

(At the end of the text is a link to this section of the website.)

The Family of Man – Photoassemblages by Allen Schill

– These assemblages are the eventual outcome of a job I held at a New York City department store around 1973-75. The job consisted of making poster-sized enlargements of people's personal photographs, rephotographing the original on a type of black-and-white Polaroid film that yielded a negative from which to make the large print, and a positive proof to judge the exposure. We offered, for an extra dollar, to put the little proof in a key ring, but most customers were not interested. All these would have been discarded, but I started to become fascinated with these images. They had a unique appeal; I began to collect them.

– Their character varied a great deal, from humorous to sentimental to the noble. Sometimes we worked from a casual snapshot, and sometimes from a formal portrait, occasionally even from an amateur oil painting. There were weddings, graduations, baptisms, babies, children and parents, grandparents and old folks passed on, lovers, pictures of the old country – in short, all the big events and the most treasured memories in life, and the people most beloved of other people.

– Whatever the case, the fact of getting the poster made was a sort of guarantee of the importance of the photo to the customer. There was often great emotion invested in these pictures, sometimes very powerful. Several times I was asked to make a sort of forced assemblage of two separate photos of a husband and wife, of whom there was no portrait together. There was a sadness to the result, its join unretouched, that was impossible to miss. Once the poster was for a memorial service for a boy who had been run over by a bus, of whom the only photo available was a crude but expressive vending-machine photo, scratched and worn from having been carried for years in someone's wallet. Behind every picture was a story, and a life.

– A considerable part of the universality of these pictures, seen as a whole, was the incredible heterogeneity of the people in them, a function of their being collected at 59th Street and Lexington Avenue, as much a crossroads of the world as any: there were people of every race, type, and background. It did not surprise me to see their common humanity manifested in the same ways, regardless of nationality or cultural background, but it could not fail to impress me nonetheless. The images were saturated with dignity, pride, and love. (It was no coincidence that I eventually gave the series the same name as the famous MOMA exhibition and book, *The Family of Man*.)

– In all I saved over 2000 of these proofs, each one carefully coated with the fixing solution, and over the next several years, took them out occasionally to ponder them. Eventually I sorted them by type and affinity, trimmed them all down to a 2"x2" square (showing some of the background of the copy board), and finally mounted the grouped photos in a simple grid layout (this in 1981). I made thirty or so assemblages, a few of only three or four photos, many others incorporating up to 20 or 25, and a few bigger still.

– These assemblages by nature are unique pieces, irreproducible (unlike most of my photographs, which are made in limited editions). In general I do not photograph people for the purposes of my artistic activity, only in snapshots like most other casual photographers. These works are among the few I've done of which people are the true subjects, the only works which I have felt compelled to do not for the sake of my particular artistic concerns, but for the sake of the homage these people deserved.

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