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Amy Arbus's One-Woman Show With a View



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Ms. Arbus lives among photos, most her own work.

By DAN SHAW
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It's the amenities more than her particular apartment that have kept the photographer Amy Arbus living in a banal beige-brick doorman building in the heart of Greenwich Village for 20 years. "I love the staff," she said of the "Mad Men"-era behemoth with Barcelona chairs and a hotel-like concierge desk in the airy, glass-walled lobby. "I love the gym. I love the swimming pool on the roof!"

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Built in the 1960s, when Ms. Arbus was growing up in the neighborhood and attending the progressive Little Red School House and P.S. 41, the 31-story tower isn't majestic like the prewar apartments that her grandparents lived in on Central Park West and Park Avenue. And it's utterly conventional compared with the converted stable on Charles Street where she lived with her mother, the photographer Diane Arbus, who made haunting images of nudists, transvestites and celebrities like Mae West and Susan Sontag.

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Amy Arbus

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A portrait of Ms. Arbus's parents, Allan and Diane Arbus.

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Ms. Arbus established her reputation in the early 1980s with the "On the Street" column in The Village Voice.

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
A large window offers a north-facing view of the city.

Ms. Arbus once dreaded the idea of living in a building like hers. "I had nightmares as a kid that I lived in a high-rise," she said. "For me, that was a fate worse than normality. But I actually like living in one, because it's a treehouse, a room with a view."

Long and narrow, Ms. Arbus's 19th-floor studio is a single room with a wall of shelves crammed with art books. She has divided the apartment into distinct sections as if it were a miniature loft: the foyer; the dining area and kitchen; the sleeping area in the middle; and an office/sitting room by the large window that offers an unobstructed north-facing view of the city. "I love to come home after a day on the streets," she said. "It's incredibly peaceful up here."

Earnest, effervescent and youthful, Ms. Arbus, 59, is sentimentally and professionally rooted to the neighborhood. She established her reputation here in the early 1980s with the "On the Street" column in The Village Voice, documenting the trendsetting downtown fashion parade.

One day on St. Marks Place in 1983, she photographed a self-possessed young woman who was wearing a stained thrift-shop coat over her pajamas. Her name was Madonna Ciccone, and she hadn't yet had a hit record. "I felt like she knew her destiny," said Ms. Arbus, who used the picture for the cover of her 2006 book, "On the Street: 1980 — 1990."

Ms. Arbus did not intend to become a photographer like her mother and her father, [Allan Arbus](#), who in the 1940s and '50s shot fashion stories as a team for magazines like Glamour and Seventeen. "It felt redundant," she said. "I felt they had it covered." Instead, she enrolled in the Berklee College of Music, where she studied flute and saxophone. "I wanted to be Charlie Parker. But I was around all these child prodigies, and it was clear I did not have an innate talent for music. Everybody else knew I was a photographer before I did."

When she was 21, a friend encouraged her to go photographing on the Boston Common, where Ms. Arbus took her first pictures of a baby in a bonnet who "looked like a little old man."

"I remember looking through the lens finder and thinking, I have a different sense of humor, a different sense of beauty," she said.

After her father moved to California in the late '60s to pursue an acting career (landing a recurring role as an Army psychiatrist on the TV series "M*A*S*H") and her mother committed suicide in 1971, Ms. Arbus began to miss the family business, and sought out new mentors.

She got a job with Jean Pagliuso, one of the few female fashion photographers. "That's where I really got my training," she said. "I learned how to run a studio. I worked as her agent for a while and booked the models. I processed her film and printed for her."

Her most influential teacher was Richard Avedon, a longtime family friend, with whom she took a master class through the International [Center of Photography](#) in 1992. "It wasn't until then that I took myself seriously as an artist," she said.

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Ms. Arbus explains that her parents never thought of themselves as artists, either. “They were photographers. Period. What you did with pictures — whether you hung them in a museum or put them in magazines — didn’t matter. You were making pictures. We didn’t need to call it art.”

But Mr. Avedon did, and he encouraged Ms. Arbus to surround herself with her own art, which is why most of the photographs on her sand-colored walls are hers. “He made a big point of living with your pictures, having them affect you when you are not consciously looking at them, and I really believe in that,” she said.

There are several large color pictures from her most recent series, “After Images.” Inspired by her study of artists like Modigliani and Picasso, Ms. Arbus replicated their works, having sets painted and models made up, and then photographing them.

Viewers are not sure whether they are looking at a painting or a photograph, which makes these hybrid images unnerving and hypnotic.

Mostly, there are black-and-white photographs that she has printed herself, including a portrait of the actor Alan Cumming backstage on the opening night of “Cabaret,” which she shot for The New Yorker. It became the cover of “The Fourth Wall,” a 2008 book featuring portraits of Broadway actors like John Malkovich and Christine Ebersole wearing their stage costumes out of context on sidewalks and in alleys.

On her nightstand next to a lamp that belonged to her Grandma Rose, she keeps family photos, including a picture her mother took of her second-grade class on dress-up day. “I own only two of my mother’s photographs, the Jewish giant and the twins,” she said, “but I don’t have them here.”

Somewhat surprisingly, her mother has been her role model. “I thought she had a really fascinating life,” Ms. Arbus said. “I saw how my mom used photography as an excuse to meet people, go home with them, ask them questions. My goal was to have an interesting life, too.”

Like many New Yorkers of her generation, she assumed she would move someplace larger one day. “I thought this apartment was a temporary situation because it was so small,” she said. But her finances could not keep pace with [Manhattan](#)’s real estate boom. “Now, I am not willing to give up what I have here for more space.”

After all, she could not live anywhere but the heart of the Village. “A friend of mine teases that all of my friends walk by my house at least once a week,” she said. “I live in the ideal location.”

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