

SUSAN UNTERBERG

Unterberg's studies of mothers and daughters are very large, double-stacked photographs (seven images each of daughters and below them, their mothers) taken with a Polaroid camera, then blown up unaltered, and juxtaposed on the wall. Unlike most images of women we are used to seeing, these are not posed, artful, or glamorous. The women stare out at us directly, confrontationally, sometimes with ambivalence, occasionally with a look that scarcely conceals terror, despair, or rage.

The images read from right to left, left to right, up and down, and crossways, and it is in this second, comparative reading that the relationship between the two women presented is activated. First, their physical resemblance becomes apparent: the shape of the face, coloring, the pattern of folds and/or wrinkles overlaying the bone structure, the similarities in hairstyle and texture. Then the similarity of their gestures becomes clear: the way they position their heads, the set of their shoulders, the way the mouths are held. Then, the relationships that lie beneath the structure: how they present themselves as subjects to the camera's scrutiny, no matter how rapid or informal the scrutiny of the pervasive Polaroid is.

The fact that all the women are white, and appear to be middle or upper class is, I think, noticeable if not remarkable. Occasionally a bit of incidental background—an elegant interior, a beach, a lushly wooded area, a classical stone carving—or the little clothing—simple, but tasteful and carefully chosen—which is visible in these predominantly head shots confirms this. Unterberg's refusal to distance herself from her own background, and the pain of enforced conformity and consequent isolation which she experienced as a result of that background, inform these images strongly. (The first pictures she did in this series, in fact, were of herself and her own mother.)

The images are disturbing because they break open the neutral facade of respectability the women might otherwise present, by virtue of the photographer's own emotional and cultural empathy with her subjects. (Ironically, Unterberg, who has also done commercial photography, offers each of her subjects an exquisitely done, traditional Hasselblad portrait in which they and their relationships are idealized and purged of pain, ambivalence, or the physical manifestations of age; these portraits offset the distress the subjects almost always express if they see themselves "revealed" in her work.)

Especially in the faces of the older women, we can see the price extracted by their lives; even more startling is to see, unwittingly, the ways in which the daughters are both bound to and escape from the choices their mothers have made, both for themselves and for their children.

Desire, loss, fury, sadness, awareness, self-consciousness, dignity, and stubbornness are at war in each generation's view of itself, and its view of the other. The past, present, and future exist simultaneously in the presentation of what might have been, what is, and what might be in the complex relationships between these women, young, middle-aged, and/or old, who "belong" to each other.