

Judy Dater

SEEING AND BEING SEEN

BY CLAIRE SYKES



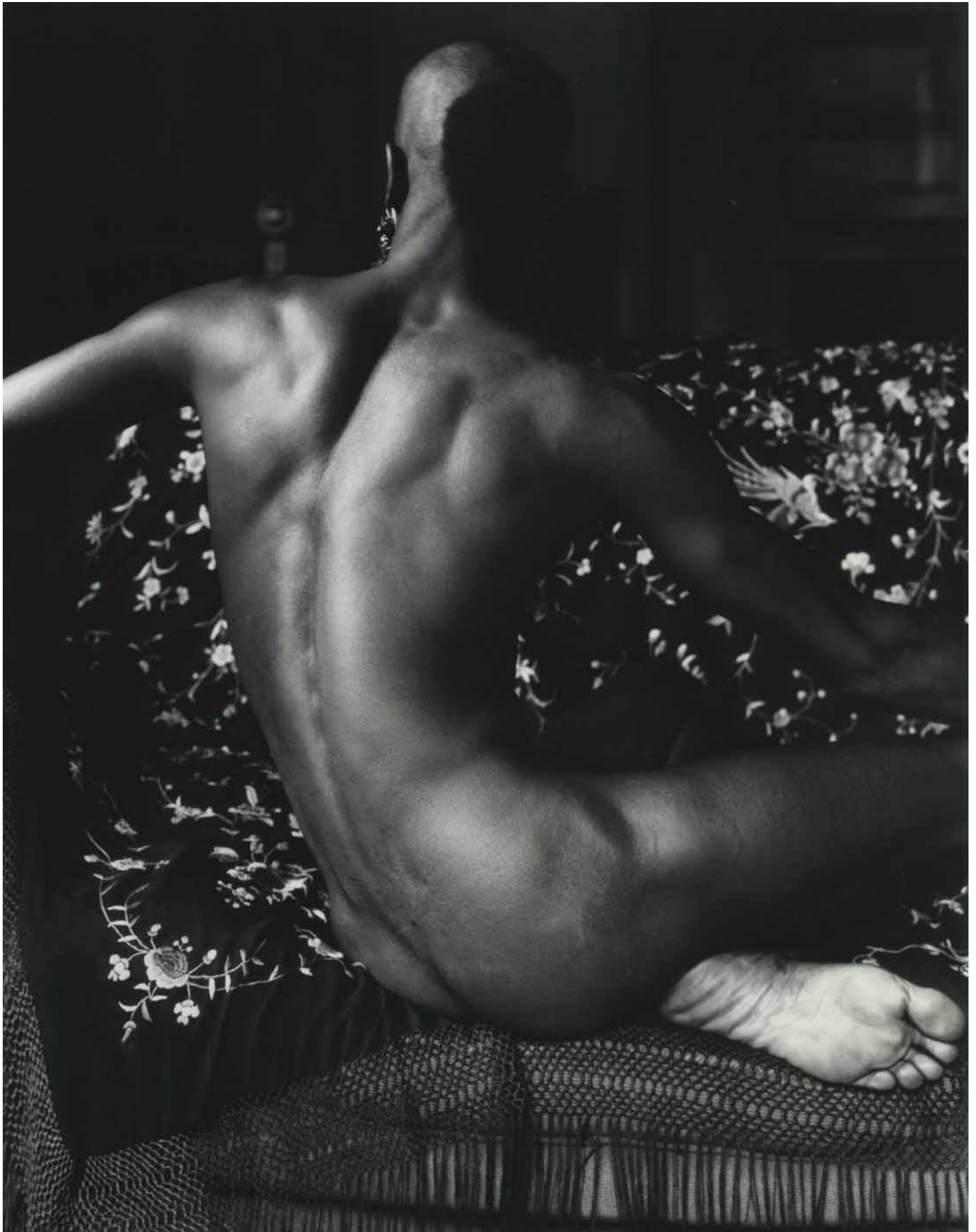
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Self-portrait With Stone, 1982

Every Saturday morning, five-year-old Judy Dater eagerly went with her father to the movie theater he owned near Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, California. While he put away cartons of candy and popcorn and retreated to his office, she stepped into the blackest space imaginable to her, its rows of red velvet seats empty of people. Alone with her fear, she dared herself to walk from the doorway down to the stage, touch it and then run back up the aisle.

Sixteen years later — after Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman, after *Lawrence of Arabia* and *East of Eden*, after movie-theater birthday parties and high school ticket-selling — Dater found herself again in the dark. But instead of films flickering on a screen, her black-and-white images slowly emerged onto paper floating in a tray of developer.

While her father's movie theater set the stage for Dater's interest in photography, it was her college darkroom that wrote the script for her life calling



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Nehemiah's back, 1975

Dater arrived as a photographer in the late 60s, at the vital cultural intersection of photography and feminism.



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President Slain, from *Memoirs*, 2012

as an artist. “I loved the instantaneousness, the mystery of the photographic process. I loved how you could see something in real life and turn it into this black-and-white image,” Dater, now 71, tells me by phone from her home in Berkeley, California that she shares with her husband, curator Jack von Euw.

For over 50 years, Dater has been turning real life into photographs. “During this time, she never got swayed by or indulged in trends, but moved with her own vision,” says Mark Johnstone, a writer and curator in Hailey, Idaho, whom Dater photographed in 1983. “She’s one of the few successful women in the art world, especially photography, who never depended on ongoing academic support to fuel and expand her artistic exploration.” Her most recent work, *Memoir*, recalls those decades in a series of oversized, photo-album-collaged images from her life and art.

Dater has made portraits all over the world — in Japan,

Argentina, France, Italy, Egypt and the U.S., mainly in California, where she’s lived most of her life. Those taken in Rome, in 1998, place serious faces against a simple black background to emphasize the subtlest emotional gestures. “From the beginning, Judy has focused on women and men in a way that is very direct and reveals the psychological character of her models,” says Donna Stein, associate director of The Wende Museum in Culver City, California, and a friend of Dater’s since they were 14. “Also, a lot of her work has a narrative, whether within one picture or a combination of images. When you see a portrait of a woman standing with her dress belted at the waist and open to reveal her breasts, and a mounted moose head behind her [“Libby” (1971)], she’s telling a story.”

Dater’s self-portraits range from her first student nudes in the mid-60s, to black-and-white nudes in the isolated Southwestern

**“Judy, Imogen and I walked toward the tree and she demonstrated:
Here’s how you work with a model.” – Twinka Thiebaud**



© JUDY DATER

Laura Mae, 1973



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Imogen and Twinka, 1974

landscape in the early 80s, to color photos in which she is costumed and posed as female stereotypes — such as “Ms. Clingfree” (1982), loaded down with cleaning products.

Marilyn Symmes, curatorial director of the Morse Research Center for Graphic Arts at Rutgers University’s Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, New Jersey, says, “Judy has done amazing portraiture, nudes and self-portraits every decade — moving closer to the sitter in order to scrutinize facial traits and nuances that quintessentially characterize the person, probing into their fundamental humanity. Over the years, she has created an impressive corpus of photographs of great psychological power and beauty. My frustration is with the lack of fuller attention on her work since her most famous image.”

She’s talking about Dater’s black-and-white photograph of 90-year-old Imogen Cunningham, dressed in black with a Rolleiflex

at her waist, standing beside a redwood tree and appearing startled at the sight of a naked “forest nymph” looking back at her with impish curiosity. “Imogen and Twinka” (1974) — the first full-frontal nude to appear in *LIFE* magazine, in its 1976 issue celebrating women from 1776 to 1976 — assures Dater a permanent place in the history of photography.

Dater arrived as a photographer in the late 60s, at the vital cultural intersection of photography and feminism. The medium was finally recognized as an art form; commercial galleries were just opening to contemporary photography, though books and magazines remained the major venues for it, and Dater’s images were among the first by a woman to be included.

“It’s important to note that Judy trained and lived on the West Coast, so she was very much a part of that whole photographic tradition of making a beautiful print, and with a more formal



© JUDY DATER

Ms. Clingfree, 1982

The consistent themes running through her art tell stories of men and women, relationships and personal feelings.

composition,” says Anne Wilkes Tucker, curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. “Meanwhile, the second wave of feminism had released society’s oppressive psychosexual constraints on women. The women’s movement on the East Coast was edgier and angrier, with more ambivalence about open sexuality. You don’t see this in Judy’s work.”

Dater’s earliest subjects pushed past the taboo of full-frontal nudity, with the nerve to look the viewer directly in the eye. The idea of seeing — and being seen without knowing it, especially — had captivated her since childhood, when she discovered Thomas Hart Benton’s painting “Persephone” (1938), of an old man ogling a young naked woman. “I carried around that image in my head for years and did several different photo versions on the theme of voyeurism. It really worked in the photo of Imogen and Twinka [Thiebaud] because it’s a twist, given that it’s two women looking at each other.”

Dater was one of the first women to photograph the female (and male) nude in a way that few had done before. She says, “I was interested in an edge to the photographs — more real and less male-oriented as objects of sexual desire. I was photographing the women as surrogate extensions of myself. Not that there wasn’t sexuality in them, but that wasn’t my primary goal. I wanted each one to be a mysterious story that viewers would bring their own narratives to.”

It’s the power of these nude images that feeds the popular misconception that Dater made more photos of people naked than clothed. Often, she would help choose her subjects’ garments, situating the people in their homes and among their things.

“Because I grew up around movies, and love them and thought about them a lot, I relate some of the way I work to being a casting and film director,” says Dater. “I pick people for the portrait, direct them, and set up the scene and the lighting. I look for people who have character and are beautiful in their own unique way. I’m interested in showing their strengths more than their weaknesses, and also their vulnerability. I think of vulnerability as a good thing because it enables people to be more open.”

From her portraits and self-portraits to her photographic collages, multi-paned photos, blown-up contact sheets, installation pieces and even a live multimedia performance work, the consistent themes running through her art tell stories of men and women, relationships and personal feelings. “I saw so many films as a kid. I think they had a huge impact on my perception of what the man-woman relationship is about, and how I lived my life, probably for too long. But I didn’t realize that until I’d watched

them again, as an adult,” says Dater. She recognizes that impact most in her latest project, “which explores relationships in a humorous way.”

Memoir opens at Thomas Paul Fine Art in Los Angeles on September 29, 2012. Like a film storyboard, the series of nine (out of 36) images depicts actual photo-album pages she created with Photoshop, mostly using pictures she has taken in the past 50 years as well as family snapshots, mementos and handwritten captions.

“Judy has used words in conjunction with her images throughout her career, though never quite the way she is now,” says Stein. “I see *Memoir* as just another extension of the way she’s always worked.”

Each 41x53-inch image projects a larger-than-life, silver-screen presence. It’s no surprise that the exhibit includes a brief film of all the images, which are also in a limited-edition portfolio. Says Sierra LeBaron, associate director of Thomas Paul Fine Art and Thiebaud’s daughter:

In this work, Dater is reinterpreting her dreams, past experiences and most importantly, her photographs. We feel a lot of people can relate to *Memoir* because it takes the familiar form of a family photo album, but it includes events in one’s life you normally wouldn’t display. *Memoir* is about taking what’s private and making it public. Normally, a journal or photo album is small enough to hold in your hands and easily hide, but this work has been enlarged to the point that its content becomes unavoidable. The texture of the paper, with its *trompe l’oeil* effect, makes the viewer want to touch it. This transformation in size allows viewers to connect with Dater’s experiences. And since she recounts her life with the least amount of written details, the viewer can also imagine people and events in their own lives, filling in the details with their own memories.

Dater documented many of her memories in journals, scrapbooks and photo albums. While cleaning out her studio three years ago, she came across writings she had done in 1989, just for herself. “They were stories about the various men in my life, starting with my father. I was trying to see where I’d been, what were the patterns in my life and what kept going wrong — why I still hadn’t found the right guy,” she says. “They were stories I find amusing now, but not back then. I had a lot of material, and was



© JUDY DATER

Juggler, 2012

**“Judy trained and lived on the West Coast, so she was very much a part
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and with a more formal composition.” — Anne Wilkes Tucker**

getting ready to turn 70 and wanted to put it in some form that would sum up my life to this point. I kept thinking about a memoir and decided to illustrate my writings with photographs. Once I made that decision, it was not too hard to come up with the idea of making it look like a photo album.”

Already familiar with Photoshop, Dater used it to arrange her photos and words on the pages. “I found a photo album from high school and liked the fragmented look of it, with its glued-in dried flowers from some prom, a restaurant menu or program from a play. I wanted to emulate that kind of look, and Photoshop seemed the perfect way to do that.”

Memoir begins the day Dater was born, June 21, 1941, and runs chronologically 100 years to June 21, 2041, “because who knows what the future will bring?” She looks back on her childhood, growing up in Hollywood and moving to San Francisco in the 60s, venturing off to Egypt, living in the Southwest and New York City, traveling to Japan, returning to California, back to Japan, going to Europe often and working extensively in Rome.

Along the way, we see her nudes and other portraits of women and men, as well as self-portraits. We learn about her lovers, affairs and four marriages, and a friend’s abortion. There’s the front-page newspaper article she saved about John F. Kennedy’s assassination (“a big, important moment in my life; I remember it so well”). There are the wars — the 1944 photo of an uncle in his World War II uniform, her first husband on his way to Korea and a boyfriend drafted and sent to Vietnam. And, there are the pictures of her with famous photographers. The last page of *Memoir* shows the photo she took of an elderly woman friend whose face she blurred, “to represent the older Judy,” says Dater.

I ask Dater what that old woman sees in her 20-something self. She says, “I see a young woman with a passion for photography, and people, who was making photographs that were unique then and that caught others’ attention.”

One of them was Jack Welpott, whom she later married. After three years as an art student at UCLA and toying with photography on her own, Dater took her first photography class from him in 1963 at San Francisco State University, where she graduated with a master’s degree in photography in 1966. “I found a medium that I totally loved. I wasn’t a very good painter or drawer, and I finally found a way to express myself. I could photograph objects and people and make them resonate with my feelings.” She started with self-portrait nudes, and soon those of friends.

Welpott took his class to the studios of Ansel Adams, Brett Weston and Wynn Bullock. In 1964 (the year of Dater’s first

exhibit at Aardvark Gallery and Bindery in San Francisco), she met Imogen Cunningham while participating in a symposium at Big Sur Hot Springs on Brett Weston. Dater knew her for 13 years and wrote *Imogen Cunningham: A Portrait* (New York Graphic Society, 1979), published three years after Cunningham’s death. “She was this amazing person and photographer who was completely self-sufficient, engaged in what she did and working all the time. It was so important to me to have a role model like her.”

From 1968-74, Welpott and Dater collaborated on a project whereby each photographed women, usually the same ones, from their personal perspectives. Especially in their seminude and nude photographs, his were more sexual and seductive, hers sensual and psychological. This marked difference between the two photographers resulted in the success of the project and its book, *Women and Other Visions* (Morgan & Morgan, 1975).

Dater’s other books of photographs include *Judy Dater: Twenty Years* (University of Arizona Press, 1986), *Body & Soul: Ten American Women* (Hill and Co., 1987) and *Cycles* (Kodansha, 1992). Many of her photos from these and other publications appear in *Memoir*.

Dater’s image on the cover of *The Woman’s Eye* by Anne Tucker (Alfred A. Knopf, 1973) was one of the first fine-art photographs that got me interested in the medium. I was 19 when this book came out, featuring Dater and nine other contemporary women photographers, and since then I have often looked at that photograph of a woman in a see-through dress crouched in a tree, one hand gripping her knee, the other the trunk, looking like some wild, otherworldly creature. Almost 40 years later, I finally met Twinka Thiebaud, and earlier this year we sat eating lemon cake at her kitchen table in Portland, Oregon.

“I had to hold completely still and strike a pose,” Thiebaud, now 66, tells me of that photo, “Twinka” (1970). A professional model for many famous artists and photographers, she had worked with Dater often. “We had a comfortable relationship. But with a 4x5 camera, there’s no relaxing into it.”

Then Thiebaud describes that day with Cunningham, when top photographers, including Dater, had come to Yosemite National Park to teach an Ansel Adams workshop, “The Nude in the Landscape,” to nearly 100 participants from around the world. “When all the models disrobed that first session, students pounced like paparazzi; they were unruly and disorganized. So Judy, Imogen and I walked away toward the tree, and as everyone gathered around us, she demonstrated: Here’s how you work with a model.”

In this photo and others by Dater, Johnstone says, “I see this

“Somewhere in the future, my story ends. The actors leave the stage. The audience goes home. Only the memories remain.” — Judy Dater



© JUDY DATER

Melanie Samrasinghe, 2005



© JUDY DATER

Erik, 2005

strength of classical portraiture in her work, with elements of theater and mystery, which I think is a reflection of the artist herself.”

In the end, all of Dater’s photographs are self-portraits. “I’ve always thought portraits I’ve done in the past were a reflection of me,” she says. “With *Memoir*, now it’s just me looking at me, not at somebody else. The work certainly goes along with my other self-portraits. Like the black-and-white ones, it’s introspective and serious; and like the color ones, it’s also playful and satirical. And I think it also goes from the naïve to the knowing, to more of an acceptance of who I am and the reality of life in the moment.”

On the last page of *Memoir*, Dater writes, “Somewhere in the future, my story ends. The actors leave the stage. The audience goes home. Only the memories remain.” These words accompany the photo of her older, future self hunched over her cane toward the edge of the frame, heading toward that final pitch darkness we

all eventually will know — and toward the photographer’s next body of work. The blurred, more abstract image, she says, “is likely the direction I’ll go, because I usually get my new ideas from something I’ve recently done.”

What new ground will she break in the process? “The one I’m breaking for myself,” Dater says. “Whether it’s for the art world, I don’t know and I don’t care. It’s the freedom to say, Well, I’ve done all this work and I like what I’ve done. And I’m going to keep doing what I want to do.” ▲

Claire Sykes is a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. Her articles on photography and other visual arts appear in Afterimage, Art on Paper, Camera Arts, Glass, Graphis, Photo District News, Photo Insider, and Communication Arts, among others.