

Gesture is voice

The photography of John Goodman

A JOHN GOODMAN PHOTOGRAPH is a study in not seeing, a gently powerful reminder of what we miss or ignore or discount as we go about our lives. To say that of most photographers would imply self-consciousness if not artifice. We know the tropes: the close-up that hints at the whole, the shadow that suggests what's been backlit, the reflection in water or a rear-view mirror or eye glasses.

Goodman is bolder, more genuine, and more intense. The black man boxing at the Times Square Gym is both revealing and unknowable—like the white ballerina with whom he's paired. Both stand exposed. Their skin looks simultaneously bright and muted, while their absorption in work—the clenched shoulders, the lifted arms—transports us to a world deeply private and shamelessly on view, the world of the athlete and the world of the artist.

It's no coincidence that Goodman is drawn to athletes and artists, prostitutes and symphony audiences; all are caught in the act of being themselves while performing. And it's in that contradictory instant, idiosyncratic and public, personal and exposed, heartfelt and rehearsed, that Goodman insists we pay attention and he pay attention. It's the instant when we let our guard down deliberately, an instant of willful vulnerability.

The flip side of John Goodman's drawing us into what we're not allowed to see—the faces of the boxer and ballerina, the street beyond the sign advertising Times Square Gym, the body of the man in overalls in the Havana doorway—is the intimacy he pulls off. We don't need to see the boxer's or the ballerina's faces any more than we need to see the face of someone we're talking to on the phone. Goodman's subjects reveal themselves in their gestures, and for John Goodman the gesture is the equivalent of the human voice. Hands abound in his images—fretful,

poised, world-weary, guarded—and in their shape, in the kind and amount of tension they carry, we come to know the person to whom they're connected. Goodman makes us readers of human signs.

For his devotion to and appreciation of the subtle dramas of daily life—the three women not fully resigned to patience on a forlorn Cuba street; the face of the hatted commuter whose mind's already absorbed by work; the ballerina with her hands on her hips who's on the verge of an outburst—it's easy to minimize or overlook Goodman's technique.

Yet, for all their spontaneity, John Goodman's photographs enjoy as tight a balance and as strong a compositional integrity as an architect's

blueprint. The central pillar-like figure who divides the picture of the three women on the Cuban street becomes an emblem of anticipation, and not just for her posture or her tight-fitting clothes. Notice how everything alive in the frame—the nearby disconsolate women, the retreating figures far away—appears at her

back, as if purposely out of mind. In front of her stretches the future—an open, empty street. The creased hat of the hurried commuter finds its complement in the outline of buildings above him. No wonder his mind's already preoccupied by work—he's wearing his office. And the chiseled ballerina, who looks as if she's ready to launch a nuclear strike, stands as precisely flanked by her colleagues as the mechanical figures of a glockenspiel.

Throughout his career, John Goodman has invited contradictions. His photography marries the tumult of personality with the symmetry of design, the visceral with the deliberate, guts with formality. By embracing those contradictions, he has given us a body of work that compels us to see. ♦

*John Goodman
Photographs,
A Retrospective:
1972-Present*
September 9 through
October 31, 2004
Art Institute of Boston at
Lesley University.