, dated 2007. Curtis's work is remarkable in its depiction of a Coast Salish ceremonialist in the feathered costume and sacred mask of the *sxwayxwey*, whose regalia and practices are rarely seen by the public. Kydd's video triptych, on flat-screen monitors that mimic framed, still



Alicante, Spain, by the legendary Henri Cartier-Bresson, brings an element of performance to street photography.

photographs, is a portrait of place—Vancouver's Downtown Eastside—rather than of an individual.

One of the interesting tensions in *Eye to Eye* is expressed through the different degrees of collaboration and individuality that appear to exist between the photographer and his or her subject or subjects. Compare the solemn distance and frontality of August Sander's 1927 *Westerwald Farmers Couple* with the sunny geniality and informality of Edward Weston's 1924 *Portrait of Diego Rivera*. The first, which depicts an unnamed, elderly man and woman, seated outdoors on wooden chairs and wearing plain, dark, conservative clothes,

embodies an indexical approach to a social type. This work is one of many from Sander's extensive series of documentary photos of the rural folk living in the Westerwald region of Germany, near what was then his home base of Cologne. Here, clothing, accessories, and posture contribute to our understanding of the lives and values of these people without admitting us to an understanding of who they were as individuals. The couple remain anonymous. By contrast, Weston's close-up image of Rivera's face excludes such social markers and speaks instead to a specific (and renowned) person. It also suggests friendship, a mutuality of under-

standing, perhaps even collaboration.

In Grannan's large colour inkjet print *Anonymous, Modesto, CA*, taken in 2012, ideas of social documentation intersect with the personal and collaborative. Her image depicts an apprehensive-looking woman with cherry-pink hair, harsh eye makeup, cheap tattoos, and abundant freckles, embracing her solemn young daughter. In her *Modesto* series of portraits, Grannan doesn't name her subjects, which is paradoxical, given the cooperation and exposure she asks of them. Still, she poses them (in bright sunlight in front of a blank white ground) rather than grabbing an image of them, in

passing, on the street (as, say, Levitt would have done). There's a slightly Diane Arbus-y feeling to many of the images in Grannan's *Modesto* series, the appearance of the subjects hinting at their marginality.

The performance nature of portrait photography is also implied in this show, in images that range from Cartier-Bresson's *Alicante, Spain*, his famous 1933 image of a pseudo-violent little streetside drama, to Hiroshi Watanabe's 2009 series of images of Japanese macaque monkeys—yes, monkeys. Titled "Suo Sarumawashi", this body of work derives its subjects from an ancient Japanese tradition of performing monkeys, which evolved over the centuries from a religious ritual to a street-festival entertainment. Humour and poignancy arise here in the expressions of the monkeys, who so closely mirror their human cousins. There's a performance aspect, too, in Learoyd's remarkable, larger-than-life camera-obscure portraits, represented here by *Olya, Square Mirror*. Learoyd demands extraordinary commitments of time and discipline from his models, who each have to sit still for up to eight hours in order for him to realize one of his images.

Ultimately, it could be argued that, unless they're snapped without the subject's awareness, all photographs of the human face and figure fold elements of performance and collaboration into their making. Along with the dynamics of looking that *Eye to Eye* proposes, these are important aspects of our enduring fascination with the portrait form. Kudos to Beck, Gruft, and Presentation House Gallery for giving us access to a remarkable collection of works.

> ROBIN LAURENCE



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PHOTOGRAPHY

Eye to Eye tracks an intimate art form

Exploring relationships between photographer and subject at PHG

■ *Eye to Eye* exhibit, drawn from the collection of Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft, animates the dynamics between photographer and subject, until July 26 at Presentation House Gallery. Beck and Gruft will discuss their collection at PHG on Thursday, July 16 at 7:30 p.m. For details visit presentationhousegallery.org.

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Andrew Gruft knows exactly how important making eye contact is when it comes to human connection — that's how he met his wife, after all.

He spotted Claudia Beck in the hallway at UBC in the 1970s. Gruft was a professor of architecture, while Beck, who had just arrived from her native U.S., taught art history — and their faculties happened to be in the same building.

Gruft is shy and would rather not say when asked what immediately struck him about Beck. Clearly there was chemistry between the two, based on his coy response.

But he remembers Beck spoke with a thick New Jersey accent and it was hard for him to understand what she was saying. Plenty of eye contact surely filled in the conversation gaps.

The two began dating and Beck introduced Gruft to art photography, as he calls it. At the time Gruft could appreciate photography like the average person, but he most certainly was not a shutterbug. The longer he dated Beck, however, the deeper his appreciation for photography grew, along with their collection — to the point of obsession.



Richard Learoyd, *Olya Square Mirror*, 2010, camera obscura lifochrome photograph.
PHOTO SUPPLIED COURTESY CLAUDIA BECK AND ANDREW GRUFT

"I was interested in photography as someone who took photographs and nothing very professional, just taking photographs of trips and birthdays — says Gruft.

Gruft and Beck's motivations and processes for collecting photography will be discussed as part of the exhibit. The couple's ever-growing collection spans from

photography's beginnings in the mid-19th century to the present day, and is considered one of the most significant privately-held photography collections in Canada.

But it's the classic photographs of the 20th century that caught Gruft's attention the most — particularly when he saw Robert Frank's work *The Americans*, an influential book of photographs taken during the post-war period in America that contrasted the high and low strata of society.

"That was really something that knocked me over," recalls Gruft. "Well, it was different. When I first saw it I realized how kind of daring and different and, what can you say, innovative it was. We were used to those kind of impulsive pictures where we got the photographs as they happened. And Frank's was much more psychologically driven. It was much more about the feel in the photo, the feel of the people in the photograph — so, it had a completely different feel to it."

Embracing a broad interpretation of portraiture, *Eye to Eye* brings together in the intimate Presentation House space a range of prints, videos and books and animates the dynamics between a photographer and subject, of observing and being observed.

The complexities of capturing people through a camera is not a subject Gruft is well versed in, but he knows the key element that when perfectly executed results in an image that stirs emotion.

"It's an interaction, right?" says Gruft. "You're not actually capturing, as interacting with someone in some kind of way. When you are photographing someone face-to-face — eye contact — that's very different. And that interaction is important because it comes across in the image. You get the feeling of what is going on. The portraits are always in a sense a portrait of the photographer as much as the person being photographed."

Case in point, Gruft's feelings towards an image of an old peasant couple captured by acclaimed German portrait photographer

CALENDAR

Learoyd made his own camera

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August Sander featured in the *Eye to Eye* exhibit.

"It's so moving — there's this old couple sitting very straight," explains Gruft. "You know, Sander did this huge body of work trying to show the German people. He took photos of all different kinds of people in different professions, social strata and so on."

The biggest conversation piece of the exhibit, perhaps, is a larger-than-life photograph by Richard Learoyd that Gruft admits he splurged on. Measuring 58 x 48 inches the haunting image of a young woman dressed all in black sitting motionless with her arms purposely crossed was captured using a pioneering form of photography: the camera obscura.

Learoyd made his own room-sized camera to achieve grainless images that command the viewer of the photograph to focus directly on the emotion. They are one-off photographs, with no negative or digital file, and therefore all the more valuable.

In fact, Gruft considers the Learoyd piece a lucky get, because more often than not he is priced out in the highly competitive photography-collecting arena.

The *Eye to Eye* exhibition features classic prints by

renowned photographers including Eugène Atget, Bruce Davidson, Robert Frank, Helen Levitt, Daido Moriyama, August Sander, and Edward Weston — as well as contemporary works by Kristen Abdai, Raymond Boisjoly, Anne Collier, Katy Grannan, and Evan Lee among others.

Paring down the diverse range of an estimated 500 photographs from the Gruft/Beck collection into one focused exhibit wasn't as big a feat as one might think for curator Helga Pakasaar.

"I had this very loose idea, portraits," explains Gruft. "It's portraits in the widest sense. It's not just straight-on portraits of people. It's photographs of people doing stuff and there are abstract portraits. It's a show that was done quickly without a huge amount of fuss or pretension. It's a pretty straightforward show."

Gruft's hope is that people that see the *Eye to Eye* exhibit will develop a greater appreciation for photography like he has.

"People tend to think of photography in a rather limited sense — particularly now with cell phones," says Gruft. "Everybody takes photographs and there are billions of photographs floating around. I think (with this exhibit) they might get the range and breadth of photography and what a great medium it is."