

# seeing and believing: the art of NANCY BURSON

by Margaret Winchell Miller

Photographer Nancy Burson ponders the same questions as the rest of us: *What would I look like if I'd been born in a different culture, of a different race? Are spiritual healers real? Will I be able to love a child born with a disfiguring disease?* Other questions posed by Burson are more obscure—questions we may never have considered: *How would a Barbie Doll look if she lived to be 75? Would she still be beautiful? What would happen if you blended the features of Grace Kelly, Marilyn Monroe, Sophia Lorei, Bette Davis, and Audrey Hepburn into one woman? If you combined likenesses of Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha, would you see the face of God?*

The difference between Burson and the rest of us is that she has turned her thirst for answers to these inquiries into a lifetime pursuit. One hundred of her photographs are currently being displayed at Blaffer Gallery on the campus of the University of Houston. Made possible in part with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and co-organized by the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, this is a remarkable exhibit that no one should miss.

Perhaps it's no accident that the black and white photograph on the front of Burson's book features a woman with eyes so large they appear to be swelling out of their sockets. It's as if they can't see enough of the world and everyone in it. Burson, who once aspired to be a painter, decided her life's work should deal with perception—how we perceive ourselves, how we perceive each other, and how we perceive ourselves within the universe.

"We decide in the first 3-5 seconds whether we like someone based on the way they look," Burson points out. What she asks people to do is to shift that way of thinking and to reserve judgment, to focus on an intention towards seeing ourselves—and others—in new ways.

"That's my job," she maintains. "To show people how to see differently."

The mother of one son, Burson confesses that when she was pregnant, she wondered whether she could love a child with some kind of deformity. "I learned that the answer to that question revolves around self-love,"



The "Human Race Machine" is featured at this exhibit of Burson's photography in Blaffer Gallery. The interactive computer station maps and measures a viewer's features, then transforms them into those of an Asian American, an African American, or a Middle Easterner. It can also digitally age and alter someone's appearance to show how he or she will look decades from now.

she explains. "If we love ourselves, it's so much easier to love others. What we need is good parents who are modeling love. This is the core. And it's the hardest job of all."

Most of us are inclined to label every person we see—male or female, beautiful or unattractive. But Burson pushes observers of her work beyond such simplistic boundaries. Children with physical abnormalities and craniofacial conditions are photographed in loving poses with family members. A series of androgynous individuals, entitled "He/She," illustrates a world that isn't always so clear-cut. The men and women that Burson has photographed "play with their [sexual] ambiguity. They're very comfortable with it. It's fun for them."

If the photographs make you uneasy, you're not alone. "My work isn't easy for everyone to look at," she acknowledges. "This is an education process. My work revolves around the issues of self-love and unconditional love. It acts as a mirror."

Burson also suggests that if you feel uncomfortable looking at her work, you ask yourself *why*. Perhaps it's because you've exposed yourself to things that have more to do with outward appearance than consciousness. She recommends that each of us spend some time each day contemplating not only what we can see but also what we *can't* see. Begin to observe and think in a different way, she suggests, little by little. Don't be afraid.

Everyone who experiences this extraordinary exhibit will be moved and persuaded into thought and conversation.

Go as soon as you can. Tell your neighbor. Take your children. See and believe.

**The Art of Nancy Burson** will be exhibited on the University of Houston campus at Blaffer Gallery (713-743-9530) through September 8. The gallery is free and open to the public on weekdays from 10-5 and weekends from 1-5 (closed Mondays and University holidays).

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