

JEANNETTE

MONTGOMERY BARRON

The word “observe” holds a myriad of meanings: from witness to study, from comment on to comply with, or even, to perform a rite or ritual. Jeanette Montgomery Barron has made a career out of observation, her work touching variously upon each of these meanings. As a shy child growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, she recalls taking pictures at an early age, “I was one of those kids who didn’t talk,” she says. “I always preferred to be a fly on the wall, observing.” Her father, an amateur photographer, introduced her to the magic of the darkroom as a teenager, inspiring her to a life in photography. “It was a pivotal moment in my life,” she recalls. “When I saw that image coming up in the tray I thought, ‘Wow! This is it. This is so cool.’”

She studied Communication Arts at the Parsons School of Design in New York. Realizing that photography would be her medium, she then enrolled at the International Center of Photography, studying there for three years. Her first job was as a still photographer on a film set. The experience broadened her. “I learned how to adapt to any situation. It helped me with portraiture. Because I was so shy, this was a great way for me to communicate with people.” After the film wrapped, a newly confident Montgomery Barron returned to New York in 1981, transforming the kitchen of her eastside apart-



ment into a darkroom.

Fascinated with the contemporary art scene, she decided to make portraits of artists, and approached Francesco Clemente to sit for her. He loved the photos and in turn sent her to Julian Schnabel. Schnabel referred her to Keith Haring; the results were recently published as *Session with Keith Haring* (Holzwarth 2006) “From there it just started snowballing,” she says. Museums and galleries such as Mary Boone began to assign her for their catalogues. Still a fly on the wall, she didn’t socialize with the art crowd, but did sometimes find herself lunching at Warhol’s Factory or visiting Basquiat’s studio, recalling that the latter did indeed paint in designer suits.

A Cinderella moment came in the early ‘80s, when Bruno Bischofberger, one of the most influential art dealers in Europe, visited her studio, buying 40 photographs in a single day. He then asked if he might publish a

book of her work, *Jeannette Montgomery Barron* (Edition Bischofberger, 1989). “That,” she concludes, “was a great day.”

Over the next few years he both purchased and commissioned her to do more photographs. She was also getting assignment work for *Vanity Fair*, *Interview* and the *New Yorker*. Environmental portraiture became her mode, though she preferred to work alone. “I never worked with an assistant, except when it was a commercial assignment, such as fashion. I think it alters the communication, and you get something different,” she says. “I want to be the only person in the room.”

A sea change in both style and subject came with marriage and children. “I wanted to stay home, so I began doing still lifes at home.” She would, however do an occasional assignment if the work interested her. When assigned to photograph Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Jorie Graham, Montgomery took along some of her still-life photographs “on a whim.” Graham was inspired by the images and suggested they collaborate on a book, *Photographs and Poems* (Scalo, 1998). One of Montgomery Barron’s long-term projects has been photographing mirrors; these were published as *Mirrors* (Holzwarth, 2004) Her newest work, *My Mother’s Clothes*, are still-lives of her mother’s clothing from the ‘60s and ‘70s. While she was photographing, her mother, who was afflicted with Alzheimer’s, began relating tales from her life prompted by the clothes.

Montgomery Barron wrote every-

thing down. What began as a very personal project, a labor of love, took on a wider socio-cultural context—a glimpse of a unique time and place in the life of an American woman.

Montgomery Barron’s work has been exhibited in the U.S. and Europe, and is held in both private and public collections, including the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Kunsthau, Zurich. In 2007 she was artist-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome, and divides her time between Rome and Connecticut. Slow to enter the digital realm, she shoots film with a Hasselblad, finding her observation skills challenged by the speed of digital. “With digital I take a lot more pictures, rather than being really slow and careful about each picture,” she says. “There is something really beautiful about film. I like not knowing what you are getting.”

—Shawn O’Sullivan

■ PRINT INFORMATION
Vintage gelatin silver prints, 14x11 inches, starting at \$5000. Modern prints: 20x16 inches, editions of 25, starting at \$1800.

■ CONTACT INFORMATION
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[contemporary color work]



JULIAN SCHNABEL, NEW YORK CITY—1984



CINDY SHERMAN, NEW YORK CITY—1986



JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT, NEW YORK CITY—1985



RAINER FETTING AND DESMOND, NEW YORK CITY—1984



ENZO CUCCHI; ROME, ITALY—1986



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, NEW YORK CITY—1987



FRANCESCO CLEMENTE, NEW YORK CITY—1981