SESSION 20 · UNIT 2 — LIGHT & PERSON · Feb 9, 2027

Diane Arbus & Nan Goldin

Arbus 1923–1971 · American — Goldin b. 1953 · American

Unguarded, intimate documentary portraiture of communities on the margins



Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey · Diane Arbus, 1967

"A picture is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know."

— Diane Arbus

KEY WORKS

- Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey, 1967 — the defining square-frame Arbus confrontation (Arbus)
- Child with a Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C., 1962 — a posed subject caught in one unguarded instant (Arbus)
- Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City, 1983 — from The Ballad of Sexual Dependency (Goldin)
- Nan One Month after Being Battered, 1984 — a widely exhibited self-portrait, made after Goldin survived domestic violence (Goldin)

CONTEXT

Arbus and Goldin both photograph people society tends to look away from — carnival performers, twins, drag queens, addicts, lovers — and both refuse to look away. But they get there by opposite routes. Arbus worked in the square 2¼" format, stopped strangers cold, and asked them to hold still and meet the lens; the confrontation is the picture. Goldin shot the people already in her life — her friends, her lovers, herself — as a diary, often in available light, often in the middle of the moment rather than posed before it. One photographer is a formal outsider gaining trust in an instant; the other is an insider who never left the room. Both results feel the same way: intimate, unguarded, and hard to look away from.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

CRITIQUE 2 — Unit 2 landing: this is the week prints get pinned to the wall and statements get rewritten out loud. Arbus and Goldin are the two clearest models of what an honest, unguarded portrait can look like — one built on formal confrontation, one built on proximity and trust — right when everyone in the room has to decide how honest their own Unit 2 work really is.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Arbus posed most of her subjects directly at the camera; Goldin shot her own life as it happened, often in half-lit rooms, without posing anyone. Which one feels more honest to you — and why might "honest" and "posed" not actually be opposites?
2. Goldin turned the camera on herself after being hurt by someone she loved, and showed the picture publicly. What does a photographer owe a subject when the subject is themselves?

MORE IMAGES



Child with a Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C. · Diane Arbus, 1962



Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City · Nan Goldin, 1983



Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi, NYC · Nan Goldin, 1991



Nan One Month after Being Battered · Nan Goldin, 1984



Cookie Mueller · Nan Goldin