This exhibition and resource features Arbus’s forerunners, peers and those inspired by her practice.

Weegee
William Klein
Walker Evans
Lisette Model
Mary Ellen Mark
Lee Friedlander
William Eggleston
Milton Rogovin
Introduction

The photographs of Diane Arbus (1923–1971) are powerful allegories of postwar America. Once seen, they are rarely forgotten. Contemporary audiences found Arbus’s approach to portraiture confronting, and her work continues to polarise opinion. Her images raise difficult, uncomfortable questions concerning the intent of the photographer.

Arbus was very curious about society around her, and her favourite thing to do was to go where she had never been. This manifested as an obsessive exploration into what it means to photograph and to be photographed, and what can happen at that moment of exchange—something elusive and a little bit magical. Whether Arbus is an empathetic champion of the outsider or an exploitative voyeur is something that each viewer alone must decide.

The works in this exhibition are from the last decade of her life, the period in which her recognisable style was in full flight and she was in total control of her medium. These rare prints are shown alongside photographs by others who also sought to redefine the tradition of portraiture and whose vision of America is also both challenging and moving.

This exhibition features Arbus’s forerunners, peers and those inspired by her practice such as Walker Evans, William Klein, Lisette Model and Weegee; those who practised documentary street photography in the 1970s and 1980s such as William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander, Mary Ellen Mark, Milton Rogovin and Garry Winogrand and recent works by Katy Grannan (only at the Art Gallery of South Australia).

Please note

Arbus’s images are not reproduced in this resource due to copyright constraints, so please make full use of the travelling exhibition, the internet and books such as Diane Arbus: an aperture monograph and Diane Arbus: revelations (see p 16, ‘Further reading’).

The development of this educational resource is informed by the VCE Art Study Design and NSW Board of Studies Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus. The discussion questions and activities in this resource can also be adapted to teach the knowledge and skills of the Visual Arts learning area for Years 7–10 in the Australian Curriculum.

All works illustrated in this resource are from the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Diane Arbus
American portraits

Weegee not titled (At a concert in Harlem) c.1948, gelatin silver photograph. Purchased 1981
An uncompromising view of the world

Diane Arbus was born Diane Nemerov, the daughter of wealthy Jewish New Yorkers; her father ran Russek’s, a department store selling furs and women’s clothing on Fifth Avenue. Growing up in an apartment in a towering building on Central Park West, she was highly protected from the world. She never felt adversity, and resented her upbringing, both at the time and later, because it seemed to her to be an unreal experience of the world. At age eighteen, she married Allan Arbus, her childhood sweetheart, and they ran a successful photography studio for a decade from the mid 1940s, doing fashion shots for leading picture magazines.

In 1956, Arbus stopped working with Allan in the studio and began to explore subjects of her own choice. She was essentially self-taught, apart from the occasional class, and undertook a detailed study of the work of other photographers as she struck out on her own. Compelled to face that which had been off limits during her privileged childhood, she looked to other photographers who had confronted the world head-on, including Weegee, William Klein, Walker Evans and Lisette Model. They each recorded their surroundings in their own way and, at times, with a frightening candour. Arbus found in their images an uncompromising view of the world, stripped of sentimentality.

Klein, who was also self-taught, experimented with the flash, wide-angle lenses, blurring and close-ups and abstraction and accidents, producing grainy, high contrast prints. Klein’s 1956 book Life is good and good for you in New York: trance witness revels, a copy of which Arbus owned, gave impetus to the emerging genre of street photography through his harsh, uncompromising vision of the city. His work was met with misunderstanding and hostility, particularly in the United States.

Discussion questions

What are the differences between street photography and art photography, both as terms and styles of documentation?

How does the direct gaze of the subjects in Klein’s and Arbus’s images affect the viewers engagement with the image and those portrayed in them?

Study

Research and examine the history and ethics of documentary street photography. Were there any constraints on photographers capturing images in public during the 1950s to 1970s and how does that differ in the twenty-first century?

Art-making activity

Construct situations to photograph that simulate spontaneous street photography. Attempt to create as authentic a scene as possible through manipulation of camera angles and background settings.
William Klein  Christmas shoppers, near Macy's, New York 1954, gelatin silver photograph. Purchased 1993

Related Arbus images:
Child with toy hand grenade, in Central Park, New York City 1962, gelatin silver photograph. Purchased 1980
The gap between intention and effect

Prior to 1962, Arbus worked primarily with a 35 mm Nikon camera, and her photographs were often about gesture, with grainy images and subjects frequently shown in movement. She switched in 1962 to a two-and-a-quarter-inch, medium-format, twin-lens Rolleiflex (later a Mamiyaflex), which she used with a flash and which, when printed full-frame, gave the photographs a square format.

The pictures she took with these cameras are deceptively but deliberately simple. Compositionally, they are often masterful, with repetitions of shapes and minutely observed, subtly presented details. Despite the confronting subject matter, her images have a classical stillness, an insistent frontality that she borrowed from classic documentary photography. She adds to this a very deliberate use of the snapshot aesthetic, with slightly tilted picture planes and people caught unawares, to signal the authenticity of her connection with the subject.

Arbus developed a working method and style that offered what amounts to a critique of the photographic portrait. There is a palpable tension in the way she presents her subjects, a complicity in the image-making process that rubs up against the fact that her subjects seem caught off guard, unintentionally revealing aspects of themselves. Arbus identified this as ‘the gap between intention and effect’, explaining that ‘it really is totally fantastic that we look like this and you sometimes see that very clearly in a photograph. Something is ironic in the world and it has to do with the fact that what you intend never comes out like you intend it’ (quoted in Arbus & Israel, 1972, p 2). Arbus’s ability to connect with and gain the trust of people is now legendary.

Discussion questions

What is in the power of photography to transform the ordinary person into the extraordinary?

What are the visual elements captured in these photographs, that give us clues to the time and place of the people’s lives?

Study

Examine how the nature of portraiture changed with the invention of photography in the 1830s and how Arbus’s work contributed to that continuing evolution in the second half of the twentieth century.

Art-making activity

Research and build a pinhole camera with which to take a series of photographs. Darkroom facilities and supervision are required for this activity.
Walker Evans  Tenant farmer’s wife, Alabama 1936, gelatin silver photograph. Purchased 1978

Related Arbus images:
The aristocrats

As a student at the alternative Ethical Culture Fieldston School in the Bronx, New York, Arbus developed a fascination with myths, ritual and public spectacle. This preoccupation remained steadfast throughout her life. For example, she was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship in 1963 to document ‘American rites, manners and customs’. She had an insatiable fascination with the world and sought to make photographs that addressed fundamental aspects of humanity.

It was the photographer Lisette Model, with whom she studied in the late 1950s, who made her realise that, in a contradictory way, the more specific a photograph of something was, the more general its message became. Model’s satirical portraits of the rich on the French Riviera and the photographs she made of the Lower East Side’s poor and marginalised in the 1940s show that she took her own advice: ‘Don’t shoot ‘till the subject hits you in the pit of your stomach’ (quoted in Abbott, Berenice, Lisette Model: an aperture monograph, Aperture, New York, ‘79, p 9). By the 1950s, she had largely turned to teaching. Her influence on Arbus, who took a number of her classes at the New School in 1956 and again in 1957–58, was profound. Arbus was particularly drawn to marginalised people who had, for whatever reason, fallen out of a conventional place in society and were forced (those born with a disability) or chose (the nudists, for example) to construct their own identity. To find them, she frequented sideshow alleys, joined nudist camps and visited seedy hotels. She also went to public spaces, streets and parks where social rules were often arbitrarily imposed and discarded. Her subjects are often seen to play with society’s roles and restrictions. She classified these people as ‘aristocrats’, having achieved a certain freedom from social constraints, and they made her feel a mix of shame and awe.

Discussion questions

How much of the larger context of the people’s lives is obvious to the viewer in these photographic portraits?

How much of Arbus as a person is revealed by her portrait choices? Also consider the work of other photographers in the exhibition.

Study

Research and examine the personal history and family background of Arbus. Look at aspects of her life that may have inspired and influenced her fascination with people on the fringes of society.

Art-making activity

Photograph a family celebration, local festival or sporting event. Focus on those that inhabit the fringes rather than the people at the centre of attention. Review your images to see what people and stories are revealed.

Related Arbus images:
A young man in curlers at home on West 20th St, NYC, 1966 1966, gelatin silver photograph. Purchased 1980
The prints

Arbus stated that, for her, ‘the subject of the picture is more important than the picture’ (quoted in Arbus & Israel, 1972, p 15). There is no doubt that the emotional authenticity of what she photographed was of upmost importance. In keeping with this, she often undersold her skill as a photographer. She often complained of technical difficulties, and others frequently observed that she seemed weighed down by her equipment. By downplaying her relationship to the technical aspects of her work, Arbus sought instead to emphasise her rapport with her subjects. All the same, she was very clear about how she wanted her images to look. She worked hard to achieve a particular quality in her prints, which have a distinct feel and appearance to other photographs of the 1960s.

Arbus worked hard to emphasise the photographic-ness of her pictures. She modified the negative tray on her Omega ‘D’ enlarger to produce the distinctive black border around her images, and she later used strips of cardboard down the sides of her negatives to blur the edges. Both of these techniques meant that each of her prints is slightly, wonderfully unique. And there is often damage (tears and marks) on the negative, which Arbus has made no effort to minimise or disguise—for example, Woman with a beehive hairdo and Girl in a watch cap, both made in 1965.

Close viewing of the collection of photographs held at the NGA reveal ghostly traces of the hand of Arbus. She reminds us consistently through a number of careful and deliberate strategies that we are looking at a photograph that has been made by a particular person.

Discussion questions

How does the lighting in these photographs affect the setting and mood of the image?

What is it about Arbus’s images and those other photographers in the exhibition that make them emotionally authentic?

Study

Research and examine in detail the black-and-white photographic darkroom techniques of the 1950s to 1970s and how Arbus used these to her creative advantage.

Art-making activity

Take photographic portraits and manipulate your images with a computer program in a similar way in which Arbus manipulated hers in the darkroom. How are the technical limitations of the photographic process and digital manipulation assisting or hindering your intended effect?
Mary Ellen Mark, *not titled (Elderly woman kissing man)*, from The bar series 1977, gelatin silver photograph. Purchased 1980

Related Arbus images:
To know life

Arbus was not alone in photographing the social landscape of America in the 1960s. Others, including Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander and Milton Rogovin, similarly took to the country’s streets. Rogovin’s life work was to photograph people from poor minority groups, and where he lived and conducted much of his work, the city of Buffalo, was well suited to his choice of subject. Like Arbus, he often knew and befriended the people he photographed, returning to them over many years and collaborating with them to create images of great dignity and integrity.

Friedlander’s images are invariably about looking, and this includes turning the camera on himself. He often intrudes into his hastily grabbed, ironic studies of the city, in a reflection or with his shadow or shoes. In this way, the viewer is constantly reminded of the photographer’s presence and role in constructing the image. His works are laconic, witty and intensely personal. Certainly, his self-portraits are rarely flattering. Coming at the end of a decade in which a particular, new brand of art photographer had begun to achieve celebrity status, Friedlander’s self-portraits can also be seen as a shrewd sendup of fame.

Arbus, Winogrand and Friedlander were included in the landmark 1967 exhibition New documents, curated by John Szarkowski for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This was the only major showing of Arbus’s work during her lifetime. While acknowledging the artists distinct styles, Szarkowski considered them all part of a generation that was using the documentary tradition ‘toward more personal ends’, as he wrote in the exhibition’s wall label (moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_391565.pdf). ‘Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy—almost an affection—for the imperfections and the frailties of society.’

Discussion questions

How are the cultural values and attitudes of the times reflected in Arbus’s photographs?

How is the ‘selfie’ of today similar or different to Arbus’s and Friedlander’s images?

Study

Research the 1967 exhibition New documents and analyse the similarities and differences between the three photographers’ works. Critically examine why their work was viewed as a major shift in documentary photography and why the exhibition is still viewed as significant fifty years on.

Art-making activity

Document in pictures the life of one of your school friends. Remember to get permission. Try to capture the highs, lows and in-between moments of their day. Select six images to exhibit that best convey your subject’s life.
DIANE ARBUS  
American portraits

Lee Friedlander  
Rt 9W, NY 1969,  
gelatin silver photograph.  
Purchased 1981

Related images:  
Burlesque comedienne in her  
dressing room, Atlantic City NJ  
1963, gelatin silver photograph.  
Purchased 1980

The Junior Interstate Ballroom  
Dance Champions, Yonkers NY  
1963, gelatin silver photograph.  
Purchased 1980
The Arbus legacy

Arbus occupies an important place in the development of American photography. Her work has indelibly influenced the way the documentary has evolved over the past fifty years. Many leading contemporary photographers, such as William Eggleston and Mary Ellen Mark, continue to rethink the tradition, looking back to Arbus, just as she looked back to her predecessors. Although some people still take issue with the way Arbus photographed the world, her impact on audiences and photographers alike is incontestable.

Arbus used the snapshot aesthetic in her work to increase its aura of authenticity and immediacy. Eggleston later employed the same technique in colour, without the abstraction and artistic mediation of black-and-white photography. Contemporary audiences reacted this with confusion. However, careful observation of his images reveals a masterful eye and a sophisticated understanding of the way photography transforms the world. Eggleston’s images are at once monumental and mundane, ordinary and strange, prosaic and poetic. The result is luminous, breathtaking and perfectly banal.

Mark also built a career photographing those on the fringes of society, seeking out people she felt displayed what she described as attitude and often working on projects over many years, slowly earning trust. Her commitment was to give the people she photographed a unique voice, an individuality. Commenting on a body of work, Mark spoke of her desire to let her subjects ‘make contact with the outside world by letting them reach out and present themselves’ (Bailey, Ronald H, ‘Mary Ellen Mark’s Poignant Scrapbook—Ward 81’, in American Photographer, June 1978, viewed maryellenmark.com/text/magazines/american%20photographer/911T-000-001.html).

Discussion questions

How important are inspirational works and mentors to an artist’s creative development?

Does the ability to take innumerous snapshots and upload them to social media in an instant make us treat our subjects differently to the way in which Arbus, Eggleston and Mark approached theirs?

Study

Source three photographic images from three different artists that inspire and excite you to produce work. Analyse and describe what it is about these images or photographic techniques that appeal to you and how they might influence your own art-making.

Art-making activity

Choose one of Arbus’s photographic portraits and recreate it as best as you can, using people, props, studio lighting and digital manipulation. Rate your result against the original.

Related Arbus images: Teenage couple on Hudson Street NYC 1963, gelatin silver photograph. Purchased 1980
Large black family in small shack 1968, gelatin silver photograph. Purchased 1981
**Glossary of terms**

**Gelatin silver photograph:** A monochrome (black-and-white) imaging print produced using the light sensitivity of silver halides, which are suspended in gelatin and chemically processed to secure an image to paper.

**Pinhole camera:** A camera without a lens, it is often made from cardboard or wood and has a very small hole pierced in one end. The hole allows light to pass through and form an image on the back of the camera, which is covered with photographic film or light-sensitive paper.

**SLR camera:** A single-lens reflex camera allows the user to see the exact image formed by the picture-taking lens by means of a hinged mirror between the lens and the film.

**Polaroid camera:** An instant picture camera designed for Polaroid materials.

**Direct gaze:** The direct gaze of the eyes of a person in a painting or photograph at the viewer of the work.

**Selfie:** A photograph taken of oneself using a digital device such as the smart phone, usually with the intention of posting it on a social network.

**Curriculum links**

**Board of Studies NSW Stage 6 Key Competencies**

**VCE Art Study Design Analytical Frameworks**

**Australian Curriculum, Visual Arts, Years 7 and 8, 9 and 10**
australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/the-arts/visual-arts

**Additional resources**

- **National Gallery of Australia**
  nga.gov.au/photography

- **Museum of Modern Art, New York**
moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3487

- **Australian Centre for Photography**
  acp.org.au

- **Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona Foundation**
  ccp.arizona.edu

- **The J Paul Getty Museum**

**Further reading**