

# Portraits of intimacy at the Norton Simon

A quiet grouping of photography brings the viewer face to face with its subjects.

BY KIRK SILSBEE

Regardless of size, a good art show can transport an audience outside of its everyday reality and into another space of consciousness, however briefly. If a small-scale exhibition does this, the possibility of a meaningful emotional connection between a viewer and the artist increases exponentially. Intimacy has tremendous potential for transformative

## Infobox

**What:** "Face It: The Photographic Portrait"

**Where:** Norton Simon Museum, 411 W. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena.

**When:** Through Aug. 11. Closed Tuesdays.

**Tickets:** Adults \$10, seniors \$7; students with ID and children under 18 free. Parking is free.

**More info:** (626) 449-6840, [www.nortonsimon.org](http://www.nortonsimon.org)

experience in a way that a blockbuster show (where people shuffle through like so much cattle) seldom does. That's what is happening at the moment in the Norton Simon's new "Face It: The Photographic Portrait."

It sits in the same little first-floor gallery that was home to the recent Simon display of Goya prints. Hit it just right, say on a weekday morning, and you'll have the place to yourself. In the quiet of the room with its subdued light, 20 black-and-white photographic subjects offer themselves to various degrees of candor and disclosure. The format brings the images into a kind of visual and tonal proximity. Seventeen different photographers — some as iconic as Imogen Cunningham, Minor White and Diane Arbus — made them, in the years 1934 to 2001.

One of the quiet triumphs of this grouping is to reveal how different motives and strategies can achieve similar results. Lee Miller, the Surrealist muse-turned-artist, photographed the constructionist



artist Joseph Cornell in 1933. In a dramatically lit setting, Cornell's illuminated head rests next to his one-of-a-kind creations: a toy sailboat with a long shock of hair and a large butterfly attached to it. Cornell and the object are linked as though one grew out of the other. Though he worked a steady day job, Cornell's true life was his artwork, done on his own time. Miller captured a central truth about him.

Jump ahead to 2000 for Judy Dater's photo of master printmaker June Wayne. There's Wayne, her back to the camera in a well-lit studio, at the end of her life. Her hair is white and cropped close, but her back takes up the largest part of



the frame. It serves as a ground for the ornate, jeweled monacle that she wore around her neck. Like Miller, Dater used an object of Wayne's work as a visual surrogate for her subject.

Rena Small does something similar in her study of painter Jean-Michel Basquiat. Shot from below, his obscured face is at the top of the image; the murky, available-light image brings to mind the work of Roy de Carava. Front-and-furthest in the photo are Basquiat's elegant hands with their long, tapering fingers.

Small and Dater are contemporary Angeleno photographers, and it's nice to see them represent So-Cal here. Dater fields two other pieces and almost



Courtesy of Norton Simon

steals the show with them. Her "Maria Rosario Domenici" is a three-quarter bust view of an Italian national woman from 2010. The lighting is dark and, like so much of her work, it has a classical quality to it. She could easily have sat for Titian or Veronese.

Dater's "George Livia" (1996) is a frontal view of a Hispanic man with leonine hair. He's framed with curtains and holding a hat across his stomach. It's a beautiful study of burnished textures, as well as a neutral vessel of psychological portent. Is he welcoming or wary?

The man has a timeless quality to him, and it's not hard to imagine him as one of Manuel Alvarez Bravo's

A series of black-and-white portraits brings the viewer close to the photographers' human subjects at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena.

Mexican subjects. His "Miss Juare" (1937) is a young woman positioned in front of a bamboo scrim in the sunlight. She's placid in her gaze, but there's an element of fire in her as well.

Duality extends elsewhere in "Face It": Duane Michals' "Newlyweds" (1967) shows a loving couple sitting on a bed in a bare room. The handwritten text that he often attached to his pieces is missing here, but it alludes to this happy moment as being fleeting. Mark Power's spontaneous shot of a young woman on a wind-blown rooftop is as obfuscating as it is revealing.

The one false note in the show is Robert Delford Brown's self-portrait from the 1970s. With all the personal import of a passport snapshot, he further obscures himself by adding colored pen dabs to the

# PORTRAITS

From A7

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image. In its own way, the picture is more banal than the smiling retired nudists whom Diane Arbus snapped

elsewhere in the exhibition. Both photographs have a so-what quality to them but only the latter invites scrutiny.

## Get in touch

**KIRK SILSBEE** writes about jazz and culture for Marquee.