

The Met Opens Bold Twenties Photo Exhibit

By CAROL ANN DAVIS

When I walked into the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Monday to preview the opening of its newest exhibit, "The New Vision: Photography Between the World Wars," I didn't really know what to expect. Conscious of the Norman Rockwell era, I was leery because I thought the exhibit might just be a collection of cute Santa Clauses and "I Was Amazed to Find a Good Example of American Life, but Life Around the World in the Twenties and Thirties." The exhibit has everything from brothel scenes in Brassai's *Introduction at Suzy's*, 1932, to the famous anonymous shot, *Explosion of the Indenburg*, 1937.



BRASSAI'S portrayal of a Paris brothel shows another aspect of life in the Thirties, in *Introduction at Suzy's*.

the building the way the artist felt it, and wonders at man's role in its construction.

This feeling of the fast pace of new technology is not lost on the second section of the exhibit: photos of machines. Many of these were taken as advertisements, and as such often focus on the sheer power of metal, steam, even the newly developed movie camera. Again, the artists use unusual angles with their subjects. Roger Perry's *Locomotive*, for example, thunders almost over the viewer; the picture is taken from ground level looking up at the oncoming train. The photo looks even more imposing because Perry printed it positive, not negative — the locomotive storms through a black background and is reversed to appear white.

Taking a break from cold steel and angular buildings, the exhibit then turns to the soft curves of everyday life. The artists, however, are not in love with any ideals; while there are some classic pictures, such as Helen Levitt's *Three Kids on a Stoop*, 1940, which portrays three New York City kids dressed up for Halloween, there are also

more somber scenes, like two poor men asleep on a subway bench and another of a tired black woman on a city street staring desperately into the camera. In these, the artists seem not as much interested in an American style as they are in a different photographic consciousness than their predecessors, who often avoided angles and "painted," blurry, more portrait-like pictures.

The exhibit continues with a series of up to the point of perfection. This section is full of heroes.

Almost as if the artists had been dreaming, the section following the stars is a series of distorted self-portraits. The artists pull film this way and that, juxtapose animals onto images of themselves, and capture confused and scared images on each other's faces. The stars they loved and made perfect with touch ups are sharply contrasted with the self-loathing portraits of the artists. As in the scenes of everyday life, there are two sides to the coin, and they feel themselves the worse side.

The pictures that follow become progressively more daring and experimental. It is obvious that the artists are seeking their own style, and finding it. This is perhaps the most exciting part of the exhibit; artists experiment with nude shots, often juxtaposing totally conflicting ideas. Many of these pictures tell stories without endings—they are mysteries, many of them sensual. There are also collages, and the artists often use everyday objects to convey something unusual. The artists begin to use shadow and light in definitive ways.

Also included in the exhibit are shots of world events, a document more valuable than many found in history books. A shot of the crowds on Armistice Day in London, 1918 is heartening, although taken with more optimism than we might ascribe to it today.



STEAMFITTING, 1921, by Lewis Hine shows the relationship between man and machine.

After all, the anonymous photographer had no knowledge of World War II.

More than being a sign of the times, though, this exhibit is timeless. It does more than just record what happened in 1933; it says that people were living in 1933, really living, and learning about machines and poverty and everything else, just like they are today. It charts the growth and experimentation of artists, which is alive and happening today as well. I am pleased to see the Met provide such a kinetic exhibit, and it shouldn't be missed.

"The New Vision: Photography Between the World Wars" is sponsored by a grant from the Ford Motor Company, and given as a gift from the collections of John C. Waddell. It contains 125 black and white photographs. It opens September 23 and runs until December 31. The exhibit will be accompanied by weekly film showings of films by the artists. The films are free with museum admission and will be shown on weekends. For more information, call Public Programs, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, (212) 879-5500, ext 2035.

Dreamscape And Landscape Merge In Geomania

By AMY GRANZIN

The television screens flicker with a natural landscape unlike any landscape you might see in nature: valleys created by fluorescent pink and yellow edged mountains are flooded with unbelievably powerful ocean waves, the foamy water so intense that it drowns the

The screen presents an icy, nightmarish region of sharp peaks and rippling snow that reaches beyond the eye's reach.

peaks, only to swiftly, breathlessly, recede from the picture, as if evaporating into the arid desert atmosphere.

This is the world of Video Geomania, a work of video art on display at the Vassar Art Gallery through September 24. Created by a New Mexico couple, Steina Vasulka, who is responsible for the visuals, and Woody Vasulka, in charge of instrumenta-

tion and production assistance, Geomania turns the superimposition of familiar natural wonders into something that exists only in dreams.

A sixteen minute tape sequence flashes from six Sony TV sets stacked in two rows. While most of the time the six screens project the same image simultaneously, occasionally two or three screens will change camera direction or color, creating a startling contrast. Movement is the most important element of the work, because in each superimposed scene, using a technique called "keying," the dissimilar landscapes are videotaped with different camera directions and perspectives, so that they seem to be growing apart or melding together.

In one sequence this combination of nature cinematography and video manipulation comes together powerfully in a stark polar landscape. The screens present an icy, nightmarish region of sharp peaks and rippling snow, that stretches beyond the eye's reach. This still, unbroken scene is invaded by billowing clouds that rush and fill the air. An odd, eerie quality is evoked from the absence of man, or of any human sign, a reflection perhaps of the coldness of the high-tech medium of video. The picture is

created by a human, but is lacking in humanity.

Other landscapes aren't as desolate. As three screens show a slow valley pan across the Grand Canyon, the other three screens are suddenly filtered with blue. This revelatory movement works by upsetting a

Geomania turns the superimposition of familiar natural wonders into something that exists only in dreams.

warm, languorous mood created by the reddish canyon, with a shock of an emotionally cool color. Another scene moves into the realm of abstraction with a close-up image of a dark gray, bubbling mass which spurts forth thick liquid. This could be the product of volcanic earth, but the image works more powerfully on a subconscious level; the mass is recognizable, but not in a specific way.

These disturbing, and yet familiar, visuals are underscored by a hushed, whispering

audio accompaniment. The sounds are what before man's presence — echoing other echoes, detached, without meaning — a perfect companion to pictures that demand your full attention. In one scene, clouds pour across the screen like poisonous gases, the visual equivalent to the soundtrack.

This is the kind of art that can only be fully realized in its chosen medium. Video has a way of grabbing your attention because of its immediacy and known accessibility.

Members of contemporary Western society have set up expectations about the range of television experiences, so when the expectations are challenged in this relatively new art form, everyone is able to share in that pushing of boundaries. The knowledge of art or film history isn't necessary, just the ability to see something new.

Steina Vasulka, the artist/video technician, is setting her sights on a four screen installation for her next project. The four screens will work together this time to create a human natural wonder, a string quartet.

This show only runs until Sunday, so if you are interested in video, film or art, hurry, and don't miss the opportunity for a new experience.

Novel Demands A Choice Between Two Worlds

By CAROL ANN DAVIS

We have time to do a little leisure reading, right? Right? Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* is worth making time for, though, even if you don't have time to make. It's not exactly leisure reading, either. It has everything: war, science, science fiction, love, politics, men and women.

The first thing that struck me about the novel was its narrator/heroine, Connie Ramos. She isn't rich, or beautiful, or particularly smart. In fact, she's what some people in the book view as a "worst case scenario." She is a Chicana woman in her thirties who lives on welfare in New York City. She's been convicted of helping her blind ex-con husband conduct an armed assault. She's also been periodically found insane, institutionalized by her family and put under heavy sedation which interferes with her short term memory. When she's not institutionalized, she gets beaten by her niece's pimp. Her daughter, who she feeds dog food to because she has little money for anything else, is put in a foster home because of child abuse charges.

Understandably, the reader might question the narrative of such a woman. When she started talking to people from the year 2137, I was decidedly skeptical. But I ended up believing Connie, and even rooting for the future world she saw, because it was a lot better than modern day New York City.

One vision is a world of steel buildings, vacuum-packed meals and continual television.

In fact, what Connie sees in the future world is fascinating. It's not what I expected—there's no techno-overkill in Mattapoisset. As you can perhaps assume from the Indian name, people in the year 2137 are concerned with things like the environment, conservation, and equality. Everybody's happy, and if they're not, they talk about it. Imagine that! For Connie, it is a sad contrast to the

world she has to live in.

The future isn't all paradise. Mattapoisset is at war with a world that subsists inside steel buildings on vacuum-packed meals and continual television. Connie is caught in the middle; the people in Mattapoisset need her help in the war so that one day they will exist. After all, they're still in the future, they don't exist yet.

So while she is institutionalized and heavily sedated, Connie has to "channel" Mattapoisset, talk to them, figure out how to help them and then do it. "Channelling" is achieved through psycho-kinetic communication. The future people chose Connie because she was very open-minded.

The world Piercy creates for Connie in present-day New York City was, for me, a glaring reprimand. Every page seemed to reveal or outline some injustice society had wrought. Of course, Connie had run the gamut: drug use, child abuse, welfare, crime—yet she'd obviously fallen through the cracks in the system. She needed help, and was being ignored, even hindered.

In order to write this book, which takes

place mainly in institutions where Connie has been placed, the author visited several public institutions. She had seen the things she ascribes to Connie's situation, and I have every reason to believe people in like situations exist. The book left me searching for something I could do, and asking, "what has been done? What hasn't?"

Piercy's answer is not clear. Certainly, we can't all do what Connie does and wage a private, violent war against public medicine. *Woman on the Edge of Time* doesn't tell us what to do, it simply points out with harsh clarity that we are on the verge of deciding our future, and it can be either cold steel and polluted, or green and preserved. The novel goes so far as to imply that we are inclining towards the first choice. Piercy's disturbingly political novel asserts that we are all men and women on the edge of time.

Marge Piercy is widely known as a feminist writer, playwright and poet. Other books include a poetry book called *The Moon is Always Female*, and several novels, including one called *Gone to Soldiers*. They are all published by Fawcett Press.