

# MODERN PAINTERS

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## MARTHA ROSLER

**FROM VIDEO AND COLLAGE** to photography and writing, from feminism to social activism: Martha Rosler has influenced as many areas of endeavor as any artist alive. This month a show of never-before-seen photographs she took in Cuba some 30 years ago will open at **Mitchell-Innes & Nash**, in New York, and the **Brooklyn Museum of Art** will honor Rosler as part of its annual gala and the fifth anniversary of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Daniel Kunitz spoke with Rosler from Berlin, where she is spending part of the year in a residency.

**DANIEL KUNITZ:** *What brought you to Cuba in 1981?*

**MARTHA ROSLER:** One of the only ways

you could go to Cuba at that time was for cultural or academic reasons because under Reagan, other sorts of trips were banned. Or you had to go through Mexico or Canada and risk censure. Somehow, Ana Mendieta helped put together a culturally based trip with the help of the Cuban government, and I was invited. I had recently moved back to New York, though some of my L.A. friends were on the trip, including Suzanne Lacy and Jerri Allyn, and I was friends with some of the other participants, including Lucy Lippard. It was hard to turn down a chance to visit Cuba, which I never thought I'd be able to visit.

**DK:** *In deciding what to photograph, did you have an agenda?*

**MR:** I did not.

**DK:** *You just shot whatever struck you?*

**MR:** Yes. The pictures I took are quite continuous with the photos I've taken before and since. They evidence the same eye for how daily life is carried out, in public in particular—one of my most precious subjects, one I keep returning to. Anyhow, I was carrying two cameras, one for black-and-white and one for color. I was in the process of deciding whether I was going concentrate on color or black-and-white in general. My compatriots in San Diego had insisted on working in black-and-white, but I was also fond of color photography. I was the only one of the group that had trained as a painter. You couldn't develop color slides yourself, and



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I didn't much care for color print film. I was ambivalent about which way I was going to go.

**DK:** *How did you select the photographs for this show?*

**MR:** I tend to look at spaces of transit and movement and the way people organize their lives. I photographed on long-distance buses in California when I lived there in the 1970s. Since then I've done a lot of work about airports and subways and roads, and looking at the black-and-whites, there are pictures of airports and cars and shop windows. A lot of my work in color subsequently centered on airports, roads, shop windows, and streets—it's almost a counterpoint to the housing work that I've done. I mean, housing is about the organization and habitation of apparently private spaces, and the other work that I'm describing is about places where people appear in public. The Cuba images follow the same lines.

**DK:** *It strikes me that while there are people*

*in your photos, there are really no individuals.*

**MR:** Well, some are portraits, but mostly I don't do portraiture. I just did a photographic series on Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where I live, commissioned by the Wattis Institute, in San Francisco, for its show "More American Photographs." But I was unwilling to produce a series of traditional portraits of people whom I knew, or whom I met in the course of walking around my neighborhood or while dealing with them behind a store counter. Instead I doubled the portraits: There were two of each, and sometimes more than one person in a photo. I included some text; I usually included a storefront image as well. I put three of those clusters on one photograph, so that the working system is a series of composite shots.

The multiplication is a tiny reminder that time is absent from still photos. I'm suspicious of the iconic portrait—the physiognomic fallacy suggests we can learn something significant

about a person from looking at a facial representation. Really, how much *can* you read from a person's photograph? Mostly we tend to fetishize what we're looking at. Since the people in these photos are not public figures, it didn't seem right for me to just show pictures of them taken at a relatively random moment. Perhaps if this were not representing a network of my own social relations, I would feel differently.

There are portraits among the photos I took in Cuba, pictures of people whom I met, however briefly, or who agreed to be photographed. Some of those are doubled too, others not. But I waited more than 30 years to show these, in any case. Photos, and representations in general, have gone past singularity; we expect series or multiples.

**DK:** *Can you talk about the relationship between your photos and your collage work?*

**MR:** They both construct a picture, a complex meaning, by the method that we consider optically realistic, the one we invest with the burden of realism. I'm interested in getting at the question of truth value in different ways, but one, straight photography, offers relatively transparent means—although we're all smart, so we know that photos aren't transparent—and the other, the constructed image, offers palpably nontransparent means. Many of the photomontages marry idealized images of private homes, or of our bodies. Two kinds of representation are facing you and reminding you that photographic representations stem from and help us construct a world picture in which different entitlements accrue to those in different geopolitical situations, in different linguistic and conceptual frames. Aesthetically I think my standards are the same. I'm fairly conservative, in fact.

**DK:** *What makes you conservative?*

**MR:** I don't like messy picture fields, though other people may think I do. And in the antiwar photomontages I much prefer a feeling of stasis to a suggestion of real-world movement. I want people to have a space of contemplation or thought. I don't always feel the need for that in straight photography, though I do have formal demands within the frame of the print. This is all less true of some of the works in the "Body Beautiful" series [1966–72], which function a bit more like sketches. But I think this all stems from my training as a drawer and painter.

**DK:** *You're being honored this month by the Sackler Center for Feminist Art.*

**MR:** It's always gratifying to receive honors, even from institutions that may purchase a work or two but don't put on shows of my work.

**DK:** *They wouldn't show you because your work is ...*

**MR:** Offensive!

RIGHT:  
Grocery Store,  
Havana, 1981.  
C-print.

BELOW:  
Uniform Store,  
Havana, 1981.  
C-print.



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