

# DANZIGER

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## On Madison

POSED: November 23 - January 18.

The exhibition “Posed” looks at four photographers –Seydou Keïta, Dana Lixenberg, Susan Meiselas, and Irving Penn - who posed their subjects in uniquely personal and artful ways. The decisions for any photographer when making a posed portrait are myriad - they can be conceptual or instinctive, formal or reactive - but the success of the picture is always more about mastery of the medium than the luck of the moment.

A good photographic portrait is not just a picture of the sitter but a window into the thought process and psyche of the photographer, as the work of these four artists attests.

### SEYDOU KEÏTA

Seydou Keïta lived in Bamako, Mali, where he ran a successful portrait studio from the 1950s to early '60s taking pictures of local individuals and families. Essentially self-taught, Keïta developed his trademark style photographing his sitters in daylight against a variety of backdrops from plain drapes to vibrant African pattern. Some customers brought in items they wanted to be photographed with but Keïta also had a selection of accessories and clothing at his subject's disposal. No matter the situation Keïta had a natural gift and a refined aesthetic that made his portraits true and distinctive works of art.

Unknown to the West for most of his career, Keïta was “rediscovered” by westerners in the early '90's when the African Art collector Jean Pigozzi sent his curator André Magnin to Bamako to try to contact and meet Keïta who until then had only been known in the west as “Unknown Photographer”! Magnin returned with 921 negatives and arranged for a printer in Paris to make the first archival prints of the images under Keïta's supervision.

The most remarkable aspect of Keïta's portraits is that although he saw himself as a tradesman - a local professional portrait photographer who would have taken hundreds if not thousands of portraits, he seems rarely to have employed the same poses or positions for his subjects. Today, we recognize that he was a great and instinctive artist. And although we cannot witness an actual session, by studying Keïta's photographs we seem to see a moment where, aided by the photographer and their familiarity with the setting, the sitters relax into their own comfort zone. Most posed photographic portraits do not project an air of happiness - that is not their intent. But in Keïta's work more often than not the subjects seem joyful and relaxed. If this were Keïta's only contribution to photography that would be enough but in addition to that each portrait is rich and sympathetic observation of a distinct individual.

### DANA LIXENBERG

Dana Lixenberg began her two decade long project “Imperial Courts, 1993-2015” in the aftermath of the year Los Angeles was gripped by riots and civil unrest following the brutal beating of Rodney King. In 1992 Lixenberg was commissioned by a Dutch magazine to make a story about the efforts to rebuild the area impacted by the riots.

Lixenberg returned to South Central Los Angeles several times in the following year and, after meeting Crips gang leader Tony Bogard, ended up at Imperial Courts, one of the largest federal housing project in Watts. She wanted to create an alternative to what she saw as the one-dimensional and sensationalized reporting in the media by starting a photographic portrait series

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picturing the residents of an underserved community. To this end Lixenberg chose to shoot with a large-format camera and black and white film, preferring the slower, more deliberate photographic process. The project turned out to be a long-term undertaking with Lixenberg returning to Imperial Courts many times over the course of 22 years.

In Lixenberg's words, the drama in portrait photography comes largely from the "way a person positions him or herself, their body language, small gestures and the rich tonal range of the image". Often, her subjects' concentrated, fixed gaze conveys a quiet self-confidence, courage and steadfastness; small details reveal a trace of vulnerability, making her portraits seem so insightful. Lixenberg took all of her photographs outdoors so that the reading of her portraits was not influenced or defined by their private environments.

In 2017 Lixenberg was named the winner of the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for her "Imperial Courts, 1993-2015" opus with the judges noting: "Lixenberg's work is simultaneously understated and emphatic, reflecting a cool sobriety, which allows her subjects to own the gaze and their contexts without sentimentality or grandiosity."

### SUSAN MEISELAS

In Susan Meiselas' 2 ¼" square format portraits of dancers from her celebrated body of work "Carnival Strippers" we have the unique opportunity to see how a photographer moves between reportage and formal portraiture.

From 1972 to 1975, Susan Meiselas spent her summers photographing and interviewing women who performed striptease at small town carnivals around New England. Covering the story on many levels, Meiselas taped their stories and shot their daily routine "reportage" style using a 35mm Leica camera. However, at various points in her immersive coverage of the women, Meiselas switched cameras to shoot larger format more formal portraits of the women. After recording them in action before and after the shows, the posed 2 ¼" square portraits gave each woman a more distinct persona and greater authorship of their identity.

With the canvas and stretchers of the tents as a backdrop. Meiselas let the women pose themselves as they wanted to be portrayed. True performers, they arranged themselves in a variety of poses, each with their own individual hand and arm gestures. As most portrait painters will tell you, arranging the hands is one of the most difficult parts of painting a portrait but in Meiselas' group of portraits, seen together the hand and arm gestures present a symphony of flowing lines - each pose as unique as the individual who made it.

### IRVING PENN

Of the four photographers in this show, Irving Penn's "Corner Portraits" are the most rigorously formal. In 1948, Penn began making portraits in a tight corner space made of two studio flats pushed together, the floor covered with a piece of old carpeting. As Penn noted, "a very rich series of pictures resulted. This confinement, surprisingly seemed to comfort people, soothing them. The walls were a surface to lean on or push against. For me the picture possibilities were interesting: limiting the subjects' movement seemed to relieve me of part of the problem of holding on to them."

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Penn's subjects constituted a wide spectrum of celebrated figures of the era. In addition to the 6 pictures we are showing Penn photographed the Duchess of Windsor, Joe Louis, Duke Ellington, and Truman Capote and many others, but Penn was never over-awed. For Penn it seems that the subjects were less important than the picture.

Penn had already begun to use the studio as an environment in which the viewer is allowed to see the electrical cables, edges of backdrops, and the photographic detritus randomly scattered along the floor. This particular series, however, used the concept of a sharper-than-90° corner in which the subjects were forced to position themselves into Penn's geometry. Some are wedged in, some lean against the flats for support, others make the corner their stage. But Penn' simple construct - as he clearly hoped - reveals much of the character and personality of each sitter.