

'Three Concerned Women' shine a light on cultures around the world

By Chris Bergeron/DAILY NEWS STAFF

Posted Nov 12, 2009 at 12:01 AM

Updated Nov 12, 2009 at 12:06 PM

Regularly traveling to other countries, Stella Johnson, Rania Matar and Susan Bank have photographed Mexico, the Middle East and Cuba with a native's immediacy and the detachment of a visitor.

Regularly traveling to other countries, Stella Johnson, Rania Matar and Susan Bank have photographed Mexico, the Middle East and Cuba with a native's immediacy and the detachment of a visitor.

As if shooting through bifocals, they have captured children and their families, laborers and the aged, poverty and natural beauty in often stunning images.

Their work is showcased in "Three Concerned Women," a powerfully affecting exhibit at the Griffin Museum of Photography that reveals the daily struggles and vitality of places many visit but few truly know.

Matar lives in Brookline and Johnson lives in Watertown while Bank has homes in Portsmouth, N.H., and Philadelphia.

All three take memorable black-and-white photographs that tell stories many tourists can't get close enough to see.

While they're all showing mid- to large-sized images, each photographer has forged a distinct style and signature look.

Enacting an Easter ritual in Mexico, a young man portraying Jesus carries the crossbeam of a crucifix past blasé onlookers in a photo by Johnson. Matar catches a dark-eyed girl playing with a Caucasian doll under her mother's watchful eyes

in a Lebanon apartment with a jagged hole blasted in the wall. A bony father holding a fat cigar lifts his young daughter off the ground in a joyous hug in Bank's poignant image.

The show was organized by Constantine Manos, a Cape Cod resident and veteran member of Mangum Photos who taught all three artists at different times.

Introducing the exhibit, he said they all demonstrated "a devotion to photography which celebrates the dignity of the human condition no matter what the circumstances might be."

Manos decided not to provide captions for the photos, thus requiring viewers to consider them on their own terms and not according to another's description.

By removing English-language cues about the photos' content, Manos puts viewers in the same position as tourists who must negotiate new countries and foreign cultures without recognizable guideposts.

"I think Constantine wants people to come to the photos first," said museum Executive Director Paula Tognarelli.

By withholding clues about the people or the scene, she believes Manos indirectly encourages viewers to unravel the mysteries of others' lives as in a real encounter. "Rather than seeing them through a caption, viewers will have to find their own cues about what they might mean," said Tognarelli.

At first glance, a visitor might say Johnson, Matar and Bank share similar interests in content and style. That would be a simplification.

Each scrutinizes their subjects with a mix of hard-eyed objectivity and barely concealed compassion that find humor, kindness and love amid poverty, grinding labor and isolation.

A Fulbright Scholar to Mexico in 2003-2004, Johnson has photographed children laughing, getting their hair braided and hanging upside down in trees in rural villages.

She demonstrates an uncanny ability to photograph fishermen in mid-cast as their nets float through the air like disks of light.

In two other stylistic hallmarks, she uses shadows to imbue her images with a sense of mystery and captures curious scenes that elude easy understanding.

Her most haunting photo shows an elderly woman casting a shadow on a hut wall like a gesturing shaman. In one singular photo, a bright-eyed young girl licks a lollipop by the ocean's edge while a disembodied arm dangles a dripping, monstrous-looking doll.

A native of Lebanon who came to the U.S. in 1984, Matar is showing about 20 photos that examine the lives of women and children in a conflict-torn country with Muslim and Christian populations.

In one striking image, a young girl's bright eyes gaze from under a head scarf at several older women in Western clothes relaxing with young men. In another, two adolescent girls wrap their scarves with the same care as American teens getting ready for an afternoon at the mall.

In one of Matar's most memorable images, a woman covered head to toe gazes toward the sea while a fashionably dressed male companion wearing sunglasses and a gold chain seems to exist in a different world.

Photographing rural Cuban life, Bank creates arresting images by juxtaposing incidents of everyday life with unexplained, sometimes disorienting details.

A man tucks a rain cape into a battered straw hat, hiding his face so he resembles an agricultural religious totem from another age. A villager carries a pig over his shoulder so its snouted-head replaces his own. And in a strange photo, a child without trousers lies on a dirty floor with a rope tied to his ankle.

Yet Bank's strongest images reveal powerful human bonds.

As two men sitting on a porch savor a fat cigar, the bigger one holds his companion's wrist in a gesture of unabashed friendship.

In one of Bank's most affecting photos, a man who might be a doctor probes the chest of an elderly man in a bed in a rural cabin. Without explanation, a horse with a flying mane races by a window.

Is it a deathbed memory? An everyday occurrence? Whether matter-of-fact or cryptic, it's both enigmatic and affecting.

Tognarelli credited Johnson, Matar and Bank with exposing the humanity of people from unfamiliar cultures.

"All three photographers go back continuously to these countries and embed themselves in these communities," she said. "By going out on their own and photographing people that many (in the U.S.) aren't familiar with, they find

common threads that link our experiences to them.”

THE ESSENTIALS:

The Griffin Museum of Photography, 67 Shore Road, Winchester, is open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday, and noon to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Admission is \$5 for adults; \$2 for seniors. Members and children under 12 are admitted free. Admission is free on Thursday.

The exhibit, “Three Concerned Women,” runs through Jan. 10.

A panel discussion between Manos and the three photographers will be moderated by Gregg Ruga, founder of Socialdocumentary.net of Lowell, today at 5 p.m. The topic is the societal role and responsibility of photographers. A book signing follows. Members free, non-members \$7.

Call 781-729-1158 or visit www.griffinmuseum.org.