
JOANNE LEONARD: DISTILLED LIFE

In college, Joanne Leonard majored in social science and minored in art. The balance between the two that she sought in her first years as an independent photographer has, in her mature work, become inherent—if more covert and complex. It has added to her formal accomplishments an element of intelligent caring, which in turn tempers the romanticism over-emphasized by most of her critics. I prefer the word humanist for Leonard's esthetic combination of the factual and the lyrical. The strength of her romanticism derives from its antithetical disillusionment, from the tough underlying fiber of social awareness which is an integral part of the feminist credo: "The personal is the political."

From the beginning of her career in 1964, Leonard has photographed the intimate lives of women with a sense of their historical significance. Although not an "organized" or highly political feminist, she was an early supporter of women's art and never had to make an about-face when feminist consciousness struck, since she had already unconsciously rooted her art in her own female experience. Her first subjects were her neighbors in a Black ghetto in Oakland, California, where she lived with her sculptor husband. After teaching herself the rudiments of photography and studying with anthropological photographer, John Collier, Jr., she saw herself in 1964 as "a committed documentarian." By 1968, she had surrendered to the "inclination to photograph personal moments rather than public ones," which had led her into the homes of her neighbors, family and friends. Typical of this period is a picture of a very young Black bride smiling shyly in front of a possibly symbolic calendar, television and nearly closed door; and another of the same bride having her hair fixed by a younger girl in front of an empty mirror.

At the same time, trying to resolve her conflict between a need to respond to world events and this attraction to "intimate family scenes," Leonard began to make photo-collages, combining her own prints with found material. By the early 1970's, many women artists had arrived at collage as the most expressive and effective vehicle for a feminist esthetic. Although

the position of women and women artists has somewhat improved over the past decade, it remains a "collage situation" merely to be a woman in a patriarchal society, reminiscent of the Surrealist definition of collage as a new reality forged from the reconciliation of two distant realities. Collage offers not only a means of knotting together the fragments of women's multiple roles and offsetting the stark contrasts imposed by heightened political consciousness, but it also provides a way of leaving nothing out. Although the collage esthetic has infinite stylistic possibilities, one of its premises might be said to be that no part is rejected in favor of the whole. It is a medium closer to film and prose than to painting and sculpture, a medium in which art, life and politics can confront each other and intersect.

Leonard was among the first to realize this and to invent her own technique. In the broadest sense, all of her work, even the "straightest" photography, might be called collage because it is rooted in the visual and sometime verbal pun or double meaning. The personal/political juxtaposition has also been crucial to her. She has remarked that at two points in her photographic career "a technical problem resolved itself just as a personal crisis took place."¹ Both solutions involved collage. The first "coincidence" happened in 1971:

For some time I had been seeking a way to integrate collage materials and photo images more successfully than I could by placing collage elements directly on the photographs. When I began printing photographs on film, obtaining transparent positive images, I knew I had a solution. I could put some of the collage elements behind the photographs and build the image in layers. Within days of that discovery, sudden events brought my marriage to an end. The difficulties of my marriage had been partly obscured by an overriding romanticism; the loss of some of my romantic dreams became the theme of these collages. I called the series "Dreams and Nightmares."

¹ All quotations are from Joanne Leonard's unpublished notes or in conversation with the author, unless otherwise cited.
