

Paper Mache for 6-20-25 by David Read

I have been thinking a lot lately about photography and the photographers who captured my attention early on in my life. It's all been brought on as I plan a gallery show about well, me, and my life in front of and behind the camera. Probably the first photographer whose name I knew other than my dad's was Mathew Brady, whose portraits and graphic battlefield images made during the Civil War were perhaps more documentary than art, but some certainly rose above mere record keeping thanks to his thoughtful compositions.

As I became more serious about photography as a career, I was spellbound by the work of Diane Arbus, who as it happens is having a major retrospective show in New York City, her hometown. Many of her subjects reminded me of the people I worked with and encountered in Hollywood, Compton and Long Beach growing up in the LA area. Diane Arbus (1923–1971) is renowned for her stark, empathetic portraits of individuals who existed on society's fringes. She used a Rolleiflex medium-format camera to compose her square images with uncompromising clarity and depth. Her subjects ranged from twins and dwarfs to nudists, circus performers, and everyday New Yorkers, captured in settings both intimate and unsettling. The new show called "Diane Arbus: Constellation" features 454 prints, many never before exhibited, presented in an immersive, non-linear layout inspired by the city's subway grid. Instead of chronological or thematic grouping and invites visitors to navigate by instinct and curiosity. Reflective panels line the backs of the prints, echoing Arbus's intent that her photography reveal not only her subjects but also our own inner landscapes. Amid the breadth and variety, ranging from sharply detailed street scenes to tender, raw depictions of marginalized individuals, the exhibition maintains a consistent emotional intensity. It underscores Arbus's belief that photography should be introspective, psychoanalytic, and revealing. "Constellation" offers a rare chance to walk into her world, not as a historical survey but as an active exploration, a journey that challenges viewers to reconsider normality, identity, and humanity in all its complexity.

And then by chance, I recently discovered the work of an extremely important early photographer who I had never heard of, Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879) who was a pioneering British photographer whose innovative and artistic approach to portraiture helped establish photography as a fine art. Born in India, Cameron began her photographic career relatively late in life, receiving her first camera at the age of 48. Within a short span, she developed a unique, expressive style that defied the sharp-focus norms of her time. Cameron's portraits of friends, family, artists, and intellectuals such as Charles Darwin, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Thomas Carlyle, are notable for their soft focus, dramatic lighting, and emotional depth. She embraced imperfections—blurred details, scratches, and long exposure times—not as flaws but as integral aspects of her artistic vision. Her compositions often evoked classical and literary themes, drawing inspiration from the Pre-Raphaelites and Renaissance art. This theatricality and symbolism brought an ethereal and introspective quality to her images, distinguishing her work from the scientific and documentary photography that dominated the mid-19th century. Although her style was controversial during her lifetime for its perceived technical failings, Cameron passionately defended her methods as artistic choices. She was among the first to explore the expressive potential of the medium, placing emotion and interpretation at the center of her practice. Her influence continues to be celebrated in major collections and exhibitions around the world. Lots of images by these photographers are on line so take a minute, do a quick search and see what photos stand out for you.