

Robert Bergman: Portraits, 1986-1995



Robert Bergman, American, b. 1944, *Untitled (06 Knit Hood)*, 1987, inkjet print, printed 2004.
Anonymous gift © Robert Bergman

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The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, in association with the National Gallery of Art, presents the first solo exhibition of American photographer Robert Bergman (b. 1944) from June 18 through August 22, 2010. "Robert Bergman: Portraits, 1986-1995" comprises thirty color portraits, which display the artist's exceptional ability to reveal both the singular nature of each of his subjects and our common humanity. Bergman divides his time between Minneapolis and New York City. The exhibition was organized by Sarah Greenough, senior curator in the Department of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., where it was shown October through December 2009.

The exhibition forms a monumental, provocative series of portraits of people the artist encountered during his extensive travels through American cities from 1985 to 1997. Using only a handheld 35mm camera and color film, Bergman portrays everyday people in the flow of American life.

Born in New Orleans in 1944, Bergman began to photograph when he was a child, and by his early twenties he had seriously embraced the medium. Moved and inspired by Robert Frank's book, *The Americans* (1959), Bergman began making black-and-white street photographs in the mid-1960s. Unlike the work of his contemporaries, such as Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, his work was informed by the quiet, often meditative moments that reveal the uncommon spirits of the people in front of his camera or unnoticed qualities of the urban spaces they inhabit.

In 1985 Bergman began to work in color, using both the densely saturated and the muted hues of the city and his subjects' attire to achieve a rich, painterly idiom. He spent the next twelve years traveling and making profound portraits of people from all walks of life. Using a finely tuned sense of form and his remarkable ability to establish rapport and trust, he depicts the singular dignity and grace of individuals, not types. Placing their faces at the front of the frame, Bergman allows us to experience each one's psychic state, often with their immediate mix of emotions: curiosity and fear, resignation and resilience.

The portraits were previously published in Bergman's book, *A Kind of Rapture*, with an introduction by American literary legend Toni Morrison and an afterword by renowned art historian, Meyer Schapiro. Morrison wrote, "Occasionally there arises an event or a moment that one knows immediately will forever mark a place in the history of artistic endeavor. Robert Bergman's portraits represent such a moment, such an event. In all its burnished majesty his gallery refuses us unearned solace and one by one each photograph unveils us, asserting a beauty, a kind of rapture, that is as close as can be to a master template of the singularity, the community, the unextinguishable sacredness of the human race."

"Robert Bergman: Portraits, 1986-1995" was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Support for the Minneapolis Institute of Arts exhibition is provided by Alfred and Ingrid Lenz Harrison.

PRESS CONTACTS

Anne-Marie Wagener, Director of Public Relations, awagener@artsmia.org, (612) 870-3280

Tammy Pleshek, Public Relations Specialist, tpleshek@artsmia.org, (612) 870-3171

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