

# The Look and the Gaze

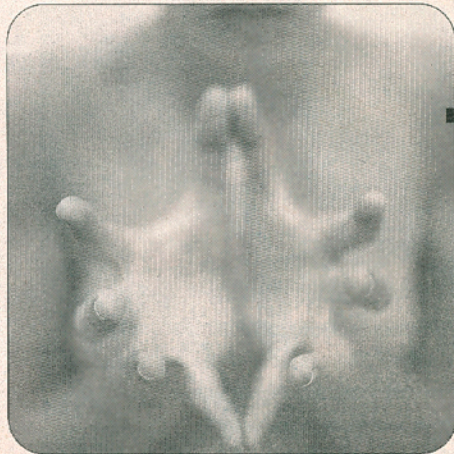
**W**e look, but we don't always see. Thanks to rapid-fire TV editing, we may only get to look at things for seconds at a time, sometimes only nano-seconds. Which is amazing, really; a whole nation conditioned to have the attention span of hamsters. Just turn on TV; the rush of images can be dazzling, hypnotic. Not much may sink in (which may be a blessing), but it's mesmerizing.

Still photography, when it's effective, focuses our attention more surely and subtly. We see things through the eyes of the photographer, which, when it works, amounts to a kind of visual poetry. Two current photo shows illustrate this phenomenon. Mona Kuhn's photos at Bassetti are examples of poetic attentiveness directed at the human figure. Sensual but not overtly erotic, Kuhn's nudes glow in the light of secluded natural places. At home in their skin, her figures exude a languorous repose so poetic that we may not have a clue what they are up to. But it may not matter.

In *Next Door*, a woman's hand reflects pale golden light like a luminous omen. It rests on another hand that appears from just outside the frame, mysteriously touching hers in an almost ballet-like gesture. Her other hand conceals her face leaving one eye gently gazing through her parted fingers. Only when you peer into the shadows is it obvious that the woman is nude. The hands have it, hold-

ing our gaze. Kuhn is big on hands, and other extremities. In *Menta*, a pair of hands cupped together with fingers outstretched unfolds like a flower — or perhaps a tentacled undersea creature. Subtly visible in the background is the rest of her, a female nude barely discernable in half-light made mystically evanescent by Hasselblad's legendary optics. Kuhn photographs women and men of all ages and races, but these hand gestures are typical if not emblematic. The body is a mystery, she seems to say, and body language speaks to us at a subliminal level below the radar of our concepts. Sometimes her subject is just a face, but the look is no less enigmatic. Surreal and psychological, Kuhn's work inverts the neoclassical provocations of her mentor, Jock Sturges, infusing hints of German expressionism and Ralph Gibson's surreal lyricism. The result is the evolving style for which this 32-year-old native of Sao Paulo, Brazil, is becoming increasingly known in global photo circles. Intriguing work from an evolving artist.

If Kuhn's work reflects a contemplative if directorial gaze, Elliot Erwit's legendary street photographs are the result of active observing. Or as he puts it: "There are no great secrets in photography ... [it is] simply a function of noticing things, nothing more." One of the most celebrated American photographers, Erwit's photo stardom emerged with his "kitchen debate" pictures of Nixon



Mona Kuhn keeps the nude aspect of her subjects more in the shadows, seemingly more intrigued by hands, as she shows in *Menta*.

his birth year "1881" blazoned on the door, as the Caddie's fins flare into space behind him. *She Got Me, 1958*, is more virile, a view of a couple of leering, just-married Middle Americans sitting on the rear fender of a car with a sign over the trunk: "She Got Me This Morning — But I'll Get Her Tonight!" American gothic — '50s style. Romance turns lyrical, however, in Erwit's famous *California Kiss*, a rear-mirror view of love in bloom. Throw in photos of Che Guevara, Fidel and some hookers in Amsterdam,

and *Snaps* makes for an interesting mix, a colorful, mid-20th century human smorgasbord by an established modern master of street photography. ☞

- Mona Kuhn: Photographs
- Through Dec. 15
- Bassetti Gallery, 233 Chartres St., 529-9811
- Elliot Erwit: *Snaps*
- Through Feb. 1
- A Gallery for Fine Photography, 322 Royal St., 568-1313