

# AMY ARBUS: AFTER IMAGES

The woman, eyes closed, body tinged an earthen orange-red, gently caresses the breast of an attendant crow cradled in her hand. It is a tender image, for she and the (stuffed) bird appear in repose and adoration, content with one another's company.

But for the classic art literate, there is something hauntingly familiar here, a shadow, a gossamer memory. Only upon reflection does one realize it is a living homage to Pablo Picasso's "Woman with a Crow," crafted toward the end of the artist's "Blue Period."

Titled "Nina/After Crow," it is one in a series of portraits by Amy Arbus – she of a dynasty of photographers of both the odd and the everyday – that literally bring to life the works of some of the world's most beloved painters.

The traveling exhibit and accompanying book, "After Images," to be on display through May 24 at Mitchell-Giddings Fine Arts in Brattleboro, is both surreal and visceral, a loving tribute but also a commanding re-interpretation of classic portraiture.

"It was a very concentrated project," said Arbus, who lives in New York City and partners most prominently with the Schoolhouse Gallery in Provincetown, which is collaborating with the Provincetown Art Association and Museum to present the exhibition at PAAM this fall.

Being more of a solitary worker, Arbus said, this was one of her more involved collaborative projects, between partnering with lighting techs and painters who applied color directly to the skin and clothing of a series of actors, dancers and models to achieve the desired effect of an ethereal marriage between photography and painting.

"It was very intense," Arbus recalled. "There was something so wonderful about being with a bunch of people and watching them working and discovering things about their art that was new for them."

The daughter of artistic parents –

prestigious photographer Diane Arbus and photographer/actor Allan Arbus (revered for his role on "M\*A\*S\*H) – Arbus is perhaps best known for her stylized black-and-white portraits of actors and commission subjects, as well as her candid captures of what she called the "New York, unpolished impromptu street look." Since taking up the family tradition, she has published five photography books, including "On the Street 1980-1990" and "The Fourth Wall."

"My work tends to be timeless in that it looks like it was made years and years before I was born," she reflected. "That's an inherent quality."

Which made "After Image" all the more an experiential endeavor. It came about after a friend adopted a cocker spaniel and suggested riffing on Gustave Courbet's "Self Portrait with a Black Dog." It was an alluring concept, she said, and she began looking back through some of her favorite paintings to see which images might best translate into a full series.

Within the collection – which took nine months, "just like giving birth to a child," she said – she both channels and brings new perspectives to the works of Picasso, Balthus, Paul Cezanne and Amedeo Modigliani, among others.

For instance, in "Nina/Crow," she offers a lighter tone to Picasso's more possessive display of affection – in his "Woman with a Crow," the black bird of prey is more tightly clutched and the woman more lascivious with her affections. Conversely, her "Sam/After Ironing," betrays a much more stark and sullen re-imagining of Picasso's nude leaning over her drudgery in "Woman Ironing." Other pieces bring a new vibrancy to Antonio Canova's goddesses in "The Three Graces," and maturity to Balthus' mooning "Thérèse."

"I do these projects instinctually, I don't know what the ultimate goal is, how long a project will be or how many



*Nina/After Crow*, 2012, photograph.

pieces," she explained of her process. "I just start doing it until I feel like there's nothing more to do. The projects have their own organic ending."

She admits, however, that photography wasn't her first calling; if she had had more of an aptitude for it, she would have become a musician, she said.

What ultimately drew her to the family art was when a distinct void was left by her mother's passing and her father's more ardent pursuit of acting. "It was like another huge loss," she said. "When I started photographing, I felt like I was absolutely home again. I understood it without understanding it. It was immediately rewarding. I resented it, until I couldn't anymore."

She recalled a recent commissioned project for a new line for the Italian luxury plus-sized label Marina Rinaldi. It was shot in Central Park in the winter, she said, shown at Milan Fashion Week, then exhibited in a show, "A New Perspective."

"I want to retain some of that in my personal work: different sizes and shapes of women, and sexual preferences, and androgyny, all races, creeds, colors, shapes, everything," Arbus said. "I'm interested in a new kind of beauty. From the moment I started photographing, I had a different sense of what beauty is all about."