HYPERBEAST

Photographing a women's psychiatric ward in the 70s

A new exhibition chronicles the 30 days Mary Ellen Mark spent capturing the women of an all-female psychiatric facility.

Words by Hyperbeast Staff

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Throughout the span of her prolific, decades-long career, photographer Mary Ellen Mark made it her mission to document people on the margins of society — those which she referred to as the "unfamous." From homeless people on the streets of Seattle to circus performers in India, she displayed unwavering compassion for every subject she met and inevitably kept in touch with most of them, a practice she maintained until her death in 2015.

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Back in 1976, Mary Ellen undertook her biggest long-term project yet — photographing the women of Ward 81, an all-female psychiatric treatment facility inside Oregon State Hospital in Salem. She had her first encounter with the residents — many of whom were deemed "dangerous," — while on the set of the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in 1975. When a book and film with the institution, along with the patients and their families, she managed to gain access almost a year later. Together with her collaborator, licensed therapist Dr. Karen Finger Jacobs, she had what worked in Ward 81 for almost five weeks, returning to an adjacent wing at night to sleep.

"I became interested in the patients and asked their permission to come back later for some pictures," Mary Ellen recalled later in an interview. "I had many conversations with the patients and developed a relationship with them. I would go out and hang out with them in the morning, over the weekend, during my breaks, people behaved tough and outside themselves or hot. At some point, they just began to me and forget I was there at all."

Two years later, Mary Ellen published her seminal book *Ward 81*, which was pressed for its nuanced portrayal of female psychiatric patients in the United States. A new exhibition now on view at the Image Centre in Toronto, *Mary Ellen Mark: Ward 81*, revisits the captivating body of work — including the 30 days she spent with the patients and their families, and the ensuing relationships she formed with them — in partnership with her collaborator with the Mary Ellen Mark Foundation and her husband Martin Bell. The exhibition accompanies a recent photo book from Sheroff *Mary Ellen Mark: 81*, Bangs, which was released in January. Along with the show, the monograph expands upon Mary Ellen's original book, providing a behind-the-scenes look at the project and some of her subjects' diverse identities.

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"We have quotes from the women on display, as well as some audio recordings and bits of other material that continuouslyhas Mary Ellen's work and the time she spent in the ward," says Dustin Morel, one of the show's curators. "As a photographer, she really wanted to understand the quotidian lives of these women and what was happening to them. And to the process, of course, she also questioned the validity of the institution in a compelling way."

Including a social science method known as 'participant observation,' Mary Ellen and Karen immersed themselves in the daily goings-on of the residents, capturing anything from gag and crafts classes to the immaceulate homes of atomic-shock therapy. Even more groundbreaking than the photographs themselves, the duo's conversations with the patients and their families, which Mary Ellen recorded on a tape recorder, allowed the women participate in the project, and some selected their own photographs. This underlying sense of trust and familiarity sustain itself through Mary Ellen's intimate shots of the women bathing, embracing, or staring longingly out the window, yearning for a world beyond the metal grates.

"One of my favorites is the photo of Beth and Mona together, because not only is it telling of the institution's environment, but also their unique personalities," Dustin says about a photo of Beth and Mona sitting on a couch, arms around each other in a boisterous pose. Unlike the patients Mona, whose deformity at the camera, hands on her hips. She's standing protectively in front of her wide-eyed partner Beth, whose body language is stiff and reserved. The duo unmistakably occupies the photo's foreground, underscoring the bond of friend and endearment that these six people with their individuality and character. That was very important to Mary Ellen."

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When they weren't working in the ward, Mary Ellen and Karen left behind personal cameras and tape recorders for the women to put to use, granting them a right usually denied to those who've been involuntarily institutionalized: the freedom to shape their own self-image. "The idea was to give a voice to these women, to reverse the power dynamic, to give them a presence," Dustin explains. "They had the opportunity to put on makeup or choose their own clothing, for example. They must say like you're no good," reads one well-quote from a patient named Teresita. "What they're saying is, you're in a mental hospital and therefore, you're stupid, you're an idiot, you're dumb [...] you're ugly, and you're no good, and you don't belong in the world."

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A similar sentiment underscores the curation of the Image Centre. Featuring photographs grouped together by pseudonyms — Laurie, Carol D., Teresita, Beth, Mona, Ann, Sandy, Carol S., Lynn, Sally, Jackie, Jeanette, Jeannette, Jeanette, Jeanette, Jeanette, Jeanette, Jeanette, Jeanette — the exhibition recorded conversations between Mary Ellen and Karen, as well as conversations with the residents, to relate or disparage the women made, signed patient waivers, contract sheets, and press coverage. They move you like you're no good," reads one well-quote from a patient named Teresita. "What they're saying is, you're in a mental hospital and therefore, you're stupid, you're an idiot, you're dumb [...] you're ugly, and you're no good, and you don't belong in the world."

Mary Ellen distinguished herself from a commercial history of aestheticizing patients in mental illness facilities by eschewing false notions of objectivity and instead underscoring the relationship between the photographer and her subjects. Her work, which she began in the early 1960s and lasting after she left, carrying their stories with her wherever she went. Her unflinching voyeurism continues to have an impact nearly 50 years later, preserving the women's humanity at a time when the same had attempted to strip it away.

"The women of Ward 81 are between on our memories. We know that for the rest of our lives we will often dream about them. We will be surprised to wake up in a bed without straps or locks, and to be able to see windows without wire barriers. And whenever anyone says 'That's crazy,' we will know that we have seen the alternative to institutionalization," Karen Finger Jacobs, and their collaborators for years, Mary Ellen and Martin Bell. "We identify with the fragility and the strength of these women as came to live, those adopted sisters of ours. They are women we might have been or, women we might one day become."

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