

REPORT FROM MADRID

In Her Image

PhotoEspaña 2002 featured an international array of artists chronicling feminine identity in the 20th century.

BY RICHARD VINE

With its female subjects labeled by profession or, frequently, their mate's occupation ("farmer's wife," "wife of an advanced intellectual"), the show of 180 photographs from August Sander's massive "People of the 20th Century" project (1911-45) might seem to be the most ideologically complacent imaginable. But in fact the exhibition, superbly curated by Gerhard Sander and Susanne Lange, offered a number of cliché-defying insights. First, every subject in the comprehensive social survey, male and female alike, was identified by family or labor role ("mother and son," "innkeeper and wife")—a reminder of the industrial-age tendency to equate self, regardless of gender, with socioeconomic function rather than family lineage or personal history. Second, the range of female roles documented by the German portraitist exceeded the strictures of stereotype, embracing service categories like nurse, secretary, nun, seamstress and actress, but also giving memorable embodiment to power-related designations like "politician," "philosopher" and "revolutionary."

Moreover, anyone interested in the history of gender-bending must relish Sander's sinuous image of Helene Abelen ("wife of a painter")—complete with slicked-back hair, jutting cigarette, man's dress shirt and tie, billowing white pantaloons and slippers. An early modern icon of bohemian liberality, it presages the androgyny and transvestism highlighted repeatedly in "Femeninos" as key strategies of female liberation.

More haunting in their brooding sense of confinement are the historically contemporaneous works of José Ortiz Echagüe. Shot in the 1920s and '30s, the sepia-toned Late Pictorialist images, printed by a direct carbon method on textured paper, depict provincial Spanish women in chadorlike garb and sequestered environments little changed, it appears, since the Middle Ages—or indeed the Moorish occupation. Something of this time-out-of-time quality lingers also in Italian photojournalist Shoba's much more recent series "Sicilian Women" (1980-present), about 20 black-and-white examples of which were displayed in lightboxes in a central subway station. Her images—a young woman in an evening gown, wearing a simpleton's mask; a titulary "serene" woman smoking next to the bust of a courtesan; a black-clad woman kneeling to kiss the face of a man murdered by the Mafia—evoke a world (or at least a region of Italy) where the expectation for women to amuse, to wait and to endure still largely shapes their appearances and acts.

Indeed, a startlingly high percentage of the photographers chosen for "Femeninos" examine femininity at its most stereotypical—and not always with a saving irony or criticality. What is one to make, today, of standard-issue midcentury fashion work by Lillian Bassman (longtime art director of *Harper's Bazaar*) or of Federico Patellani's behind-the-scenes documentation of Italian movie queens and first-round beauty contestants? Spanish favorites though the

artists may be, is it really possible to get past the arty lasciviousness of Rafael Navarro's close-up "formalist" studies of the female bodyscape or the forthrightly leering quality of the nude portraits concocted by Alberto Garcia-Alix? (If you're into large-scale shots of hard-faced, naked babes flaunting their butt holes, Garcia-Alix is your man.)

In this context, "Modern Madonna," a series of large, brightly colored studies of suburban Dutch women and their babies by Corinne Noordenbos seemed—implausible as it sounds—oddly refreshing in its embrace of good health and normalcy. Each picture's ham-fisted classic composition (lots of triangular figure arrangements and celestial lighting) reinforced the suite's unabashedly corny theme of seeking the ideal in the mundane—in less-than-beautiful mothers and their sometimes squalling kids.

Deliberate challenge to conventional feminine iconography took a variety of forms here, from the "new woman" photojournalism of Germany's *Twen* magazine during the 1960s and Helmut Newton's once-daring studies in S&M chic to familiar, yet still arresting, art projects such as Nan Goldin's "Ballad of Sexual Dependency" (1981-96) and other louche works. Inner-directedness seemed to prevail in the nude, nearly illegible self-portraits from Adrian Piper's 1971 "Food for the Spirit" project (shown in conjunction with now classic performance images by Marina Abramovic and Carolee Schneemann). Meanwhile, two series by Susan Meiselas constituted a mini-parable of contrasting gender relationships: her black-and-white "Carnival Strippers" (1976), whose tent-show performers can do little more than tease and please, and her sumptuously colored "Pandora's Box" (2001), documenting no-nonsense



Francesca Woodman: Providence, Rhode Island, 1978, silver gelatin print, 5 1/2 inches square.



Elina Brotherus: Spring, 2001, C-print.

Ana Casa Broda: My Grandmother, Mother and Sister Look at Me, 1991, silver gelatin print.



Art in America 73

Drawn from 25 countries, the roundup presented three major responses to traditional womanhood, roughly corresponding to successive historical phases—acceptance, challenge and entitlement.

dominatrices at work in a high-end Manhattan "fantasy" house.

Group shows of note ranged from the relatively sober "Double Face," comprising works by such historical stalwarts as Berenice Abbott, Ilse Bing and Claude Cahun in which the female subject's countenance is echoed through reflection or superimposition, to displays of more recent photographs accentuating the strange and extreme. "The Self" included tough-girl portraits by Catherine Opie and Japan's Yurie Nagashima, exercises in transvestism by Jürgen Klauke (Germany) and Vladislav Mamyshev (Russia), along with scores of infectious self-portraits shot in photo-booth grids by Japanese newcomer Tomoko Sawada (b. 1977), who adopts a spectrum of identities

in between. "Girls vs. Grannies" offered, to represent the latter, the still startling naked-old-lady studies of Japan-based Manabu Yamanaka as well as bizarre scenes orchestrated by his fellow countrywoman Miwa Yanagi to illustrate the imaginings of young girls about themselves 50 years hence (e.g., a windswept, fiery-haired matron laughing heartily as she cruises along in a motorcycle sidecar). Such images were offset by Dutch photographer Hellen van Meene's crosslit shots of pudgy Northern European preadolescents seeming to dream of future ugly-duckling transformations and, in stark contrast, by Nobuyoshi Araki's pedophilic meditations on Japanese schoolgirls—dangerously pretty children caught in an artful predator's through-the-lens gaze.

Among the festival's one-person standouts was a gallery show by Portugal's Helena Almeida. Confidently titled "Seduzir" (To Seduce), the display of large-scale, black-and-white photos, sometimes accented with a single swipe of red paint, featured the artist, in a smart black suit and high heels, putting her attractive 68-year-old body (her face unshown) through a series of off-kilter poses and jump-rope maneuvers. Self-acceptance—of a more conflicted sort—was also examined by Ana Casa Broda, whose photos and texts (including nude self-portraits labeled by date and widely fluctuating body weight, accompanied by a candid what-I-ate and what-I-did diary) record a years-long effort to come to terms with four generations of beloved women in her Spanish-Austrian family. But for sheer imaginative potency, nothing surpassed the eerily intense tableaux and quasi-surrealistic self-portraits of U.S. photographer Francesca Woodman. Despite her brilliance, the 22-year-old suicide apparently did not attain self-acceptance, or even a sustainable psychic truce, but her 1972-81 work—often involving body and soul stripped bare in crumbling interiors—stood out not only as the single most compelling element of PhotoEspaña 2002 but as an emotional landmark for her artistic generation.

Feminine entitlement, in the works on view in Madrid, appeared to be fraught with problems both for those women struggling to attain it and for those who must cope with it once achieved. Brazil's Beth Moyses addressed the independence issue straight-on with an installation that included head-and-shoulder photographs of abused, usually impoverished women who had redoned their wedding dresses; a video of 150 women dressed as brides marching through the streets of São Paulo as they pull the petals from roses and eventually bury the thorny stems in a public square on the International Day to End Violence Against Women; and a room in which visitors were encouraged to walk about freely on a carpet of sewn-together wedding gowns. At the other end of the social spectrum are the subjects in "Rich and Famous" (1994-2001), Daniela Rossell's color-photo series depicting young women from multimillionaire families in her native Mexico. The garish environments, swank indulgence and meretricious attire of these modern-day princesses bespeak a high-



Daniela Rossell: Untitled, from the series "Rich and Famous," 1994-2001, C-print, 30 by 40 inches. All photos courtesy PhotoEspaña 2002.

end entrapment. Though the world is theirs on a platter, they seem utterly stuck in their station (who would choose to live it up, and what on earth could these coddled misses possibly do for a livelihood?) and unable to conceive their self-worth in any guise other than that of fashion-magazine sexpot.

The burden of self-determination is also the implicit concern of Finland's Elina Brotherus, whose extensive exhibition was composed almost entirely of self-portraits in a wide variety of settings and unsmiling moods. Collectively, the images—the artist seated at a small table and staring out a window, folded up herself in a cramped Euro-style bathtub, curiously fully clothed against her boyfriend on a rumpled bed, etc.—convey a sense of displacement and seeking, a determination to learn the world and her own persistently solitary place in it. Several pictures, playing upon the correlation between self-definition and language, show her attempt to learn French by attaching Post-it labels (*la glace, le lavabo, le lit*, etc.) to every household item in sight. In the most poignant shot, Brotherus sits alone on a bed with a sticker on her forehead that reads *un défaut de la tête* (a mental defect).

In this 30-year-old artist's work, the long feminist odyssey clearly reaches a stage of ironic self-reflection. Faultlessly programmatic, artistic director Rubio, quoting Gilles Lipovetsky, identified the movement's goal with "the power of free control over self and the need to invent oneself unboundedly by any social imperative." There is something grand but also naive and terrifying about that "any," that blithely absolute renunciation of all social determinants. More nuanced is Brotherus's apparently free yet sad-faced contemporary persona. Her ambivalence hints that it may be time to dust off an old existentialist maxim—that although all roles are arbitrary, one begins to exist in a meaningful way only through willful engagement, through a knowing commitment to a particular, situated part. □

PhotoEspaña 2002: "Femeninos" appeared at 49 venues in Madrid [June 12-July 14], including Fundación Santander Central Hispano; Real Jardín Botánico; La Fábrica; Círculo de Bellas Artes; Fundación Telefónica; Casa de América; Biblioteca Nacional; Centro Cultural Condé Duque; Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte; and Canal de Isabel II. The event was accompanied by an illustrated handbook as well as a 175-page catalogue with essays by Susana Blas Brunel, Giovanna Calvezzi, Enrique Gil Calvo, Jorge Naval and Oliva Maria Rubio.