

## The Harvard Independent

### Picture, Picture on the Wall: Boston's Photography Exhibits

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*Groups*, an exhibit at Boston University's Photographic Resource Center, centers, naturally enough, upon the group portrait - the sort of pictures that countless families take every day. The exhibit, which features work from a number of prominent photographers, including Ben Gest and Amy Montali, is both a bit kitschy snapshot and a bit posed studio portrait. The artists' subjects are young and old, male and female; their photographs are both intimate and detached. They are everything we want them to be, yet nothing we expect them to be. They are, in short, a hundred stories waiting to be told.

When people look at these images, they don't see the composition or the colors or the technology employed by the photographer. They see a story. Sociologist Howard Becker wrote that works of photography "are whatever they have come to mean....They are social constructions, pure and simple." The relationship between models is sacrificed in interpretation to the subjectivity of the viewer. The *Groups* exhibit fosters this imposition of the personal. The individuals in the photos are not professional models, nor are they newsworthy characters nor are they anthropological subjects; they are just people - in many cases, people from the photographers' own families.

The gallery even features a notebook in which guests are encouraged to jot down stories conjured up by the show's photographs. Flipping through the pages, you quickly see the myriad of meanings people ascribed to the same images. One guest wrote of the shame of a woman returning home at 3 a.m., "drunk and smelling of sex." Another described the early love of a couple, a time when "blood ran hard with passion in their veins" and "when every word she spoke flowed like honey from her lips to his ears." These aren't the emotionally laden words of the subjects, not even of the photographer, but of the viewers, of mere passersby, individuals completely removed from the production of the images, yet drawn by personal experience to construct around them imagined narratives.

Photographer Sally Mann is oft criticized for her artistic yet graphic images of young models, including her own children. Her subjects' nudity and mature expressions shock many viewers into condemning her work. Sally Mann's exploitation is obvious - the stark nudity of children leaves no room for questioning. But what of exploitation in other images? In images of any family? Any people, really. What of the exploitation of suggestion? A nude child with a Popsicle is a nude child with a Popsicle. But what of a young couple trapped in a reciprocal gaze? It is an illicit affair in the heat of passion. It's the melancholy end to a romance that never was. It's everything and nothing that a viewer can see in it. And the subjects of such a photograph? They are not naked children on a porch but players in the minds of a hundred viewers.