

From The Nursing Home Series, 1985



I LOOKS PRETTY GOOD EXCEPT I AM BALD-HEADED

SOME OLD PEOPLE ARE ABSOLUTELY USELESS
BUT I AM HANGING ON VERY WELL
I AM GOING TO BE 99

IT IS ALL A STRUGGLE
WHEN I GO TO SLEEP I AM NEVER SURE IF I WILL EVER WAKE UP
I AM SLEEPING BETWEEN DARKNESS AND LIGHTNESS

THOMAS HENDERSON

In the hands of the politically conscious photographer, the camera has proven itself to be an effective tool for social change. Lewis Hine's early 20th century photographs of children working in factories, old before they had a chance to grow up, awakened the nation to enact laws protecting children from exploitation. Our collective image of the Depression is based upon the straight-forward photographs of Walker Evans and other FSA (Farm Security Administration) photographers, whose heart-wrenching depictions of rural poverty contributed to the call for the great social programs of the Roosevelt era. More recently, W. Eugene Smith's 1970s photographs of the crippling effects of mercury poisoning on the inhabitants of Minimata, Japan, stimulated the environmental movement.

Jim Goldberg is one of several young photographers who continue to work in the tradition of social documentation, but who approach their subjects without indictments or simple solutions. Goldberg, in his Nursing Home Series, presents the plight of the elderly. Like Ruth Morgan, another young Bay Area photographer whose stunning portraits of inmates at San Quentin were shown last year in MATRIX (#87), Goldberg forces the viewer to confront a segment of the population that is institutionalized and comfortably out of public view. Aided by a grant from the Cambridge, Massachusetts, Art Council, Goldberg spent seven months getting to know and photographing the residents of Neville Manor Nursing Home. Each portrait is a result of a long process

in which Goldberg presented his subject with a black-and-white photograph and asked that a response to the work be written directly on the margins. Comments range from the poetic, "I'm slipping between darkness and lightness," to the resigned, "I am through with this world, I want to go to a happy place." Defiance, "Young people turn their backs...I'd like to hit them with my cane. They'll learn--everybody gets old," and bitterness, "I have no friends, no children...I certainly am useless," are often expressed but are punctuated by an occasional optimistic note: one patient writes, "This is the good life," and another, "We like it here."

Goldberg initiated the practice of having his subjects write on photographs ten years ago in two series made in San Francisco, the first photographed in welfare hotels, followed by another made in the drawing rooms of that city's art patrons. The subjects' responses, the common expressions of fears or joys, often jolt our assumptions as to which group is better off. A prosperous man admits to "a lack of self-confidence," and states he is "afraid of being a loser," while one welfare hotel dweller says, "I take pride in the picture as it seems so natural and life like," and another, "Gee I look good--healthy and have a honest face." Goldberg's initial idealistic intent of helping the poor and humanizing the rich through photographic interaction was shaken as he realized that the issues of poverty and wealth are complex and solutions to social inequities more elusive than

he had imagined.

The Nursing Home Series includes photographs of the institutional environment alongside the portraits. A mural-size image of a ghostly figure behind a curtain divider is a powerful evocation of isolation. A large image of the back of a woman's head as she looks out the window at a garden signifies the separation of the residents from the outside world. Certain leitmotifs--the clock, the wheelchair, the curtain, the picture of Christ--appear again and again in single and gridded photographs, recreating the ambience of Neville Manor and underlining the concerns of its residents.

Goldberg tries to present an honest picture of the day-to-day life of his elderly subjects. Many of them simply could not be cared for at home; others have no one able or willing to perform the task. As life-expectancy increases and the population of the United States becomes older, it will become more and more difficult to ignore the problems of care for the aged.

Goldberg was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1953 and studied photography and education at Western Washington University, Bellingham, receiving a B.A. in 1975. Goldberg moved to San Francisco to study at Lone Mountain College and at that time undertook his "Guest Register" project, photographing people in transient hotels in the Mission District and asking them to write next to the photograph in a book (he might have taken his lead from Bill Owens' several photographic books on middle-

class America in which the images are expanded with commentary by the subjects). When Lone Mountain College closed, Goldberg enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute, receiving an M.F.A. in photography in 1979. Goldberg is the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (1980), the Ruttenberg Fellowship (1983), The Engelhard Award (1985), and the Guggenheim Foundation (1985). Goldberg's earlier series were shown at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1984 and published by Random House in a monograph entitled "Rich and Poor." The Nursing Home Series will also be shown at the Clarence Kennedy Gallery of the Polaroid Corporation, Cambridge, MA, in an exhibition cosponsored by the Boston Photographic Resource Center.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

Approximately 79 black-and-white photographs from The Nursing Home Series, 1985, sizes varying from 8 x 10" to 79-3/4 x 113".

Selected one-person
exhibitions:

Nova Gallery, Vancouver,
B.C., Canada, '79; O.K.
Harris Gallery, NY, '81; Blue
Sky Gallery, Portland, OR,
'82; Friends of Photography
Gallery, Carmel, CA, '84;
Akron Art Museum, Ohio, '86.

Selected bibliography:

Canavor, Natalie.
"Shows We've Seen," Popular
Photography, Oct. '80.
DePietro, Thomas. "A
Touch of Two Classes," The
New York Times Book Review,
March 30, '86.
Goldberg, Jim Rich and
Poor (monograph) (NY: Random
House, '85).
Green, Blake. "The
Double Life of Jim Goldberg,"
San Francisco Chronicle, Feb.
6, '86.
McMann, Jean. "Cultural
Contexts: The Work of Ruth
Morgan and Jim Goldberg," San
Francisco Camerawork
Quarterly, Summer, '85.
Orenstein, Peggy. "The
Goldberg Variations,"
Esquire, Oct. '85.

Selected group exhibitions:

Santa Barbara Museum of
Modern Art, CA, Attitudes:
Photography in the '70s, '79
(catalogue); Concord Gallery,
NY, Portraits, '83; Seibu
Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan,
20th Century Photographs from
The Museum of Modern Art, NY,
'83 (catalogue); San
Francisco Museum of Modern
Art, CA, Photography in
California: 1945-1980, '84
(catalogue); The Museum of
Modern Art, NY, Three
Americans (Robert Adams, Joel
Sternfeld, Jim Goldberg),
'84; San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art, CA, Extending the
Parameters of 20th Century
Art, '85; Everson Museum of
Art, Syracuse, NY, Lightwork
Photography in the '70s and
'80s, '85 (catalogue).

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