

photograph

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About The Cover

Charles H. Traub

LYLE REXER

Remember the Seventies? Platforms and polyester, disco funk and Vietnam fallout, Nixon Resigns! And the summer of Son of Sam (aka David Berkowitz). It was also the time when a new generation of American photographers took to the streets and hit the road in search of an America that was putting itself on display as never before. Inspired by Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand, they cast a hip, cool eye on the phantasmagoria of the emerging Me Generation. But Charles H. Traub had something most of them didn't: a formal Bauhaus rigor acquired at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, and a desire not just to record the strange new world but to celebrate it. Two exhibitions in New York allow viewers to experience Traub's joy at taking pictures: one of black-and-white work from the 1970s at Gitterman Gallery (on view through December 2), and another of color nudes from the early 1980s at Daniel Cooney Fine Art (from November 16 to January 6). "Chicago was a lakefront town," recalls Traub, who currently directs the graduate photography program at New York's School of Visual Arts, "and when people's inhibitions went down and they felt comfortable putting their bodies out there on the beach, it was like Rio. I loved the humor of it." For the images on the cover, Traub used a square-format camera with a lens shade that was too small, so that it rounded off the edges of the frame in his prints. The effect is like looking at an old-fashioned TV screen, with a succession of random images popping up in front of you: a headless man in a Hawaiian shirt, a fire hydrant, a woman in a fur coat trying to look glamorous, a stone lawn deer, plaid pants, a running dive off a short pier. The look is casual but the formalism is consistent and sly. And unlike television, the longer you look, the more you see. "Charlie doesn't pretend to give us a God's-eye view," says Tom Gitterman. "These are personal. They say, 'See it with me.' People are not a means to an end. He loves them." That engagement is even more obvious in a series of color nudes at Cooney Fine Art. Decades before Justine Kurland and other contemporary photographers tried it, Traub advertised for subjects willing to take off their clothes in front of the camera. The result is an extended essay in, as Traub puts it, "the uncomfortable moment after people reveal themselves and before they begin to pose." According to Daniel Cooney, "It overturned the idea that nudes were studied subjects, and that they had to be beautiful and formal." These nudes are guarded, awkward, and intensely vulnerable. Adds Traub, "This was a time when 'voyeur' was not a dirty word. It encompassed a human transaction, based on people's desire to be looked at, and the photographer's unquenchable desire to look." □