

Exhibition Review

Faces of Feminism. CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY. Mounted at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa. 13 April-19 June, 1994. 174 p. publication.

The wry smile of artist Sarah Diamond catches your eye from across the room. Mothers United for Metro Shelter in Halifax amble away from you down a pathway, children snuggled in their arms. An intimate group of Haitian women from *Le Point de ralliement des femmes haïtiennes* share a toast over dinner. Athlete Betty Baxter squints up at you from a gymnasium floor lit by bright sunlight. These are some of the images created by photographer Pamela Harris as part of her long-term project *Faces of Feminism*, exhibited at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography from April to June 1994.

This exhibition is composed of fifty-eight black and white photographs of individual women and women's groups from across the country. Several questions come to mind when looking at the images. Who are these women? What do the images tell us about feminism in Canada? These varied images, coupled with accompanying text panels tell the life stories of the women portrayed.

Harris, who has spent most of her career as a photographer documenting the women's movement and women's issues in Canada, began this project of documenting grass roots feminism in the early 1980s. She toured the full exhibition of images as well as selected groupings, beginning in 1984 with *Faces of Feminism - Toronto* and ending with the exhibition as we see it now. The project in its totality is, as Angela Miles comments in "Regarding Feminism" in P. Harris's *Faces of Feminism*, 1992, "an eloquent testimony to the vitality of the women's movement in Canada," as it documents the diversity of women's achievements, goals, dreams, aspirations, as well as the more mundane and common events of daily life. As mentioned in the preface of the publication of the same name, few of the women are household names to the ordinary viewer. However, their experiences as Canadian women are presented to us as universally understood. As Angela Miles states, "each woman's articulation of her identity as a woman and recognition of shared female interests and experiences provides us with the basis for her participation in the women's movement."

Harris has photographed women from all cultural backgrounds and all groups of society. She has attempted to cover a large spectrum of "feminisms," illustrating the range of philosophies that make up what feminism is in Canada today. There is

more than one feminism, and there is more than one way to express feminist sentiment. There is also more than one way to shoot a photographic portrait, and Harris has worked with her subjects to create an image that best tells a story about the sitter. Interestingly, the identity of the sitter in Harris's works is established by clarifying what work she does, hence farmers are photographed in their fields, artists in their studios, and health care workers in their clinics. Harris's oeuvre, however, covers all aspects of women's lives, not only work, and the images are diverse and rich. She photographs both women working for change from within the system, such as Marie Laing, MLA, in front of the Legislative Assembly, Edmonton, Alberta, and women who choose alternate methods for change such as Darlene Birch, midwife, and Tamarack and Mountain, who founded the Healing Centre for Women in Ottawa. She photographs poets such as Dorothy Livesay and Maxine Tynes, and includes their poems as accompanying text, letting their artistry speak for them. She photographs mothers at play with their children and women at rest at the end of the day. The accompanying text is often extremely personal, allowing us a rare glimpse of the more intimate life of the sitter.



Eunadie Johnson, Crisis Centre Founder, Thompson, Manitoba, 1985
(Photographer: Pamela Harris; from *Faces of Feminism*, Second Story Press, 1992)

Although these images and texts are powerful and inspiring documentary records of Canadian feminists, this exhibition lacks a certain dynamism in its presentation. A room full of images and text of such women looking inward towards each other or outward at us the viewer should create an environment in which a dialogue about feminism can take place, inviting the viewer to participate and enjoy the rich tapestry of image and text before them. Its placement within the pantheon of the museum removes the context and some of the meaning of the works, as the space is entirely unapproachable. In the museum community, this type of exhibition is referred to as "the big white cube;" singular images uniformly set apart at eye level, in a large white square space. Somehow, the warmth of the images and text is lost when set up against the harsh whiteness of the walls. It is unfortunate and ironic that this is so, as an exhibition of this sort has the potential to be a meeting place for community grass roots activity.

Although Harris's work on Canadian women is a testament to her tenacity and ardour in documenting faces of feminism, the exhibition lacks the conviction of the photographer.

The Documentary Art and Photography Division of the National Archives of Canada purchased portfolios of Pamela Harris's works from this and earlier projects in 1987, 1991 and 1992. This collection, although identical to the material in the exhibition, was not acquired for its aesthetic values; rather it was purchased for its information value concerning the multi-faceted nature of feminism in Canada today.

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