

At The Galleries

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Frances Gardiner Collins

Mary Ellen Rooney

Opinion

Inspiring Portraits

Bruce Poli

Black-and-white portraits, while tying the threads of art photography together through the 20th century, have had a curious effect on how we, the viewers, see ourselves. From the early days, the opposing forces of Alfred Steiglitz's "equivalents" and Edward Steichen's parlor images brought forth a sense of depth in the human face, a magnetism that flows between the seer and the seen as described by the camera. Thus we were reminded so clearly in Mary Ellen Rooney's exhibit, "Windows on Wise Women," that the monumental character of portraits is not lost in the post-'60s, that the spirit of Paul Strand and Edward Weston is very much alive in 1983.

At Gallery East, East Hampton, through last weekend, the exhibit featured 18 women between the ages of 65 and 96 whom the photographer saw as having contributed to the community for decades. From a distance of ten feet, one sees into these women's lives and the respect Ms. Rooney has for each as an individual.

Frances Gardiner Collins, her cowboy hat tipped back, gently blows smoke from her lips in a most intimate way, not to us but to her. Terry Liss, a social

activist, stares at a grand Victorian painting of her mother looming on the wall, their two faces identically mirrored. What can she be thinking? In the marvelous old European face of Mary Cantwell we see, perhaps, Golda Meir or some long forgotten saint of the Middle Ages.

"Star-Guided"

Ms. Rooney, a Bridgehampton writer and photographer who was commissioned for the project by Deborah Perry of Amagansett, has said she was "somehow enchanted, bewitched, star-guided" by the ladies she photographed. The exhibit took nine months to prepare, and during that time she has sat for hundreds of hours with the 18 women, whose occupations range from naturalist to rare book collector, from physical therapist to curator. Evidence of these relationships is seen in their eyes, the curve of their arms, the expressions on their faces.

Literally millions of photographic portraits have been made since the birth of photography; this show stands out in its intimacy and community flavor. There are no celebrities or society figures, yet these women are within themselves cause for celebration. You needn't know their names or

accomplishments—they are visible through the windows which Ms. Rooney has so delicately framed. As she explained, "They never talked of the past; they're living today."

What is perhaps most inspiring of good portraiture is the balance of tone and space in the context of the picture. The wise women are carefully placed in their chosen environments: Michelina Toscani's extended arm flows like a wave over a black background, pointedly ending with a lit cigarette. Margaret Lamb is unmistakably an artist. Fanny Gardiner stares to the northeast corner of the print, from which a ray of light appears. These are remarkable photographs.

In Our Windows

It is not the wisdom of science or philosophy we encounter in them, but a dimension of humanity. Of the project she conceived, Ms. Perry has declared, "In this world we need to re-see, reclaim, recognize who we are. Those who lead, who are on the front lines of life, are our sages. See them in YOUR windows."

Thanks to Mary Ellen Rooney's passionate devotion, we can. She evokes in "Wise Women" a universal key to human character so that we, the observers, can unlock the secrets to these extraordinary lives.

Bruce Poli was curator and writer-researcher of the County's Tercentenary photography exhibit, which is being displayed throughout Suffolk in 1983 and 1984. He is a photographer and has written extensively on photography. Ed.