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A Photographer's Testament of Youth

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

IN 1992, when Rineke Dijkstra was an unknown photographer from the Netherlands visiting the United States, she found herself shooting pictures on a beach in South Carolina while being watched intently by an extroverted 14-year-old blond girl.

Ms. Dijkstra was trying to make naturalistic portraits of adolescents, and this was not the shy type she was looking for. But not wanting to disappoint, she photographed the girl anyway, and assumed the session was a failure. Only later did she realize that the shot of the girl, in a pose reminiscent of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," in an orange bikini with her stomach sucked in and a stricken expression on her face, had just the unguarded quality she was after.

"You could see she was trying so hard to answer to a specific image — trying to look like perfection," Ms. Dijkstra said. "It was in herself. It was in her culture. For me, it was so much about America."

Ms. Dijkstra was inspired to continue shooting at several other beaches, including those in Poland, Britain, Ukraine and Croatia; she became fascinated with the ways photography could reveal both cultural differences and universal similarities in the molten, transitional moment of young adulthood. The resulting series, "Beach Portraits"—monumentally scaled, painterly color prints that give significance to the smallest details of dress and attitude against a neutral backdrop of sky, water and sand—brought her to international prominence after it was exhibited in 1997 in the annual show of new photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Her young subject in the orange bikini, Erin Kinney, was stunned to learn her life-size likeness was hanging in the museum and eventually contacted Ms. Dijkstra, who recently photographed her again.

"I look at that photograph now and see someone who is very insecure and vulnerable, but I didn't think about those things when I was 14," said Ms. Kinney, now 34, who remembers anticipating that the session would feel like a glamorous modeling shoot. "I definitely came into it with an idea of what was going to happen. But because there

wasn't a lot of direction, it made me feel very awkward. I wasn't being told what to do."

Ms. Dijkstra, 52, whose 4-by-5-inch field camera requires slow, laborious work with plates, doesn't like to talk much during a shoot. She tries to create room for something genuine to happen.

"When you take a photograph," she said, "you look in a more objective way," but there is also a connection between photographer and subject. "It's recognition, as Diane Arbus said."

"I'm not just an observer," she added. "We have to respond to each other. It's a kind of tension which I like."

Sandra Phillips, senior curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where Ms. Dijkstra's [first large-scale American retrospective](#) opened last month (it will travel to the Guggenheim Museum in New York in June), described her as "deeply interested in how photography is an emotional act."

"You can see it in the pictures," she said. "There's a kind of respect for the subject as well as an intimacy. A lot of this was motivated by tragedy that she had experienced, and one understands her receptiveness to Arbus."

Ms. Phillips was referring to both a devastating bicycle accident in 1990, after which Ms. Dijkstra spent five months recuperating in bed, and the 1992 murder of her friend and assistant, Esther Kroon, who was shot by two boys wanting to steal her camera when she was visiting Guatemala. "It made me realize that you are just very vulnerable," Ms. Dijkstra said.

Ms. Dijkstra, who said she considers herself naturally introverted, was drawn to photography in part as a way to connect with people. While studying at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam she would screw up the courage to ask flamboyantly dressed strangers at the nightclub Paradiso if she could take their pictures.

While Ms. Dijkstra was at the academy, a teacher mentioned an affinity between the black-and-white images of this series and Arbus's work, which she hadn't previously known. "Arbus's photographs are empathic but not sentimental," said Ms. Dijkstra, who went on to write her thesis on Arbus, who is known for dignified portraits of society's misfits.

"She doesn't frame them with any kinds of cliché," Ms. Dijkstra added. "Somehow they are sort of monuments."

After graduating in 1986 Ms. Dijkstra did editorial work, including portraits of businessmen for annual reports, but was frustrated by how stiff her subjects were.

In 1991, during her intensive rehabilitation after the bike accident, Ms. Dijkstra made what she calls her first truthful portrait, an image of herself just out of the lap pool, staring down the camera with a look of determination and sheer fatigue. Realizing that physical exertion could ease her subjects' self-consciousness gave her the idea to try photographing on the beach.

After her breakthrough with that series she undertook other series in which she captured shifting demeanors, including women who had just given birth, bullfighters from Portugal who had just stepped out of the ring and Israeli women going into the army. (All of these are on view in the retrospective.)

Ms. Dijkstra is after the same qualities in her work with video, including "Buzz Club/Mystery World," her first video installation, from 1996-97. She juxtaposed girls she plucked from the Buzz Club in Liverpool, England, to dance (and drink beer and chew gum and smoke cigarettes) against a white wall with boys selected from the Mystery World nightclub in the Netherlands doing the same to a pulsing techno beat. The subjects slide in and out of inhibition and absorption in their dancing, and the half-hour two-channel projection — with individuals and pairings alternating on two adjacent screens — comes off as a humorous anthropological study of the mating rituals of clubgoers.

In her more recent three-screen video piece "I See a Woman Crying (Weeping Woman)," from 2009, Ms. Dijkstra used [Picasso's "Weeping Woman"](#) in the Tate Liverpool as the distraction device for a group of English schoolchildren, who were asked to describe what they saw in the painting — which never appears on screen. The camera follows the conversation as it builds, with observations like: "He paints how people feel," and "She's lonely." One boy obsessively talks about money, while a girl silently fumes in disgust at his comments.

"The whole group dynamic adds up," Ms. Dijkstra said. "If you replaced any two of those people, it could have been a totally different discussion."

During her career Ms. Dijkstra has also recorded how her subjects change over time, as in her series "Almerisa." The title subject was a 6-year-old Bosnian refugee in a center for asylum seekers in Leiden, in the Netherlands, when Ms. Dijkstra first photographed her in 1994 — a tiny girl in her stiff best dress, her feet dangling limply from the chair on which she's propped. Later, wondering what had become of Almerisa and her family as they made a new life in the Netherlands, the photographer looked them up and began

chronicling Almerisa every year or so — always sitting on a chair — as she grew into a teenager, acclimated to a new culture and, by the last of the 11 pictures, became a mother holding a baby of her own.

“She is from another culture, but she is somehow adopting the Western European one,” said Ms. Dijkstra, who was a witness for Almerisa’s wedding. “You can show that. Her attitude is changing. Her clothes are changing. The way she wears her hair. She’s just a girl going through what every girl goes through, but with her it’s a little bit different, because she comes from Bosnia.”

Ms. Dijkstra brought Almerisa to New York last year when the series was on view at the Museum of Modern Art. “I could see her seeing herself on the wall at that museum and people watching the photos,” she said. “She suddenly understood that it was not just about her, it was about something much wider.”