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'Nobody Else Sees the Way I Do'

By RALPH GARDNER

I thought mentioning Diane Arbus's famous 1962 photograph "Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park" might be a way to ease into a conversation with her daughter, the photographer Amy Arbus, when we got together recently.

For a long time, I assumed the little boy clutching the grenade was a hyperactive kid named Peter Jordan, with whom I attended second grade. But when I tracked down a class photo of Peter in an ancient yearbook, I realized it was somebody else. (Turns out the subject is actually Colin Wood, son of 1931 Wimbledon tennis champion Sidney Wood.)



Bryan Thomas for The Wall Street Journal

The photographer Amy Arbus in her apartment in Greenwich Village.

But almost more evocative to me than the grimacing little boy was the backdrop. The picture appeared to have been taken near the Mall in Central Park, where I played as a child. I thought Ms. Arbus—who is approximately my age—might have also.

"I only went there when I was little," she said of the park. "By then," meaning when the picture of the boy with the hand grenade was taken, "we were already down here." She was referring to Greenwich Village, where she still lives. "We moved to Charles Street, the East

Village...Westbeth."

I asked why her family moved so much. "Good question," she said. "Money?"

It could have been touchy interviewing the child of a famous photographer who had an eerie, instantly recognizable style, especially when her offspring has chosen the same profession. And particularly when you want to pay her career the respect of not comparing

it to her parent's.



Bryan Thomas for The Wall Street Journal

The front and back covers of Amy Arbus's upcoming book, 'After Images.'

But unlike what one might assume of her mother, who committed suicide in 1971, Ms. Arbus seems possessed of a lightness of spirit that lets you know no subjects are off-limits. Nonetheless, the photographer, whose latest work is the subject of two upcoming shows—one at the 1stdibs Gallery in the New York Design Center starting April 2, and the other opening a week later at the Griffin Museum of Photography in Winchester, Ma.—did indicate that discussing her mother wouldn't be a promising avenue. "I'm so not an expert on my mother," she said.

Perhaps a more intrepid journalist would have demanded why. But I'd like to think the answer is self-evident. It would probably be easy to spend your life caretaking your mother's legacy, but that would make it difficult to get any of your own work done. And from what it was possible to gather from an hour spent at her apartment, Ms. Arbus seemed destined to do things her own way. (There's a photograph of her taken by her mother near the front door of her apartment. It shows

her as a little girl on a New York City street in a fashionable shearling coat and leggings. But unlike the typical adorable-child portrait, this one comes with an Arbusian twist: The daughter's eyes are rolled heavenward, her mouth agape, either as if she's noticed something falling from the sky or she's just being uncooperative.)

"My mother had photographed me a lot and I loved the attention," she remembered. "I wanted to be a model until I realized I wasn't going to be tall enough. You couldn't be 5-foot 2.

"They're shocked I turned out so normal," the photographer added, referring to her friends. "My mom passed away when I was 17 and my father left when I was 13 to become an actor."

Her father, Allan Arbus, a former advertising photographer, starred in the 1972 cult film "Greaser's Palace," and also appeared in the TV show "Mash" as a psychiatrist, Major Sidney Freedman.

The '60s also probably wouldn't have been the best time for Ms. Arbus to find her equilibrium. After attending public and private schools in the city, she left New York after 10th grade. "It was a very unusual childhood," she conceded without quite explaining why. "I didn't want to stay in school. My mother was sensitive to that. We knew somebody in alternate education."

She moved to an itinerant school in Maine. "We built yurts, of all things," she remembered. "We were trying to live back to the land. During the winter, which was staggeringly cold, we traveled all over the country. Some places we went to were really cult-like."

One of their destinations was Woolman Hill, a high school in Deerfield, Mass., attended by a former boyfriend. "There was a yurt on the property where my old boyfriend was living," she said. "I thought, 'This is too bizarre! I just built a yurt and he's living in a yurt.'"

It doesn't sound as if Ms. Arbus spent much time studying calculus or cramming for the SATs. She attended Goddard College in Vermont for a year, a rendition of her life story sufficing as her application. "I can't imagine it was all that fascinating," she said.

She studied music, but found Goddard's music department somewhat lacking. "They only had a piano and a gamelan teacher," she said. "It's like gongs. I felt the need to transfer."

She did, to Berklee College of Music in Boston, where, surrounded by musical prodigies, she discovered something valuable: She wasn't one of them. Her decision to drop music was sparked by what turned out to be a lucky accident. "I broke my two front teeth while my boyfriend was chasing me around the room," she remembered. "During the three weeks I couldn't play a wind instrument it changed my life. I remember the song that broke me—Chick Corea's 'Spain.' It's beautiful but it has a lot of 64th notes."

It was around that time that Ms. Arbus picked up a camera. "It never occurred to me to be a photographer because I had two parents who spent their careers doing it," she explained. "It seemed redundant at best." However, she added: "When both parents stopped photographing I missed it desperately."

She remembers the afternoon she rediscovered the craft. She was with a friend on the Boston Commons. "I photographed a little African-American baby with a bonnet on, and she looked like a little old man. I remember looking through the lens thinking, 'Nobody else sees the way I do.' I felt like I had an instinct."

She had the opportunity to prove her eye throughout the 1980s, when the Village Voice ran "On the Street," a monthly page of her starkly lighted street-fashion photos that tiptoed between fabulous and freakish. Her subjects included Madonna, pre-fame and looking pretty and almost prim; the Clash; and fashion designer Anna Sui. "The '80s were magical despite all the horrible things we were dealing with," she said. "I was really happy to be in my 20s. It was so creative. People my age were fearless and full of ambition. There was no way of stopping them from doing what they wanted to do."

Her latest book, "After Images," and exhibitions involve photographs using actors, models and dancers to evoke famous paintings by artists such as Cezanne, Picasso and Balthus. "People think they're paintings," said Ms. Arbus, who travels much of the year, teaching from Trondheim in Norway to Provincetown.

"I change my technique to match the project," she added. "My interest in what it means to be human is never-ending."

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Corrections & Amplifications

An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of MASH character Sidney Freedman as Friedman. It also incorrectly stated the dates of two shows featuring Arbus's work.

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