



0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8

Zuzanna Smolarkiewicz . . . from page 1

Smolarkiewicz appeared in these pages in [June](#) as one of three graduate student artists whose group show at the Rio Gallery, *I Am You*, focused on their common conviction that portraits are as self-expressive as any other genre of art. Eva Jorgensen, also in that trio, appears here as one of Smolarkiewicz's subjects, her kitchen displaying some of the antique family portraits she uses to locate herself in time and space through vast, net-like images of her extensive family. | 0 | Jorgensen's prints and installations evolved in linear fashion between *I Am You* and her thesis show in July, while Smolarkiewicz moved forward on more than half a dozen parallel tracks simultaneously, each with a source in her own story and a unique visual presentation. Her snapshot portraits in *I Am You* were rough, spontaneous invasions of her friends' space that also forced the viewer a little too close for comfort. They were what Marshall McLuhan called "hot," and some viewers skirted her side of the gallery.

By contrast, vacancy—despite the giant "ENTER" sign that looms in the foreground of one image—keeps viewers at the kind of aesthetic distance that permits moving up close to the pictures. When she was a child traveling across the country with her family, roadside motels represented a refuge from life in the back seat of a car. They offered luxuries the family didn't possess at home: color TV, swimming pools, and take-out food. Yet as adults, she realizes, most of us see them as nodes in the ordeal of travel, connected in our minds with uprooted lives, illicit encounters, and shameful purposes. Appropriate, then, that as adults we see this lost fragment of a child's world from a distance, like a confection forever recalled but now closed to us.

Compared to those projects, a woman's place? is spacious and daylit. Most of the subjects are seen from far enough away that they appear full length. Some are in another room. Some are so far away, or turned away from the camera in such a way, that they would be hard to recognize from these "portraits." Despite their candid poses and the photographer's disregard for convention—the extent of which may be measured from the fact that one of these "women" is clearly a man—the overall effect is formal: thirty subjects, thirty kitchens. In each, the architecture is fully present. It often suggests, by its rotation from the picture plane and resulting diagonal perspective, the energy of the woman who dwells in it. In most there is a sense of enclosure, though whether it's more like a cave or a cell may be for viewers to decide. Occasional windows or doors into another part of the house add a dimension. So, too, does the presence of men alongside these women, sharing their space. The equal companionship implicit in these is the flip side of the contented or self-absorbed solitude seen in others. In "Susan, Brooklyn, New York," nothing breaks through the picture plane. Instead, Susan's gaze out the window runs perpendicular to our gaze at her. Contrast that with "Brenda, Heber, Utah," where Brenda and her male companion are seen in the distant kitchen, their small forms dwarfed by the lounge chair—a throne abandoned for now—that looms in the foreground.

Two characteristics of contemporary photography are the snapshot aesthetic—a rejection of the high aims of classical photographers—and the construction of original subjects and even whole tableaus that are

Exhibition Preview: Ogden Dick by Jane: Kristi Hager & the Female Gaze at WSU

by Gretchen Reynolds

Driving down from a faculty gathering, to a weekend drawing workshop. Ogden, Utah, to Helper, Utah. Over the pass with a full moon and me with a skylight in my reliable car. I smile most of the way there. I am late and when I pull up in front of the tall windows of the Studio Group Building, which look out onto the quiet main street of Helper, they are blocked out with paper. I enter the front doors into a huge and dark studio space which holds, at its center, a circle of reverent and working artists. They radiate out from a platform in the middle. Then I see him. Raised high on a model stand and lit with a warm light, is the most beautiful man I have ever seen. He is studying to be a neuro surgeon. Modeling is his day job. He is buck naked. He is jaw-drop, drooling-mouth good looking. He is get-run-out-of-town-for-falling-in-love-with-your-model (an occupational hazard for figurative artists) manly man handsome and then some.

Later, on the back porch, exhausted from making art, several of us girls are speculating about women's access to formal drawing skills. Hasn't it changed over the years and haven't women been celebrating the male nude as subject matter for awhile now? Is the female nude more beautiful than the male nude? We had just seen a whole lot of evidence to the contrary. Would we, as women, paint or draw the male nude with the same concerns as a man would? The questions started to swirl and the idea of an exhibition, "You've Got Male" was born. It was then briefly named "Dick by Jane," and now, *The Female Gaze*, due to open on October 22nd, at Weber State University's, [Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery](#), Ogden, Utah.

Kristi Hager, who will be showing with Jen Davis and Patricia Kimball in this exhibit, is a Montana artist who has been working with the male nude as subject matter for some years. Hoping to provide an alternative to the objectification of the nude, Hager avoids approaching her models with the eye of the voyeur. Instead, Hager poses the model on a raised platform so that the point of view is not from above. This has the effect of leveling the playing field between the viewer and the subject. She works with the model to find a pose that implies self-determination and agency. This effectively rejects the tradition of the passive, "I am here to be looked at" nude. Hager's larger than life figures move in water, a kind of baptism into the world of the spirit in the body. She explores the relationship between sensuality and spirituality, commenting on the idea that the two are not irreconcilable. Hager's images are compassionate and powerful.

The other two artists in this exhibit do not focus uniquely on the male nude. *The Female Gaze* began as a national call for entries from female artists who depict the male nude in their work. Due to website address snafus and a subsequent low number of entries, the exhibition has evolved into the present three-person exhibition exploring the nature of the female gaze on the human figure. Local artist Patricia Kimball explores the clothed figure in her paintings, drawings and prints. Photographer Jen Davis' gaze is an autobiographical one, viewing herself in everyday settings to see how the world views her.

I am excited to see the work of all three of these fine artists, but my mind is still drawn to that wonderful drawing workshop and the conversation it sparked. I have had many similar conversations

then photographed. Both to some degree capitulate to the fundamental predicament of photography as art form: that viewers tend to ignore the formal qualities of the photograph and only look at the subject. Smolarkiewicz has dabbled in both approaches, and appropriately for someone who is not only an M.F.A. candidate, but also a working professional photographer, a range of other aesthetic approaches and genres as well. But it now appears that her real interests lie in the ability of her medium to transform an avalanche of visual data into a dramatic encounter with parallel lives and at least one parallel consciousness. So she gives herself the freedom of those Baroque painters who presented their kings and queens as if they were just another element—sometimes quite small—in a vast canvas in which the artist's skill was part of a universe revolving around them to their glory. The difference is that she, like the video artist Bill Viola, sees Baroque art as its creators could not: not as the product of kings and queens, but as something they themselves created. As an artist, then, she can concede neither the content nor the form.

So the best way to look at these photographs may be as dramas, or as windows onto ordinary lives that just need to be looked at in a certain way for their dramatic truth to emerge. Anyone who hasn't tried to slip a large format camera into a quiet domestic scene probably can't fully appreciate what the photographer has undertaken in order to capture the subtle details and tight spaces seen here in deep focus and without distortion. But that's only the start of what Smolarkiewicz has accomplished. Throughout a woman's place? one vital question runs: how is it that we are allowed to witness this? Beecher nursing a beer seems as shut down as the elaborate stereo system she stands behind, its glowing pilot light almost the only evidence of both their potentials. | **1** | Even as she lapses into an introspective moment, Brenda's blond mane celebrates her affinity with the yellow crested cockatiels she keeps close by. | **2** | And while it's easy to imagine a photographer being welcomed into Pani Koluch's Warsaw apartment to join the family meal, that doesn't explain the intimacy that we eavesdrop on between Holly and her son, Sarah and her daughter, or Meredith and the man who stands in the dark just outside her brightly lit kitchen. | **3** | Talent is a privilege, and with it comes opportunity. Zuzanna Smolarkiewicz shares her boon with us, permitting us to seemingly enter these truly private moments without compromising either their quality or the capacity of our presence.

Even if it's true, as many artists and critics have said, that every portrait contains the ghost of a self-portrait, it's not true that every artist who makes portraits can develop that latent image into something with a life of its own. Rembrandt used himself and his family as figures in his biblical subjects, but it is in the felt humanity in his canvases that we now recognize his presence. Zuzanna Smolarkiewicz is not yet Rembrandt, but that is a matter of degree. Meanwhile, her portraits have an affinity with his that most artists neither possess nor aspire to. The self-portrait that her pictures of her friends bring into view incorporates curiosity, compassion, humor, and understanding. It may not yet be a complete picture of human nature, but it is a completely human picture.

Zuzanna Smolarkiewicz's MFA Thesis exhibit, a woman's place, is on exhibit at the University of Uta's Gittens Gallery through October. Her work can also be seen on her [website](#).

regarding the idea of women working with the male nude as subject matter since then. We have the feminist theory of the male gaze being the objectification of the female. We have our taboo of the human form. We have the figure being one of the hardest subjects to excel at. We are very complicated forms and many artists, these days, do not want to do the work of learning to do it well.

The question that I am most often asked is whether or not the female nude is more beautiful than the male? In my personal wrestling with using the male nude as subject matter, I feel that the female form has nothing on the male. As a figurative artist, I can see that the female nude is beautiful, but I am attracted to the male body in a way that I am not with the female body. My guess is that the effect of that would get into how I am painting. I look forward to one day finding more women who are celebrating the male nude as subject matter and contributing to that kind of work myself.

The Female Gaze will be at the [Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery](#) October 22 – December 14.



0 | 1

[return to top](#) ↗