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Arts & Theater

By Jessica Zack

Judy Dater retrospective celebrates photographer's focus on people



Judy Dater's "Self-Portrait With Stone, Badlands, South Dakota," 1981.

As a 21-year-old art student at San Francisco State in 1962, Judy Dater took her very first photography class and, as she remembers it, fell in love with portraiture “at a time when everybody else was photographing landscapes.”

Dater was just getting comfortable behind the camera (“first a 35mm, before I fell in love with the magic of a 4-by-5,” she says) during a period when the West Coast f.64 group (including Ansel Adams, Brett

Weston and Imogen Cunningham), founded in Oakland in the 1930s, remained influential in the Bay

Area's photography scene. Named for an aperture used to achieve maximum sharpness and depth of field with a large-format camera, the collective espoused an environmental, anti-pictorialist aesthetic — think of Adams' mountains or Weston's rippling sand dunes — that still held sway three decades later.

“We would all go as a class on field trips to Pebble Beach. I remember everybody eagerly taking pictures of the rocks, but I just wanted one of my friends to go sit on the rocks. Seeing a person in relation to the environment was always more visually interesting to me,” Dater said recently, discussing her career and the upcoming retrospective exhibition, “Judy Dater: Only Human,” opening Saturday, April 7, at the de Young Museum.

“Only Human” is the first broad survey of Dater's lengthy career in more than 20 years. She worked closely with Julian Cox, former chief curator of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and then (after Cox's departure in

October) with curatorial assistant Janna Keegan to select favorite images highlighting the enduring dramatic pull of her portraits and self-portraits.

Images date back to her student nudes from the 1960s. Also included are numerous direct-gaze shots of women, both clothed and nude, representing Dater's emergence as a pioneering feminist artist in the 1970s, as well as male nudes and conceptual self-portraits in the desert Southwest.

"Photography really wasn't such a big deal back then," said Dater, recounting how she met Cunningham, the revered doyenne of San Francisco photography, "with her little beanie and her peace symbol," during a student day trip to Big Sur Hot Springs.

"It was a small community. In Carmel, we'd all sleep on Brett Weston's floor. He'd make us pancakes, then we'd go to Ansel's house and he'd make us drinks."

"Imogen was 80 and I was twentysomething when we met," said Dater, who grew up in Hollywood, where her father owned a movie theater. "She took an interest in me because I was one of the few young photographers at the time also photographing people."

Cunningham became an influential mentor and friend until her death in 1976 at age 94. The two women are forever linked because of Dater's best-known photograph, "Imogen and Twinka, Yosemite" (1974). The staged re-creation of Thomas Hart Benton's painting "Persephone" (a poster of which hangs on Dater's darkroom door) shows tiny 90-year-old Cunningham (black coat, white hair, heavy Rolleiflex around her neck) looking startled in a forest by the sight of a naked young woman (model Twinka, Wayne Thiebaud's daughter) on the other side of a redwood tree.

Recognized all over the world, the photo was the first full-frontal nude to run in Life magazine, in its 1976 bicentennial celebration of American women.

"I almost didn't put it in the (de Young) show," Dater said. "It's been a blessing, and also a curse. A lot of people know the picture and don't know that I took it."

Photographing women — of all ages, shapes and ethnicities — has always been central to Dater's work. Early on she realized there was always an "implied story" when taking pictures in her subjects' own homes, "wearing their own clothes, surrounded by their own objects."

"People weren't talking about identity politics back in the '60s and '70s, or the male gaze, but it was always important to me that I was a woman taking photographs of women. I made a point of having them look directly into the camera. That way the person looking at the picture has to confront them."

"Judy developed a nuanced understanding of feminism that was far beyond its time, and started exploring what we now think of as gender neutrality really early on," said curator Keegan. "Her sitters, irrespective of their gender identity, can express various degrees of masculinity or femininity and she sees both as equally empowering."

Asked if she had to fight to be taken seriously as a young female artist in a male-dominated medium, Dater said, "Fight? No. I had to resist."

“I have plenty of #MeToo stories I could tell, plenty of invitations into the darkroom. Brett Weston flirted all the time. Propositions by very powerful men, and it was a given it would help my career. On the other hand, I experienced men like (photographers) Arnold Newman and Jim Enyeart just helping me, being supportive, when they thought I had talent. I experienced both extremes.”

Dater’s dog Blake (named for poet William Blake) rested his head on her lap while she reminisced in the light-filled Berkeley studio in which she’s worked daily for nearly 20 years. She lives nearby with her husband, UC Berkeley Bancroft Library Curator Jack von Euw.

Dater’s beloved 1972 Deardorff large-format camera stood on a tripod by a large rear window. It’s the same one she used to take the Imogen-Twinka photo, and that she recently hauled, at age 76, into the de Young to take a new nude self-portrait.

A self-described “obsessive people watcher,” Dater is just as fascinated today as she was as a young artist with the conundrum of how to best capture a person’s essence in one emotionally resonant frame.

An exhibition of her portraits and lesser-known conceptual work goes on view at Martin Muller’s Modernism Gallery on May 10.

“People are totally, centrally important to me, and still every bit as interesting,” she said. “That’s why I’m doing these gun portraits.”

Dater has recently been inviting gun owners into her studio to take close-up portraits with their weapons. “I’m not a gun advocate, I don’t own one, I’ve never shot one. But talking to people about why they have them, hearing their strong feelings, has been fascinating. People are kind of scared of this subject matter, but I do it because I’m curious.”



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Judy Dater: Only Human

April 7-Sept. 16. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. (415)750-3600. www.deyoung.famsf.org

Dater, seen at her studio in Berkeley, opens her “Only Human” career retrospective exhibit at the de Young on April 7.