
THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

BOSTON NOW:
PHOTOGRAPHY

F R A G M E N T

By reflecting the appearances of things, the photograph creates a desire to know more—or know all—about its subject. Inevitably this desire is denied: even after sustained looking, the image is elusive, like a mirage or the shadow that it literally is. The photograph exists between a vivid state of immediacy—“the photographer was there”—and the inevitable distance between the photograph and the viewer, who are separated from one another through time, place and the literal limitations of “what you can see.” A good photograph sets meaning adrift: it can provoke, but it cannot resolve. As Roland Barthes has written “it cannot *say* what it lets us see.” [1]

When a photographer enters an unfamiliar culture—a street or family group—the paradoxical fusion of immediacy and distance inherent to the medium is amplified. In this situation the photographer is both present and absent: a witness, but not an integral part of the scene transcribed by the camera. For the viewer too, the photographer seems absent—there is often little obvious trace of his or her sensibility, although the photograph is subtly suffused with it—so that in looking at the image the viewer *re-replaces* the photographer: becomes a witness and an outsider.

In the 20th century the camera has often been used to create a poetry of alienation. Roswell Angier’s series of photographs tersely titled *Boston, 1984* establish street subjects as isolated figments: the characters combined into *ad hoc* dramas seem in danger of turning into smoke—or more appropriately, back into light. Through long exposure and movement of the camera, Angier creates a shifting world which is anchored primarily by the direct gaze of a central figure. Through this look, which is typically level and arresting (literally) the viewer feels drawn into an uncomfortable world against his or her will. There is a connection made across distance which is poignant, and alarming. John Lueders-Booth’s portraits of women are equally startling in their intimate engagement of the viewer through a straight, intense stare. The differences in status and outlook between viewer and subject—the distance that photography breaches—is melted away by the attitude of the subjects. Again, the viewer is held, almost against his or her will to contemplate a difficult subject.

The unstable intimacy which Angier and Lueders-Booth draw out of their subjects and deliver to the viewer is encompassed within a single image by Sage Sohler and Susan Kandel whose photographs primarily depict family groups. Sohler’s work often dramatizes a situation of alienation within a context where intimacy is assumed. Her photographs establish a complex skein of relationships between siblings, parents and friends whose fabric is typically torn by a gesture or figure which lifts itself out of the photograph like an emblem of rebellion or refusal. In *South Boston, MA* (1982) one figure (apparently an adolescent daughter) stands rigidly at the verge of a picnic blanket. She is further set apart

[1] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard. New York, Hill and Wang, 1981. p. 100



J O H N L U E D E R S - B O O T H

Untitled, 1983
black and white print
17 x 14"