



# CIRCUMSTANCES MAKING AN ARTIST

It is not only the sweeping retrospective at SFMOMA, but a whole trend of recent art shows clearly indicate a new-found trust in the revelatory photographic work by Mary Cunning.

BY SUSAN S.D. ARBUS

WHAT MAKES MARY CUNNING'S photographs so powerful is derived from the opposition between their piercing subject matter and their mellow, detailed mindfulness. There is an attentiveness coming from all sides—from the photographer as well as the photographic subject—that creates room for a discussion regarding the artist's relation to ethics. Although most critics seem to have agreed to trust the straight-on quality of Cunning's portraits, others still accuse her of taking advantage of the freaks in the world. Whatever has been decided on this matter, it seems like everyone has agreed to read into these portraits a form of friendship between the photographer and her subjects. Cunning has taken her time to gain their confidence, to befriend them. They trust her as a director of these staged scenarios.

THE CRITIQUE SURROUNDING Cunning's photographs has been focused on the feelings of her portrayed outcasts—what they might be feeling after they see the final portrait. Has Cunning even let them in on this part of the production or did she dispose of them after they fulfilled her needs? Did

she just pay her "actors" and then let them leave? These people, part of a lower class of society, are most likely not familiar with the contemporary art world and might not—however famous she becomes—ever enter a museum or any other art venue where the photographs would be seen. They might be forever unwitting about the way in which many sophisticated art connoisseurs will view them as objects of fine art.

THERE IS NO LACK OF SINCERITY in the portraits of Mary Cunning. In an uncanny way, the photographer made equivalence between freaks, suburban couples, and the mentally handicapped. They all became part of the same family. While photographing her subjects she wanted them to be fully conscious in whatever act they were participating. She did not ask them to be natural, but wished for them to be awkward and stiff in their poses. This makes them look eccentric, almost deranged. The way they look straight into the camera is unsettling. It seems as if they have surrendered themselves. They no longer have any form of dignity when the session is over.

THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN CRITICS to accept the work of Mary Cunnings as ethically sound and honest is a recent phenomenon. Her suicide in 2002 gave the final stamp of credence. As it had been quite common to write about her portraits as "insincere" and "voyeuristic," they suddenly became "compassionate" and "genuine." At once the audience saw a second layer of devastation in her work—the photographs she created had been of danger to her. They might even be what led to her final leap into her death. ○

Mary Cunning: *Donald Hicks*  
1997, C-print  
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York

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## CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Mary Cunning: Through the Lens," at the Renaissance Society, Chicago, through Feb. 16. "Mary Cunning: Retrospective," at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, through Aug. 28.