

focus on / Jean Dykstra

Ambiguous Affection

The photographs of Allen Frame

Allen Frame's dark, grainy photographs of friends and acquaintances have an ephemeral, almost fragile quality. He tends to photograph at transitional times (early in the morning, late at night, as a party winds down) and in transitional spaces (hotel rooms, bars and restaurants, simply furnished, temporary apartments from Brooklyn to Berlin). His subjects are fre-

speaking, about relationships. People's faces are, often as not, shrouded in shadow, so the tension or affection between his subjects is established through body language and gesture, rather than by their expressions. In *Paulita and Frank, St. Petersburg* (2001), Paulita is almost entirely in shadow, but her hands, raised up as she leans forward, convey a sense of urgency. Facing her across the table, Frank lifts a hand, too, and he appears to be holding a cigarette lighter, although it also looks like a mysterious floating ball of light that he's conjured out of thin air. As in all of Frame's photographs, the graininess of the high-speed film—with its associations of cheap newsprint or the untrained snapshot—is countered by the graceful, polished

(1999), three figures stand in a kitchen, seen through a doorway. Shadows suggest the presence of other people, but these three—two men and a woman—have separated themselves from the others. What's happening in the picture isn't clear: the man on the right could be teaching a dance step, or illustrating a story. He's directing the other two, his hand extended, just slightly, as if to say: "stop there" or "like this." The man in the center takes a precise, studied step forward, while the woman looks on. A sense of connection is established by their gestures, the way they turn toward each other. The photograph draws us in with its beauty, and then provides us just enough information to anchor us there, free to linger and spin out



Ariadna, Barcelona, gelatin-silver print (20 x 24 in.), 1999.
All images courtesy Gitterman Gallery, New York.



Cecilia, Dan, and Frank, Brooklyn, gelatin-silver print (20 x 24 in.), 1999.

quently twenty-somethings, in transition themselves, he says, "at an age when so many decisions are so open, and people are still searching." An undercurrent of anxiety is present, a darkness both literal and figurative. Frame explains: "Roy DeCarava once said about his photographs that if he had lit them, they wouldn't have been the same situations, and there's a kind of faithfulness to the situation, a level of intimacy, that I'm protecting."

Frame's photographs are, generally

composition of the image. In *Tina and Jonas, Berlin* (1999), the couple is in silhouette, and Tina has reached out to put her hand on Jonas's shoulder. The picture reads as a farewell—they're breaking up, perhaps—but then again, that might not be what's happening at all. It's more interesting not to know.

Indeed, a finely calibrated ambiguity characterizes many of his works. Although we are inclined, even today, to see photographs as facts, that inclination is nicely frustrated here. In *Cecilia, Dan, and Frank*

our own narratives and associations.

Frame grew up in Mississippi and went to Harvard, where he studied art history. He took photography classes at Image Works in Cambridge, Mass., which he describes as a lot like the International Center of Photography (ICP), New York, where he now teaches. Among his many projects in various fields, photographic and theatrical, are the slide show *Electric Blanket*, which he created with Nan Goldin in 1990, and *Sounds in the Distance*, an adaptation of

monologues by artist David Wojnarowicz, which he directed. Recently, he has begun working in film. His photographs, not surprisingly, have as much of an affinity with film, and even theater and painting, as with photographic conventions, although his method is not unlike that of street photographers. He doesn't stage or pose his photographs; he watches and shoots, trying, as he puts it, to "photograph with anticipation."

Photographing in this way, observing day-to-day, ordinary experiences, he isolates moments of intimacy that are evocative, most of all, of the ambiguous nature of affection and desire.

Allen Frame's work is on view at the Gitterman Gallery in New York through June 4. ■



Above: *Daniela, Florence*, gelatin-silver print (20x24in.), 1999. Top: *Cali, Abi, and Colin, London*, gelatin-silver print (20 x 24in.), 1993.