

Judith

Joy

Ross

**Photographs
1978-2015**

Startling in their transparency, the photographs of Judith Joy Ross (Hazleton, 1946) attest the ability of a portrait to glimpse the past, present, and even the future of its subject. Since the mid-1970s, Ross has used large-format cameras, printing the resulting negatives by contact to memorialize her brief encounters with a cross-section of individuals, with a focus on the working-class people of northeastern Pennsylvania, where she was born, raised, and still lives.

Without sentimentality or irony, Ross registers with steely delicacy the faces and bearing of the people who stand before her lens, intent on seeing the complexity of who they are rather than a projection of who they might otherwise be. This has required a spontaneous and radical leveling of the relationship between photographer and subject.

Ross's portraits are often, but not always, made in the context of series animated by moral, civic, or existential concerns. They address the sweep of human experience—innocence and loss; bravery and fear; bitterness and beauty; resilience and disenchantment—themes Ross has explored in subjects ranging from children at municipal parks and public schools and elected members of Congress, to African immigrants in Paris and strangers encountered on a cross-country drive. America's engagement in various wars has spurred some of Ross's most riveting portraits, of visitors to a national memorial, reservists called into active duty, and civilians who have either supported or stood in protest against these campaigns.

The distinctive way in which Judith Joy Ross tensions intimacy and emotional distance reveals the mutability of fellow beings subject to the greater forces of the world. For her, the camera is a tool not only for connection, but also for transcendence. "Without a camera, I am often anxious and unforgiving in my judgment," Ross has said. "With a camera, I can come to see and make sense of it all."

Joshua Chuang
Curator



Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs are gold-toned gelatin silver chloride printing-out paper prints. All works are from the collection of the artist.

The exhibition begins on Floor 0 and continues to Floor -1.

Beginnings

Eurana Park

All my life I wanted to be an artist, but until I discovered photography, I did not have a clear idea of what that meant. With the camera I found a way to connect to the bigger world. People became my subject—the lives of people! They were all strangers but now I could know them.

Raised in the coal-mining city of Hazleton, Pennsylvania, with a love of art and a regard for the commonplace, Judith Joy Ross found her medium, and her calling, when she first saw an image of the world projected onto the ground glass of a camera as a college student.

It would take more than a decade of experimenting with various motifs, camera formats, and printing styles, however, for Ross to develop a distinctive vision as a photographer. In the late 1970s, captivated by the inner lives of passing strangers, she began observing people in public parks and on city streets with a handheld view camera, taking note of revealing expressions or intimate gestures.

The death of Ross's father in 1981 moved her to revisit Eurana Park, the site of a local swimming hole in Weatherly, Pennsylvania, where she and her brothers used to play as children. The next summer, she used a newly-acquired 8×10-inch view camera to make portraits of the young people she found there. Seeking answers to the question of what made life worth living, Ross engaged directly with her subjects, who were in turn transfixed by the large, wooden apparatus she used to record their encounter. Suffused with soft light and a gentle trust, the photographs she took in that and subsequent summers evoke a sense of allegory, conveying what it is to be not only youthful but also supple, before the complications of life take hold.

[1983–1984]

Portraits at the Vietnam

Veterans Memorial

Portraits of the United States

Congress

Determined to confront harder realities of adult life, Judith Joy Ross was spurred in 1983 and 1984 to make portraits of visitors to the just-opened Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. After weeks of futile efforts to record the complex emotional responses she observed, Ross began to comprehend the site as a theater in which she could see people as worthy in their tragic selves. Ross used a shallow depth of field to isolate her subjects from their backgrounds as well as the memorial itself, resulting in a series of portraits that are profoundly enigmatic in their psychological address.

The enormous toll of the Vietnam War compelled Ross to think about the authority figures who had enabled it. Rather than simply confirm her own prejudices about her nation's elected officials, she conceived an ambitious campaign to photograph them—especially ones with whom she disagreed—as a way to reveal their humanity. Remarkably, Ross secured appointments to make portraits of more than one hundred members of Congress and their aides between 1986 and 1987. Working onsite in the offices and hallways of the Capitol, and using only available light, Ross saw past her sitters' attempts at self-presentation, registering instead the qualities that made them real—however flawed—thus equal.

Nanticoke

[1985-1989]

Easton Portraits

The pictures tell stories many of us remember from our own lives, but they are pictures of someone else. And so the line between them and us gets blurry. Whose story is this? Answer, our story.

Even as she dedicated herself to subjects of national consequence, Judith Joy Ross continued her heightened observations of everyday life in northeastern Pennsylvania. The most poignant of these were recorded at sites of personal significance. In Nanticoke, where her father once managed a five-and-ten-cent store, she made a cycle of pictures of a defunct storefront as well as the interior of a diner where he used to take her to lunch. In nearby Dorrance, she created portraits of the arched boughs and gnarled trunks of willow trees at the edge of a lake built by her father decades earlier.

In 1988 Ross made a series of portraits of children and adolescents in the city of Easton. More worldly than those she met at Eurana Park, the youths in Easton look back at Ross's camera with wariness, even defiance. With clear-eyed empathy, Ross valorized their unvarnished, still-forming identities as wondrous and deserving of attention.

Jobs

U.S. Army Reserves on Red Alert - Gulf War Rallies

In 1990, partly inspired by August Sander's occupational portraits from Weimar-era Germany, Judith Joy Ross embarked on a project to show working-class people going about their jobs, a motif she had explored earlier. For her longest-running series, Ross brought her view camera along with her everywhere she went, choosing her subjects so adroitly that it is difficult to imagine them in any other role.

Ross's charged portraits of army reservists at the Bethlehem Armory grew out of her "Jobs" series. Over two days, dozens of men and women consented to be photographed by Ross as they shed their civilian lives and readied themselves to be sent to the Persian Gulf for Operation Desert Shield. Months later Ross also memorialized attendees at local rallies where people signaled their support for the troops by tying yellow ribbons around their arms.

[1990–1993]

Portraits of the Hazleton

Public Schools

2046

Northeast Philadelphia

I once asked my mother what she did when, as children, my brothers and I misbehaved. She said she would look at us very, very hard—not to stare us down, but rather to look until she truly saw us, and who we really were to her.

In 1992 Ross received a grant that allowed her to realize a project she had long contemplated: to photograph inside the schools she and her brothers had attended, and their mother before them. For three years, Ross and her camera were fixtures in the classrooms and hallways of the Hazleton public schools as she recorded environmental and individual portraits of elementary, middle, high school students, and their teachers. Together they offer a collective view of American public school life that is more sweetly and painfully authentic than that found in any yearbook.

The prospects of youth were also the subject of the portrait series “2046,” which Ross carried out in 1996, the year she turned fifty. With its title, the series invites viewers to weigh the future more explicitly—what will become of these subjects and their relationships with each other, fifty years hence?

Noting the dearth of diverse perspectives among the populace of the Lehigh Valley where she lives, Ross sought to learn about the experience of urban youth. In the summer of 1998, she drove to the bleak northeastern part of Philadelphia and set up her 8×10 camera in a concrete park, where her subjects’ wariness eventually gave way to acknowledgment. Ross returned repeatedly to the city to photograph in playgrounds as well as community youth programs, making portraits that radiate a ravishing presence against a backdrop of violence and privation.

Eagle Rock Reservation

Washington Square

Paris Portraits Park

You have to really see something before you take a picture... I do not see most of the time. I am just negotiating the space and my endless needs. Seeing is when you recognize the deep meaning, the poetry of who you see.

A week after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, Judith Joy Ross drove to a nature reserve in West Orange, New Jersey, with an unobstructed view of the Manhattan skyline. There Ross asked fellow bystanders if she could photograph them as they ruminated on the void where the World Trade Center once stood.

A few days later Ross ventured into New York City to face the legacy of a different tragedy. Just prior to 9/11, five teenagers had arrived from northern Uganda to testify at the United Nations about their experience of a brutal civil war. Learning of their ordeal and their scuttled plans, Ross arranged to photograph them in Washington Square Park. Transported from one harrowing reality to another, they stand as evidence of their trauma and survival.

Those portraits led her eventually to photograph African immigrants in Paris, the other cosmopolitan city with which she had a personal connection, through her brother, Edward, a longtime resident. When language barriers inhibited her engagements with people on the street, she turned to making portraits of her brother's friends and acquaintances, as well as Edward himself.

Home / Rockport Freeland

Ross's pursuit of her own metaphorical biography has been an essential aspect of her art. As her mother's health declined in the late 1990s, Ross began to photograph the family cottage in Rockport, Pennsylvania, during one of her periodic retreats. For Ross, everything in and about the house—its weathered exterior, timeworn furnishings, even a trinket picked up from a junk store—seemed to speak.

In 2004 she made a series of portraits in Freeland, the hardscrabble borough where her father was born. Ross's family history and Freeland's intimate size enabled her to establish an immediate rapport with the place and its people. In a mobile home park, she observed four boys racing old pedal carts down a gravelly road. Each race ended with a feigned crash, an act she saw as symbolic of their lives.

[2000-2009]

Elections

Eyes Wide Open

Both of us together—we make the picture. They're giving me, I'm getting. I'm encouraging them, they give me more. We might actually be in love for a few seconds. I'll never see them again.

Drawn to the sheer humanity of the civic ritual by which people elect their leaders, Ross started in 1996 to make portraits of neighbors and fellow citizens as they lined up to vote at her local church. During national contests, Ross traveled to Democratic polling centers around the region, observing with critical distance the influx of party officials, field organizers, and campaign buttons that has accompanied Pennsylvania's perennial status as a swing state.

“Eyes Wide Open,” a stark public exhibition about the human cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, spurred Ross in 2006 to reconsider her nonpartisan approach to portraying those exercising their civic duties. Moved by the emotion of those contemplating the exhibition, as well as those who gathered concurrently to demand an end to the Iraq war, Ross created a series that interspersed public mourners with public protesters, showing them collectively as a heterogeneous array of ordinary citizens affected by a war they did not choose to wage.

Out West

[2011-2015]

In 2006 Ross realized a long-held desire to drive across the United States. Taking a northern route, she made stops in Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington State before returning home to Pennsylvania, making portraits of strangers she met along the way.

She further expanded the scope of her work after the printing-out-paper on which she had depended for decades was discontinued, compelling her to photograph for a number of years primarily with color film. Soft and restrained but with an occasional pop, Ross's handling of color invests her portraits with a feeling of immediacy and atmosphere as affected by season or weather.

In recent years Ross has resumed photographing solely in black and white. As her production has become slowed, it has also become more distilled and succinct. A pair of portraits made in Nanticoke show an older man softened by time, and a raven-haired woman whose presence is unyielding, even terrifying. The most recent photograph depicts a haunting young woman who looks up in astonishment. Each an act of acceptance, they have much to say about our epoch.