

Barbara Davatz – As Time Goes By, 1972 to 2014

The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, in strange action: I do not stop imitating myself...

Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, 1981

Portraits play a major role in the work of Barbara Davatz (born 1944). For more than 40 years she has repeatedly devoted her attention to the question of how people can be captured and presented by means of a camera. What does a picture say about the person portrayed? Which photographs seem authentic? How much staging is permitted? And when does an image become a projection surface?

Her long-term study entitled “As Time Goes By”, which was completed in 2014 and has just recently been published in book form, is the centrepiece of the new exhibition at the Fotostiftung Schweiz. For that work, Barbara Davatz photographed selected couples from the Zurich scene at four different stages of their lives over a period of more than 30 years – a project that is unique in Swiss and in international photography and is being shown now for the first time in its entirety. This is not just a work about individuals and couples, about visible and invisible powers of attraction between people, it is also a study of how society and styles change – an impressive document of our time.

To complement it, the exhibition will also include other portrait series that indicate just how consistently and wilfully Barbara Davatz has pursued her course. Whether photographing the staff of a company, observing the similarity between twins, studying resemblances among family members or getting the employees of an international fashion house in front of the camera, Davatz takes those she portrays out of their everyday context so as to eliminate any form of distraction. She photographs them frontally using as neutral a lighting as possible. She also draws our full attention to the face and its expression, to the body and its bearing, to the clothing and the details of the outside appearance. We are invited to compare.

The sober, clear images are at the same time the fruit of great attention and perception. Those portrayed return the gaze of the viewers, touching them with their openness and vulnerability. Whoever gets involved in these images discovers much that is puzzling, mysterious and individual behind the precise and uniformly captured surface. Seeing and knowing, curiosity and knowledge, assertions and fantasies intermingle. “The emotional lies between the images, so to speak, in the imagined life-stories or in the memories that are awakened,” says Barbara Davatz. “Sometimes I find the way certain people look at the camera quite sensual, even erotic. When do people ever look into one another’s eyes as intensely? When they are in love!”

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Publication:

Barbara Davatz – As Time Goes By. 1982, 1988, 1997, 2014, Edition Patrick Frey, 2015.
Hardback, 168 pages, 89 photographs b/w, CHF 78.-.

AS TIME GOES BY, 1982–2014

“The inspiration for this work came from two people I had just got to know at the time, Nicola and Kurt. When I first saw them they both had blonde hair in a crew cut and were mainly dressed in black. It was not unisex fashion, but they wore very special clothes. I thought the two of them were great. They were part of a circle of interesting people who were all ten to twenty years younger than me. It was they who provided the initial spark, drawing my attention to other couples who conveyed messages through their ‘dual’ appearance.” Subsequently Barbara Davatz focussed on 12 young couples who were either in love or were friends or related. She photographed them with a simple and clear artistic concept – in such a way that they could present themselves without staging in any forced way. She repeated this at intervals of several years, more precisely, in 1988, 1997 and 2014. Some of the partners had disappeared, others were new, and in some cases the pair had become a family. One decisive feature of this series is that the same strict rules for the setting and composition were maintained over the years, making it possible to perceive the tiny changes in a person, the passing of time, but also the subtle differences between the individuals.

GSÜÜN, 2002

The old Swiss dialect expression “Gsüün” refers to the “typical” aspect of faces within a family. This could also be described, for example, by the sentence, “He’s a carbon copy of his father, or she is just like her mother”. The physiognomical features that are passed on from one generation to another often lead to astonishing concurrences, tempting us to deduce – usually all too rashly – character traits from outward appearances. In Tösstal, where she has lived for many years, Barbara Davatz selected a number of families with the aim of documenting their “Gsüün”. On show is a selection of 37 from a series of 77 photographs – a quasi-scientific sequence which translates the issue of the influence of biological and social factors on a biography into fascinating images. “Gsüün” can also be interpreted against the backdrop of the decoding of the human genome – as an attempt to visually capture that code and its variations. How much similarity is predetermined? What is individual manifestation? And where is similarity merely in the mind?

BEAUTY LIES WITHIN, 2007

The title “Beauty Lies Within” takes up an ambiguous slogan printed for a period of time on carrier bags from the H&M fashion chain. The photographer thus indicates, tongue in cheek, that she is particularly interested in the messages which those she portrays aimed to convey through their appearance. To do this she invited 81 salespeople from the fashion house to her studio so as to photograph them outside of their usual working context. The strict concept for the takes and the deliberately sparse information given – name, birth date, nationality – suggest that this is not a study of character, but a kind of sociological and ethnographical inventory: What do young Swiss people look like in the 21st century? What does identity mean in a globalized world? And how often do we fall into the trap of our own projections when we try to read the faces without having any further information? Although this work is only about a small section of society, it nevertheless shows general developments: be it the increasing importance of fashion and lifestyle in constructing identity, the subtle interplay of differentiation and assimilation in a multicultural society. For this, standardized, globally distributed items of clothing, for example, are combined into individual or group-specific codes. As in her other series, Barbara Davatz also works here “like a lepidopterist who is enthusiastic about the colours and shapes of wings,” as she herself puts it.

PORTRAIT OF A SWISS COMPANY, 1972 / DOUBLES, 1975

For the exhibition at the Fotostiftung Schweiz, Barbara Davatz has re-edited her two earliest portrait series specifically for a projection accompanied by music and interlinked in two sequences. In her 38-part series "Portrait of a Swiss Company" from the early 1970s she developed her own unpathetic conceptual style, succeeding in showcasing people as individuals while at the same time addressing their social standing and the contemporary environment. The staff of the H. Walser company, a textile printing and cotton spinning mill in Zürchersmühle, AR, not only stands for a typically Swiss company at a time when industrial production was still an important economic factor. In the years of increasing xenophobia – Switzerland voted on the so-called "Überfremdungsinitiative" (initiative against foreign domination) in 1970 – that series was also an unexcited but compelling political statement which raised a monument to the workers, who mainly came from Spain.

The complement to this work is the series "Doubles" (1975), which is not about social but rather biological or genetic determination: the 25 sets of twins, to which a further 57 couples were added in 1982, seem in retrospect like an anticipation of that mixture of fascination and fear that we feel today in view of the possibility of manipulating and copying the human genome. "We are at the start of a new era in which, for the first time, we will have in our hands a reliable tool for intervening in the genetic identity of our children. The question is no longer, whether we will use it, but how," writes the biologist and science editor Angelika Jacobs (NZZ, 16 December 2015).

Accompanying programme (in German):

Sunday, 28 February 2016, 11.30 a.m.: Artist talk, Barbara Davatz in conversation with Martin Jaeggi.

Sunday, 24 April 2016, 11.30 a.m.: Exhibition tour "Vom Spiel mit modischen Codes", with Barbara Davatz and Anna-Brigitte Schlittler (art historian and fashion theoretician).

Barbara Davatz

Born 1944, 1948–1963 grew up in the US.

1964/65: Preliminary course at the Schule für Gestaltung in Basel, first photographic works.

1965–68: Photography class at the Schule für Gestaltung in Zürich.

Since 1968: Free-lance work commissioned mainly for magazines, advertising, film and slide presentations, specializing in portraits and portrait reportage. Also free works, above all conceptual portrait and landscape series.

Most important publications:

As Time Goes By, Portraits 1982, 1988, 1997. Edition Patrick Frey, 1999.

Beauty Lies Within. Portraits aus einer globalisierten Mode-Welt. Limmat, Verlag 2007.

Barbara Davatz – Fotografische Reihungen. Exh. cat., Kunstmuseum Olten, 2011.

As Time Goes By, 1982, 1988, 1997, 2014. Edition Patrick Frey, 2015.

BARBARA DAVATZ SPEAKING ABOUT HER WORK

The names of my teachers are August Sander, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon. The desire to render human beings “visible” by excising them from their surroundings, leaving nothing to distract from them, is something I share with them. They understood photography as permitting no flattery. Moreover, my faith in the elementary expressiveness of what is depicted, the interest in the encyclopaedic and typological series and the passion for collecting I share with the plant photographer Karl Blossfeldt and the photographer-couple Bernd and Hilla Becher.

Whenever I start a project, it’s very important for me to be in love with it because that gives me tremendous energy. The joy and interest comes from the people themselves, from their faces. When something really appeals to me, when I love looking at something, then I want to multiply it.

I am interested in the many varieties of human beings, just as a lepidopterist is enthusiastic about the colours and shapes of wings.

It always starts with the gaze. You tend to spend more time looking at a photograph if it looks back at you. That sparks something off. Direct eye contact is indispensable – you have to have the impression that you are really face-to-face with someone. That’s also why I prefer an expression that is “emotionless”. [...] A smile makes the picture less mysterious and may interfere with what viewers project into it.

A rigorously consistent concept is a prerequisite for the wide-ranging, imaginative reading of the portraits, namely: formal stasis, no action. Always the same centred, diffused lighting that thwarts drama, the same light-grey background, the direct eye contact with the camera, the same framing. Although you never see the feet, you do see enough of the body to communicate an adequate measure of information.

What’s important to me is the impression of a certain vulnerability or of being unguarded, an openness or intimacy. Pictures with those features can make an impact on viewers. In this series in particular, I sometimes have the feeling that the way people look into the camera is sensual, almost erotic. When do people look deep into one another’s eyes? When they are in love!

I want to show real, strong, likeable people. I am not searching for someone’s appealing expression, but for his or her zero position, their inner state.

Every picture is the record of a relationship, the sum of the pictures is a record of time.