Some old people are absolutely useless.

But I am hoping not to be 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 slipping 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 straightforward 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 Minamata, Japan, stimulated the environmental movement.

Jin 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 (#97), Goldberg forces the viewer to confront a segment of the population that is institutionalized and comfortably out of public view. 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, "It looks 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 defines the 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 grided photographs which recreate the ambiance 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 (one 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, however, 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
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:

Selected group exhibitions:

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