

# ALL TOGETHER NOW

What do you do when dozens of the most important female photographers alive get together? Take their picture, of course. By Guy Trebay

**'D**EAD HELPS," MARGARETTA MITCHELL IS SAYING. "Why do you think the official history of women photographers is basically Barbara Morgan and Berenice Abbott?" She adds that the other big plus about dead women photographers is that "you don't have to deal with the actual woman." On an early fall evening Mitchell has persuaded 30 actual women to sit for what amounts to a class picture of the (partial) honor roll of twentieth-century women photographers—the survivors, that is. The occasion is the opening of the New York Public Library's epic survey "A History of Women Photographers," which opened last week.

"When I heard they were getting a lot of the women together for the opening, it just came out of my mouth," says Mitchell, whose 1979 show and accompanying book, *Recollections: Ten Women of Photography*, which documented a group of turn-of-the-century pioneers, traveled to seventeen U.S. cities after a hugely successful run at the International Center for Photography. "I said, 'You've got to let me document them.' There's an absolute hunger for this information. People don't last forever, you know."

But some last a long, long time. Wandering around the library rotunda in a black knit pantsuit is Ruth Bernhard, just in from San Francisco on this, her ninety-first birthday. The tiny, animated Bernhard—whose best-known images are highly tonal nudes that prefigure Robert Mapplethorpe's explorations by a good 60 years—has no trouble remembering her first camera, an Eastman Kodak 8-by-10 bought in 1929. The \$90 it cost was her entire severance from *Delineator* magazine, where she'd worked blowing dust off negatives for photographer Ralph Steiner. "Not very entertaining," she says. "It was food preparations—you know, onions stuffed with nuts." Bernhard turned over her money to an acquaintance, and he gave her his camera in exchange. The first image she snapped was of a life preserver.

Grace Robertson started her career in 1948 with a second-hand Leica and a made-up name. "I called myself Dick Muir," says Robertson, whose aristocratic features seem even

more striking on someone of shooting-guard height. "I didn't think they'd hire a woman for the type of work I wanted to do." Robertson went on to reclaim her name and to create famous essays on subjects like motherhood and sheep-shearing. Now, in England, Robertson is revered as a Master Photographer. What this mainly means, she stops to explain, "is that people get Brownie points for interviewing me before I'm gone."

As three of Mitchell's assistants scurry around propping up strobes and photo umbrellas, a fourth sets Mitchell's big-view camera so that its cyclops eye surveys a scene of closing-time exodus. A tide of bookworms ebbs past a small island of women, many of them anonymous-looking, most personally unacquainted with one another, all collectively responsible for images that have helped define a visual century.

"Can anyone point me toward Abigail Heyman?" asks Karen Tweedy-Holmes, a pink-cheeked woman whose most celebrated work was male portraiture taken at crotch level. While Tweedy-Holmes seeks out Heyman, Robertson goes in search of Sylvia Plachy, who's off in a corner comparing notes on childhood equipment with Mary Ellen Mark. Between them, these two women have built photojournalistic careers on their distinctive abilities to comprehend and sympathetically render the lives of prostitutes, the inhabitants of Three Mile Island, and the mentally ill. Is it surprising that their earliest memories of photography are sweetly nostalgic? "Mine was an Agfa box camera," sighs Plachy, in the Hungarian

accent that remains an ineradicable part of her after nearly 40 years in America. "Actually, the very first camera was a Robin—it was part Japanese and part American. I took pictures of my cat."

"I think mine was a Brownie," says Mark. "I used it to take pictures at Camp Lindemere and of my friends in sixth grade at Meyer's Elementary School. I remember being very excited to get back these pictures of my friends."

Wandering through the small group of women, Rebecca Lepkoff modestly snaps frames with her Kodak point-and-shoot. She's so great-aunt-at-a-bar-mitzvah about it, you'd hardly imagine that Lepkoff was an early member of the sem-



**PICTURE THIS:** PHOTOGRAPHER'S PHOTOGRAPHER MARGARETTA MITCHELL.



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** TOP ROW: BEA NETTLES (19), GRACE ROBERTSON (6), SYLVIA PLACHY (20), ABIGAIL HEYMAN (NO NUMBER); SECOND ROW: SANDRA WEINER (31), JUDITH GOLDEN (14), BARBARA CRANE (28), LILIANE DECOCK (1), EVE SONNEMAN (NO NUMBER), REBECCA LEPKOFF (3), INGE MORATH (16), MARY ELLEN MARK (26); THIRD ROW: MARGARETTA MITCHELL (5), KATHRYN ABBE (10), FRANCES MCLAUGHLIN-GILL (15), MARILYN NANCE (18), KAREN TWEEDY-HOLMES (2), MARIE COSINDAS (29), ROSALIND SOLOMON (NO NUMBER), JUDITH TURNER (23), LOIS GREENFIELD (NO NUMBER), NINA ROSENBLUM (NO NUMBER); FRONT ROW: NAOMI SAVAGE (7), ELLEN AUERBACH (NO NUMBER), NORMA HOLT (4), RUTH BERNHARD (11), NAOMI ROSENBLUM (NO NUMBER), BARBARA TANNENBAUM (NO NUMBER), JILL KREMENTZ (13).

inal Photo League. "I started in 1930," explains the 80-year-old photographer. "I'm still shooting, mostly down in the Lower East Side. It was a Jewish area when I started. Later, it changed to black, then Spanish, and now it's Chinese. People lived in the streets. They wrote their feelings on the walls. They raised their children in public, which the rich are too nervous to do. An awful lot gets lost, you know, and not just the images. Some of the places I go, you can't even find the old streets."

A nervous assistant ticks off a list of arrivals—"I'm still missing Susan Meiselas and Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe," she says—as another distributes numbered placards the women will hold for identification in a master shot. "It's photographer bingo," says Inge Morath as, suddenly, on some subtle cue from Mitchell, the legendary and the semi-legendary and the cult and the coterie photographers all begin to arrange

themselves on the steps. There is Marie Cosindas (elegiac portraits, saturated Polaroid still lifes), and Rosalind Solomon (Haiti, voodoo, people with AIDS), and Liliane De Cock (epic landscapes in the American West), and Jill Krementz (writers' portraits), and Lois Greenfield (late-twentieth-century dance), and Barbara Crane (experimental landscape), and Eve Sonneman (perspectival studies in Cibachrome), and . . .

"Show your number card, everybody," Mitchell clucks as latecomer Susan Meiselas (carnival strippers, the war in Nicaragua) darts into place alongside Mary Ellen Mark, saying, "I don't mind being on the edge." "Don't hide your faces, ladies," says Mitchell. "Look at the camera. Chin up. A little expression, please." Gripping the button on her shutter cord, Mitchell says, "Smile!"

"Oh," Mary Ellen Mark whispers, "I never smile." ■