Selections from the Carol Beesley Collection of Photographs, in Honor of Michael Hennagin

"Photography suits the temper of this age - of active bodies and minds. It is a perfect medium for one whose mind is teeming with ideas, with imagery… for one who sees quickly and acts decisively."

EDWARD WESTON

"Photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing and when they have vanished there is no contrivance on earth which can make them come back again."

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON

Carol Beesley, emeritus professor of art, taught studio courses such as drawing and painting at the University of Oklahoma from 1973 until she retired in 1997. In "retirement," Beesley maintains an active studio in Santa Fe and continues to teach classes in OU's Summer in Santa Fe program. Beginning with her days as a graduate student at UCLA, where she studied with the late Robert Heinecken in the early 1970s, and continuing with her turn to serious collecting in the 1980s, she has zealously pursued her love of that quintessentially modern art object: the great photograph. Her strong feelings about the importance of photography as an art form and her extensive knowledge of the critical literature surrounding photography led to her invitation to regularly teach courses in the history of photography while at OU. She sees herself not only as someone with a passion for photographs as art objects, but as a steward of these important records of art making in the modern era. When asked to characterize her collection, she replied, "These are all images I have loved and cherished and for which I think of myself as only a caretaker."

This inaugural exhibition of the Carol Beesley Collection of Photographs is dedicated to her late husband Michael Hennagin (1936-1993), a composer and respected professor of music at the University of Oklahoma. This exhibition gives an occasion to recognize an important gift to the photography collection of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, and an opportunity for visitors to enjoy the fruits of a long and loving relationship between Beesley and the art of photography. Comprised of more than 100 images, one of the striking things about the collection is its democratic character. "I've never really been terribly concerned with whether or not I'm acquiring a work by a famous photographer, I've always been much more interested in whether or not it was a good photograph," she said. Although we find the work of many prominent photog-
raphers in this exhibition (Edward Weston, Paul Caponigro, Laura Gilpin, Henri Cartier-Bresson, just to name a few), the Beasley collection also is proof that great photographs can be found everywhere. "One of the things I love about photography is that almost everyone in the world has used a camera and I love that even the most untrained, unschooled person can make beautiful pictures. We find them all the time: whole caches of beautiful images by unknown or unheralded photographers," she said.

Among the portraits in the Beasley collection are iconic images such as Laura Gilpin's portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe and the striking image of Mother Teresa by Mary Ellen Mark. It is too simple to see a mere reflection of Beasley's Catholic upbringing or her admiration for the path-breaking life and work of O'Keeffe. These images are testimonials to the pioneering role of women in photography every bit as much as they are outstanding examples of portraiture. Invented in 1839, and without a long history in the male-dominated academy, photography allowed women entry into all phases of its development as an art form. A striking contemporary example in this exhibition is part of a series of portraits that Dawna Wallis, a former OU student, made of Oklahomans and Kansans in the 1980s.

Other unheralded artists in this exhibition include Jim Miller, another former OU student, and Gary Harger, who began making photographs at the Joseph Harp correctional facility in a state-sponsored program for art in the prisons. Miller's stark portrait of a girl beside a highway embodies the intersection of people and place that is integral to middle America. Harger's photo essay on prison life is charged with a raw clarity that many more famously artistic photographers struggle to achieve. These later works are an expression of the ultimately democratic nature of the revolution in image making that photography represents and that fuels this collector's passion. "When photography became widespread, for the first time ordinary people knew what their ancestors looked like," Beasley said. "Portraiture wasn't just for people who could afford expensive oil paintings. Now anyone could have a portrait of their mother or grandmother or their cat, for that matter."

In the context of this collection we may also consider the term democratic in a somewhat more political sense as well. As a painter, Beasley is well known for her colorist landscapes of Oklahoma and the great Southwest. As an art historian, she has long recognized the important role that photography played in giving Americans a sense of the real grandeur of the American dream—that it was not just a big dream philosophically, it was a big dream physically. It was the energy required to fulfill both of those dreams that literally created this nation's self-image. Photography can capture the character of a place as surely as it can capture the character in a face. Following in the tradition of

Edward Weston (U.S., 1886-1958)
Nude, 1925
Gelatin silver print, 9 1/2 x 6 1/4 in.
Gift of Carol Beasley Herring
Carleton Watkins and Timothy O'Sullivan, 19th century photographers who documented our initial encounters with great vistas of the West, the work of Paul Caponigro has served to increase our appreciation for the depth of the romance those places instilled in us as Americans. It is the amazing certainty of their existence that the photograph bequeaths to all, even those of us who have never beheld their splendor in person or meditated on what is no more.

Some of the most interesting and important photographs in the Beesley collection are works in which the artist has explored photography’s capacity to represent reality. “I love the ambiguities of the medium,” she said. “The photograph itself always starts from the world, and most people start their interaction with photography from an assumption that a photograph tells the truth, but it’s the most complicated truth ever assigned to an object. The thing is, a photograph can be more real than the truth.”

Two favorite photographers, Frederick Sommer and Edward Weston, provide prime examples of the medium’s ability to present unlikely subjects aesthetically. Of Sommer’s unique vision, Beesley said, “I adore his elegant sense of mortality, his exquisite symmetry. He records subject matter that would repulse most viewers and with it makes haunting photographs about the transitory beauty of this world. You notice there are never any horizon lines in his photographs, so that the edge of the photograph — as the edge of our immediate experience — also implies all that exists beyond the realm of our experience.”

For many viewers, the decayed animals that inhabit Sommer’s barren spaces can hardly be conceived of as having any aesthetic value at all. It takes a truly creative eye, open to seeing the world in new ways, to understand that these photographs are testament to the ability of image making in the mechanical age to reveal the sublime.

Weston is another example of an artist who understood the implications of photography as a means of almost spiritual communion in the scientific age. He understood how the camera, how the very mechanics of photography, could lead us below the surface of our vision to a deeper understanding of the world. “Weston was a master printer,” Beesley said. “He helped me understand how important the craft of photography is to the art of photography. He was able to show the world in a way that the human eye can never see except in a photograph.”

To Carol Beesley, photographs enable us to encounter more than images themselves.

“The camera augments our experience of the world, and what we see is not more true, but we see it more clearly, more deeply, more precisely, and if you look hard enough, you can find your own truths in that experience of the photograph.”

Dawna Walls (U.S., b. 1952)
Shop Girls at the Mall, OKC, 1990
Gelatin silver print, 12 7/8 x 9 3/4 in.
Gift of Carol Beesley Herrneg

Gary Hargr (U.S., b. 1953)
FTW with Mirrored Glasses, 1991
Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 in.
Gift of Carol Beesley Herrneg
Above left (and detail, front):
Laura Gilpin (U.S., 1891-1979)
Georgia O’Keeffe with Juan Hamilton Pot, 1953
Gelatin silver print, 8⅛ x 7¾ in.
Gift of Carol Bessley Hermann

Overleaf:
Jerry N. Uelsmann, (U.S., b. 1934)
Untitled, 1988
Gelatin silver print, 10⅜ x 13¾ in.
Gift of Carol Bessley Hermann

Above right:
Sally Mann (U.S., b. 1951)
Untitled (Girl Looking Over Her Shoulder), 1973
Gelatin silver print, 10⅛ x 13¾ in.
Gift of Carol Bessley Hermann

Below:
Frederick Sommer (U.S., b. Italy, 1904-1999)
Jack Rabbit, 1939
Gelatin silver print, 7¾ x 9½ in.
Liberi courtesy of Carol Bessley Hermann, 2009