

HELENE AYLON  
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JUDY CHICAGO  
SAS COLBY  
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ELEANOR DICKINSON  
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LAS MUJERES MURALISTAS  
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CHERIE RACITI  
BONNIE SHERK  
CATHY SIMON  
SHARON SISKIN  
CATHERINE WAGNER  
WOMEN'S CAUCUS FOR ART

# *Connecting*

# *Conversations*

*Interviews with 28 Bay Area Women Artists*

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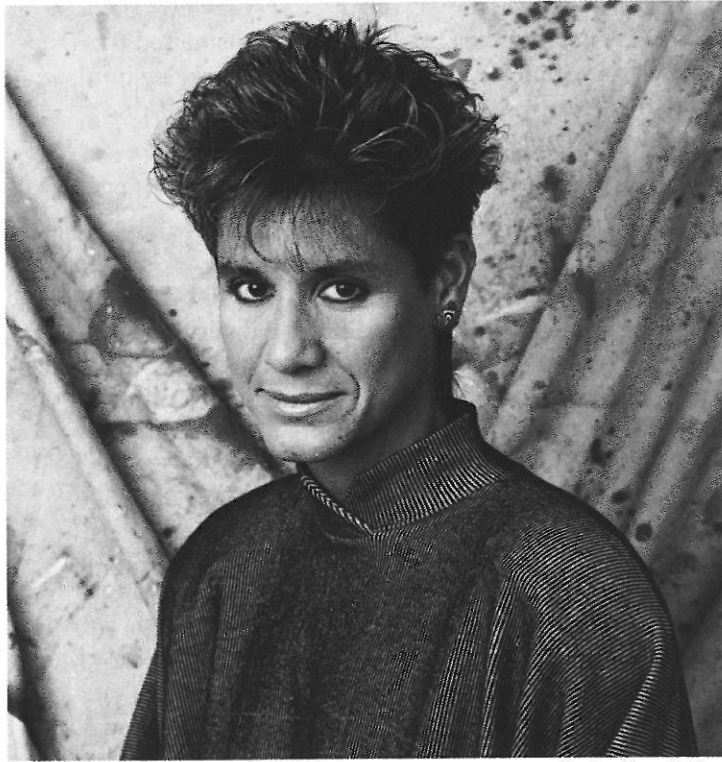
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Born 1953, San Francisco; spent childhood in California; B.A., San Francisco State University, 1975, M.A., 1977; first exhibited San Francisco, 1978; now resides in San Francisco.



Marilyn Garry-Mulkeen

## CATHERINE WAGNER

The first photographic series by Catherine Wagner that received public recognition was the *Moscone Center Portfolio* of 1978–1981, a documentation of the five-year construction of the George Moscone Convention Center in San Francisco. Jack Welpott, the photographer, comments on this portfolio: "There is a saying that architecture is frozen music. Wagner's approach has melted it into something fluid. Architecture is generally thought to be something static, objective and three-dimensional. She turns it into something dynamic, subjective and two-dimensional. And yet, each photograph, seen by itself, is concrete and on an illusory level,

three-dimensional." Wagner's second major series dealt with the American classroom. *The American Classroom* of 1984 depicts classrooms ranging from a police academy to a dog grooming school to a nursery school. Wagner takes these environments and presents them in such a manner that a book's position on a table or writing on a chalkboard seem choreographed.

The word photograph originates from the Greek words *phos*, meaning "light," and *graphein*, meaning "to write." Catherine Wagner is a photographer who creates visual poetry. In both the *Moscone Center Portfolio* and *The American Classroom* series, she uses black-and-white materials and fine technique to produce elegant pieces of art. For a number of years, Wagner has taught photography at Mills College.

Catherine Wagner

Heather Cox: Where did you spend your childhood?

Catherine Wagner: I was born in San Francisco and moved to Marin County when I was a child. My mother is from Manila and my father is from Germany. When I was seventeen I went to Mexico to the Instituto de Allende, to study art and art history. After two years I came back to the States to the San Francisco Art Institute. I finished my degree at San Francisco State University.

Heather Cox interviewed Catherine Wagner, San Francisco, October 4 and 19, 1986

HC: How did you become interested in photography?

CW: It was the only thing in high school that interested me. When I was sixteen, I had a high school photography teacher who made me aware of my potential, and through photography I became aware of society around me. It was a way of helping me define myself. I always pursued photography. However, in the Sixties and Seventies, photography didn't have the same stature in school that painting and sculpture had. I felt a little ghettoized. Photography and ceramics were not recognized as "high art"; they were considered crafts.

HC: Then why did you choose photography as your medium?

CW: Photography is the medium that allowed me to work

through ideas quickly. Because photography is relatively facile, people don't stop and think about how they can use a photograph to its full power. Sometimes I don't feel a part of the "photography movement"; I feel closer to the conceptual movement. Photographs can be very beautiful objects, but to me that is a very limiting point of view. I am more interested in content and ideas, and how those things affect people.

**HC: How has teaching affected your career?**

**CW:** I feel you can be the best teacher by being a good role model, a practicing artist. Teaching is rewarding. Students see the world in a new way. The process of making art is about integrity, and it is about defining one's place in society. It's about achieving a feeling of self-worth, which I think is what everybody in our society basically wants to feel. It is exciting to see students discover this process. I don't expect all of my students to become great artists, but if they leave the class with questions, visually re-examining their place in the world, then for me they have succeeded.

**HC: What was your experience in graduate school like?**

**CW:** At one point in graduate school, out of a group of fifteen, I was the only woman. However, my professors were very supportive of my work; I felt I had their respect. Nevertheless, I felt they didn't quite understand what I was doing and I was pretty much the lone wolf. Out of my graduate group, I became close to two people; one has become a well-known art critic, and the other is now doing commercial art abroad. I am still close with my former professors.

**HC: Do you consider yourself a feminist?**

**CW:** Yes. Anyone who is making decisions for herself and taking responsibility for them is a feminist. As I get older I become more aware of the historically unequal place that women have in society.

**HC: What are particular influences in your photographs?**

**CW:** In terms of a movement that I can identify with, I feel

most akin to the conceptual movement. I like "idea" art, but I don't like "idea" art without soul. I need the combination of heart and mind together. I don't like art that is either self-indulgently emotional or overly intellectual. It is interesting to me that the English language is one of the only languages where there is no word that synthesizes both heart and mind, like in Japanese, the word *kokoro*.

**HC: Are you drawn to any particular women artists?**

**CW:** For me, the list of great women artists is eclectic and extensive. I think Mary Miss is great; Alice Aycock has done some excellent work; Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Martin are great painters and Berenice Abbott is a fabulous photographer. I like Laurie Anderson. There is not one style of work I consider the best. All of these artists add to a long list of excellent work.

**HC: Your work has been described as "objective." How would you describe your photographs?**

**CW:** When you try to be objective you're not really being objective, because every time you point the camera you make a decision about what belongs in the image and what does not. You are taking a subjective stance. My own position is that I don't want to tell anyone what to feel. I think my photographs are about what I call the language of our time and that we are in the process of defining a language, or perhaps redefining an existing language. I am asking people to re-invent their own set of questions and their own set of answers in what appears to be a neutral but universal environment. The Fifties and Sixties were heavily saturated with "the metaphor"; the Eighties present a new challenge, a more open-ended way of seeing. It is an intellectual choice to present these things in what would appear to be the most objective manner. I am giving the viewers a lot of credibility because I believe that the person who looks at visual work has the desire to ask questions.

**HC: Let's talk about your earlier work.**

**CW:** My work then was much less objective than it is now. I

used more formal art qualities to guide the viewer. I like to see my work now as much more open-ended. In the Seventies, I was making beautiful photographs. Then something happened where I had to redefine what beautiful meant. I went through a period of work that did not have any obvious or inherent "beauty" because I wanted the viewer to redefine the content and the form. So, I then did a group of ultra-austere work. I like the fact that you can go through all that and still be the same person. Later, I started photographing the urban landscape and that turned into a project about cities and how people relate to their environment and to one another. Then that worked into another project about the changing California landscape. That, in turn, evolved into the George Moscone work, which took as long as the building took to build—five years. The series of the George Moscone Convention Center are like stage sets to me. These photographs show transition, archaeology in reverse, future ruins. From there, my newest group of work is *The American Classroom* series.

**HC:** Why did you choose this particular picture from *The American Classroom* series to discuss?

**CW:** Because it is what has most recently been on my mind. The photograph, *South Main Baptist Church of Houston, Children's Sunday School*, represents a midway point in the group of *The American Classroom* work. This group of work talks about our environment and our educational endeavors, whether it is scientific research or something as humanly basic as playing in a Sunday school room. I think this photograph talks about how we structure our environment and why we arrange things the way we do. I feel as though the photograph has an intellectual and emotional base to it and yet is presented in childlike form. I positioned myself two feet off the ground, so I was the same height as the children who were playing there. I am drawn to this photograph in particular because the range of human emotions is vast. There is the playfulness of the child's wooden pony that we can all relate to. There are so many universal



*South Main Baptist Church of Houston, Children's Sunday School, Houston, Texas, 1985*

icons in this photograph: the church, the building blocks, the positioning of the objects.

**HC:** Tell me a little more about *The American Classroom* series.

**CW:** I have spent so much of my life in the classroom, first as a student, then as a teacher. I thought it was important for me to look around my immediate surroundings, whether it be home or workplace or the classroom. These are common, everyday places that American culture participates in.

**HC:** People look at it so much, they don't see it anymore?

**CW:** Right. Since the classroom hasn't been given much visual consideration, people are seeing it for the first time. They are re-seeing that which has become invisible. And that to me is very important.

**HC:** Do you have any ideas on future projects?

**CW:** I never map out what I am going to do, but I do get ideas as I am working. I try very hard to keep my mind and my

feelings generated toward the direction of current projects. When you work on a project for three or four years, you start wandering and burning out and part of it is the discipline of learning to come to a conclusion. Most recently I have been thinking a lot about photographing my parents' backyard. I see a whole suite of images. There is a woodpile in my parents' backyard that I can see working around. Every time I go out there I want to bring the 8 x 10 view camera and make these "woodpile-size" prints. A lot of times things don't work out and that is the process of making art. I am thinking about working around my parents' house and I am thinking maybe some of that has to do with coming to terms with my family's getting older. The house they live in is the house we grew up in. Every time I go over there, I see this woodpile, and I think I'd better get to it fast because the weather is getting cold.