

Art and Cake, November 4, 2018

Judy Dater

*Only Human*

Laband Art Gallery, Loyola Marymount University

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By Jody Zellen



What does it mean to be human? Human beings have the capacity for feeling, sensitivity and compassion. The phrase 'only human' often refers to an acceptance of vulnerability and imperfection. Photographer Judy Dater is interested in what makes people human and the black and white photographs in her 50 year survey illustrate a sensitivity and engagement with her subjects. On view are both portraits and self portraits that span the five decades of her career. Born in 1941, Dater grew up in Los Angeles. She studied at UCLA and at San Francisco State University where she received a BA and MA, and later became associated with other West Coast photographers like Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock and Imogen Cunningham, whom she considered her mentor.

Dater approaches her subjects with an openness that allows them to feel comfortable and reveal their inner selves. For example, she began to photograph the nude body as a way to "express her ideas about sexuality, gender politics, freedom, vulnerability, strength and character." In *Self-portrait with Stone* (1981) the camera captured her naked body in the fetal position among the rocks in a receding desert scene whereas in other images she stood stoic and strong in relation to the natural landscape. Her early self-portraits suggested it was okay to be sexy, desired, female and free. This attitude permeates all her images as she is somehow able to capture the essence of those who pose in front of her lens. Dater's iconic photograph is *Imogen with Twinka at Yosemite* (1974) a portrait of the elder Cunningham (who has an old twin lens camera around her neck) looking at the naked Twinka (who leans against the trunk of a large tree). The image was immediately celebrated for its parodying of male voyeurism.

Although Dater has a playful side and has created candid photographs onsite, the majority of her images on view in *Only Human* are controlled portraits taken inside the studio. She is most definitely a people photographer and has the innate ability to make her sitters, many of whom

are strangers, comfortable enough to let down their guard. Dater is interested who people are behind the facades and masks that they erect to protect them from the world at large. Moving from image to image within the gallery one gets the sense of Dater's love of humanity and her desire to present the strength of her subjects. Her 2015 portrait of Maxine Hong Kingston depicts the author holding her gray hair horizontally across the top of the composition. There is an innocence to the image despite the fact that the subject is in her seventies. *Lovers #2* (1965) is a close up of a nude couple's embrace. The difference in their skin tones is apparent yet not entirely what the image is about as Dater is more interested in human relationships than in racial politics.

Dater is as comfortable focusing on a face as she is creating a portrait where the subject is in the natural environment or surrounded by props. She is interested in the implied narratives and the stories that are revealed through gesture and facial expressions. While so much of current photography is focused on sharing the now, a moment spontaneously posed and captured by a cellphone to be immediately posted online, it is refreshing and reassuring to take in Dater's beautifully printed black and white images. They are slow and satisfying, rather than providing instant gratification.

<https://artandcakela.com/2018/11/04/judy-dater-only-human/>