

CHRISTOPHER FELVER: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING

ZANE BENNETT CONTEMPORARY ART
435 SOUTH GUADALUPE STREET, SANTA FE

We have such a hard time determining why

we're here on the planet. Speaking here not so much of the cosmic why of why does the universe exist with us in it, but more toward finding an answer to "Why are we here?" in the sense of what are we really supposed to be doing with our time? It seems that if we had that answer, then pursuing it would give life more meaning. What is being for, what are you supposed to be doing with it? What is the "importance of being?" What is our *raison d'être*?

Recent discoveries in astro- and metaphysics have made it abundantly clear that getting an answer to the ultimate why of the existence of everything is not really an achievable task. The resultant bounce back from this wall of impossibility is toward human-scale meanings, and in this sense all human knowledge and intellectual constructs qualify as being derived from a melding of purely human subjectivities; subjectivities that are both collective and highly individualized yet participate in the cooperative thinking, painting, sculpting, writing, acting, dreaming, singing, playing, discovering, and polemicizing that is culture.

You can get all academic about it and discuss art in erudite terms as a "site for

cultural meaning," or you can shave your beard and remove your reading glasses and just face the real reason we're here—that the common element in all our cultural activities is, quite simply, human connection. Ipso facto, your purpose in life is to be human, to have a body bound to this particular planet and to do those most important of human things—to cooperate, communicate, and connect. "People who need people" and all that, like the song says.

Christopher Felver's photographic portraits of contemporary poets, priestesses, painters, and thinkers put the emphasis right where it belongs, though Barbra Streisand doesn't make an appearance. Felver's greatest ability is to put his famous sitters at ease, even to capture some quintessential aspect of each unique individual's character. Anjelica Huston is stately and regal, with just a glimpse of good humor and sensuality in the curling corners of her mouth. Hunter S. Thompson looks as sublimely paranoid as ever in his aviator glasses, while Gerhard Richter maintains the Teutonic distance and reserve that typifies his best work. Felver's

first cultural heroes were the Beats, and Felver's images of Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg are both outstanding. In fact, as far as portraiture goes, and the requirements of presence it imposes, Felver is masterful. The shots themselves are clean, cropped, and composed for the most part. Nearly every sitter looks directly into the eyes of the viewer. Face to face, human to human, there is a primordial power in Felver's pictures of people. And when they are people who have achieved the iconic status of celebrity, our voyeurism kicks in. Is that what she really looked like? Is his head really so round? What made Roy Lichtenstein smile so broadly at the photographer?

Jasper Johns, John Chamberlain, Helen Frankenthaler, John Updike, Noam Chomsky, Joan Mitchell, Yayoi Kusama, Georg Baselitz, Richard Serra...the list goes on and on. Some key players are MIA, but for the most part this exhibition reads as a current Who's Who in the realms of art, poetry, and philosophy. This is the current intelligentsia on pictorial parade. Larry Rivers becomes a collage element in one of his

own paintings. Johns is slightly turned away, demonstrating the elusive reclusiveness that is his hallmark. The pleasure of seeing your favorites depicted exactly as they ought to be is matched by the surprises. Louise Nevelson always worked the dramatic eye shadow, but who knew she could look so much like a tragic, homeless gypsy? The Rauschenberg shot looks strikingly sanitized, like an over-produced Hollywood headshot. Where is Rauschenberg drunk and disorderly like we like him? Still and all, Felver has a remarkable gift for the poetry of portrait making.

The only solid criticism of this show is that the quality of the prints themselves seems to be somewhat compromised. These are all old-school, made-in-the-darkroom gelatin silver prints, and as such they really ought to be displayed in frames, under glass. I'm not sure if the print quality is not great to begin with or if exposure to light and air has caused them to fade somewhat. Truly white whites and deep, rich blacks are hard to find in this body of work, which despite this one technical concern is quite extraordinary, just like the individuals depicted, all of whom along with Christopher Felver have found and forged incredible human connections.

—JON CARVER



Above: Robert Rauschenberg
Left: Louise Nevelson