

# the Stranger

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VISUAL ART

## Fascinated by Unusual Deaths

Amy Blakemore and the Diana Camera

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Photography needs more great underachievers. It is an underachieving medium. All the expansions on simply waking up and taking a picture seem to serve the "elevation" of photography to art, but they do nothing to solve the basic, sufficiently artistic mystery of why it's so damn hard to take an interesting picture.

The field is already teeming, for example, with the following: crystal-clear prints the size of cars. Pictures made of hundreds of images painstakingly compiled into one. Authoritative pictures, decisive pictures. Instant-icon pictures. Photographs made to look like paintings or act like sculptures. Picture-concepts, which are graphs rather than photographs. Photographs having an identity crisis and acting out by being antiquey, or high-techy, or overly ugly, or overly pretty.

In actual fact, it is hard enough to take just one photograph that's imperfect and alive in all the right ways; you'll know this from the endless roll of dead clichés in your cell phone. Amy Blakemore has applied herself to producing magnificent photographic underachievements for more than 20 years. She lives in Houston, where the Museum of Fine Arts assembled 36 of her pictures taken between 1988 and 2008, 35 of which have traveled to Seattle Art Museum; also in Seattle, at James Harris Gallery, are six more of her pictures, taken in 2009 and 2010. They're all made using a Diana camera.

"If you were going to make a photograph of desire—or of something dreamed, lost, remembered, or imagined—you would make it with a Diana camera, the plastic-bodied toy camera that first came from China in the 1950s," an *Art on Paper* reviewer wrote about Nancy Rexroth, the artist best known for using the Diana. "It had one lens, two aperture settings, and a few focus options that added up to one result—a fuzzy image."

Rexroth used the Diana for moody looks-back at her native Iowa, but Blakemore's use of the camera is varied, her visions unsettling rather than nostalgic. While all Diana pictures come out grainy, Blakemore works to make hers as in-focus as possible; they strain at the edge of clarity. She also mostly cuts off the romantic dark corners on the prints. Otherwise, like a strict documentarian, she rarely crops at all, and she also does not use a flash, allowing the irregularities of the camera to be met on the other side by the vagaries of natural light.

"I was fascinated by unusual deaths, medical oddities, and murder," Blakemore has said of her interests as a child. It helps to explain the subtle feeling that her pictures, while less obviously loaded, share something with Diane Arbus's outsiders, Weegee's crime scenes, and Nan Goldin's drug addicts. Even with their casual, unexotic, these-are-just-the-people-I-know-and-the-places-I-go-ness, Blakemore's photos send out uneasy vibrations. *Apples* (1995), a shot of nothing but a grassy area with some fallen apples on it—all the pictures are square-format, keep in mind—is almost menacing. In her catalog essay, SAM curator Marisa C. Sanchez suggests it's because, in *Apples*, "the ground where one would typically find solid footing is not a stable place." The grass is streaked with late-afternoon shadows, and the apples are in various states of both visual blur and actual decay. It's as if your eyes fall on them as unsteadily as your feet would, some hard and clear as rocks, others soft and decomposing.

The earliest pictures, from the 1980s and early '90s, are black and white, and reflect travels to distant lands to witness rituals and the like, and they're less convincing, more generic. The best pictures—achieving that Blakemorian balance between document and fiction—are in color, and often feature friends and family members. *Steph* is a friend of Blakemore's who appears at dusk, her face glowing impossibly orange, framed close-up and large, almost as if she were a cardboard cutout of wholesome American farm life, but with just enough of her own particular realness remaining. *Jim* is seen so darkly that his portrait is nearly informationless, a specter—this is the artist's uncle looking out at the camera through a kitchen window. She says she thought he didn't seem to believe she was taking his picture, and looking at the print, trying to make it out, also requires a little act of faith.

Being specific while hinting at larger, unknown stories, that's Blakemore's trick—introducing *Steven* in mid-blink on an autumn day; or *Duncan* looking down, his glasses casting a shadow on his shirt; or *Pam* scratching her bedhead while the seagull next to her lifts off. Blakemore's mother's face is sliced by a shadow. Her father's body is inert on his wrinkled deathbed. Though she's from Tulsa originally, Blakemore has been called a Southern photographer, maybe because she's like the writer Flannery O'Connor: dark, warm, and savage. ★