



Amy Arbus

“Nina/After Crow” by Amy Arbus.

The Arts

Homage to the masters

In After Images, acclaimed photographer Amy Arbus reinterprets classic paintings



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By Richard Henke/The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—*After Images*, Amy Arbus's newest collection of photographs, found its inspiration in a cocker spaniel.

"An friend of mine, writer and actor David Pittu, who has worked with me on many of my series of photographs, recently got a cocker spaniel," says Arbus. "As we were sitting together one afternoon, at one point he said to me, 'I feel like we should be a Courbet portrait.'"

The idea resonated with Arbus.

"I could picture it immediately — David and his dog, poised and posed and captured perfectly in that moment — and I thought to myself, there's something to this; there's something here," Arbus told Matthew B. Biedlingmaier in an interview for Provincetown/Arts.org.

So she created a photograph called, "Self Portrait with Black Dog."

"I was so taken by how it came out that I almost immediately I saw it as a series, not having any idea about how I would do it," Arbus told *The Commons*. "But I knew I wanted to recreate in photography the paintings of masters."

What finally materialized was *After Images*, a series of hybrid images that challenges the thin line between painting and art photography.

On Thursday, April 30, from 5 to 8 p.m., Mitchell-Giddings Fine Arts in Brattleboro will host the opening reception of this exhibit of work by Arbus. Located on 183 Main St., the gallery will also host a book signing of *After Images* and an artist talk on Saturday, May 2, from 5 to 7 p.m. Both the book and the exhibit will run at Mitchell-Giddings until May 24.

Amy Arbus is the daughter of the renowned photographer Diane Arbus and photographer/actor Allan Arbus, who is most known for his role as the psychiatrist Sidney Freedman on the television series *M*A*S*H*. Amy teaches portraiture at the International Center of Photography in New York and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Mass. She has had 25 solo exhibitions worldwide and has published five books.

Her photographs, which have appeared in and on the covers of many periodicals including *The Village Voice*, *New York*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *People*, are in the permanent collection of The Museum of Modern Art.

With two photographers for parents, Arbus may have seemed destined for her career. "Photography was always like another family member in our home," she says. But then when Arbus was 13, her father gave up

photography and went out to Hollywood to become an actor and, when she was 17, her mother died.

Since there was no longer anyone left to carry on the tradition of photography, Amy did.

“I didn’t even know I had the knack for it,” Arbus confesses. “Friends say they knew I was destined to be a photographer even before I did. They said all my stories were visual, and that I was less concerned with facts than appearance.”

After Images is a series Arbus made in 2011 and 2012 to pay homage to her favorite painters such as Balthus, Cezanne, David, Ingres, Modigliani, and Picasso. The images are photographs of live scenes, staged to replicate the powerful effects of original paintings from the early 20th century.

Arbus wanted to pay tribute to her personal pantheon of great painters, those artists who meant the most her. “I wanted to have some Picasso’s blue period for sure, perhaps a David, and a bunch of Cezannes,” Arbus says.

Initially, she had no idea how to actually produce these pictures.

Arbus writes in her artist statement for the show, “I studied the portrait paintings, organized a team, and began experimenting by photographing actors and dancers. My biggest challenges were how to create extremely soft lighting, skewed perspectives, Picasso’s elongated fingers and Modigliani’s incredibly long necks.”

This was a project Arbus could not do alone. Arbus needed to find models, people to paint backdrops, stylists, and costumers.

“This limited the type of paintings from which I could work,” says Arbus.

Getting her hands on an 18th-century gown may have proven to be difficult, so she ended up focusing on relatively simple portraits.

She began working on the series every week, all week, photographing once a week for nine months. After she finished 24 portraits, she considered the series complete.

Arbus says, “All my photograph series seem to find their own natural ending, that moment when there are no longer not enough or too many, and I can say, ‘It’s what it is.’ When I find I am not creating anything new, and I feel my level of frustration rising, that’s the time to stop.”

Arbus confesses the response to *After Images* has been unprecedented for her.

“When people see them for the first time they are often stunned, mystified and intrigued,” she writes. “They can’t tell if they are looking at a painting or a photograph. Some have said that the images make them uncomfortable because they don’t know how to categorize them which is something I find quite desirable.”

Arbus discovered that people either loved or hated this show.

“The people who hate it believe that I am not bringing anything new here, and that I am attempting to do something that it is impossible for photography to do,” she says.

But simulating the original paintings in a new media was not her goal.

“I didn’t want to recreate but to reinterpret,” Arbus explains. “It was not my intention that the photographs would look identical to the original, but rather that they would merely reference their source. Even though my fear was that they would end up looking like a joke, or that I was making fun of the original paintings, nothing could be further from what I intended.

“The more experienced we got at recreating the images, the more we wanted to deviate from the originals,” Arbus writes. “I was amazed how the painted elements – costumes, props, and the models themselves – appeared to recede while the eyes seemed to advance. The images appear both flattened and dimensional in a startling way. It is as if the models are trying to escape the confines of their two-dimensional world.”

Arbus believes that the people who love the photographs of *After Images* are often drawn to the emotional intensity of the work.

Biedlingmaier writes, “The result [of the series] can only be described as homage — superbly detailed photographic representations of paintings, many of them portraits and all of them classics, that burst with clean, crisp lines and smoky shadows juxtaposed with bright, vivid colors; in essence, a daring, wholly original series of photographs that evoke, with style and originality, the paintings on which they’re based.”

Arbus says, “In creating any photograph, I take an emotional tenor and go forward, and there always must be something new for me to discover. In this series I learned to use incredibly soft lighting which was unusual for me. I also worked with distortion and perspective, to create elongated hands and necks, or stretching a table to the way it appears to a viewer in a certain painting. In fact, the whole series was about stretching my knowledge how to create.”

Mitchell-Giddings Fine Arts will present Arbus’s work that is rarely seen outside New York City or Provincetown.

“In fact we are a little awed that she has agreed to show here,” says Petria Mitchell, co-owner of Mitchell-Giddings. “The exhibit happened only because Andy Reichsman, a filmmaker from Marlboro, came to an opening at our gallery and was so taken by the space that he said it would be a good place for his friend Amy Arbus to show. So we started conversations with her, who turned out to be not just a great artist but really fun. And to top it all, Amy is a dog person.”

Although Arbus still lives in New York City where she was born and raised, for a time she she made her home in Greenfield, Mass., and she still has friends in the Brattleboro area.

“I love Brattleboro!” Arbus exclaims. “I know a bunch of people there and how we used to hang out at places like South Pond (in Marlboro). Some of these memories are from a long time ago, so coming back reminds me of my days as a young woman.”

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