

Fending Off Her Story (clearing out cache for what counts)

By Sue Spaid

"Newsworthiness," as evaluated by some news editor, governs an article's length and placement. On May 1, 1999 (the day Rev. Jesse L. Jackson led three prisoners of war out of Yugoslavia), a tourist boat with 21 passengers sank within 30 seconds on Lake Hamilton, near Hot Springs, Arkansas. Thirteen people died, yet it barely caused a blip on the media horizon. No less tragic than the recent Amtrak train crash or Columbine High massacre, news editors explained the story's relative obscurity by citing the absence of an eye-catching photo (an image of a sunken boat looks like that of a tranquil lake) and the improbability of their audience being caught in a boating accident.¹

Given the surplus of violent acts of nature and unnatural acts of violence, news editors must go crazy trying to predict which story will sustain the American psyche's voyeuristic propensity. The only way to explain the disproportionately large news share garnered by Leona Helmsley, Tonya Harding, Amy Fisher, and Susan Smith over the years is that sustaining their stories beats selecting from thousands of new ones.² Despite the fact that nefarious women sell newspapers, which deflects attention from potentially more interesting women, only 15% of front-page stories concern women.³ On a more perverse note, at least 233 *New York Times* articles have mentioned Ms. Fisher⁴—not bad for a 24-year-old ex-prostitute, a.k.a. Mary Jo Buttafuoco's 1992 assailant—whose vice has inspired three made-for-television movies and a website (Aimee: The Official Amy Fisher Organization). Given her release and claims of prison rape, legal exploitation and child abuse, untold stories await.

By using multiple formats (video, photo/text, a banner, flip books, freestanding books) to flesh out the aforementioned *four*, Judith Yourman's *Offending History* mimics the media's repetition compulsion: overexposure (t.v., print, radio, movies, and websites) automatically transforms troubled malcontents into pernicious antagonists. While

none of the *four* is particularly admirable, their media omnipresence tragically recapitulates stereotypically female flaws (excessive, manipulative, petty, and narcissistic behavioral traits), thus supplying scapegoats for societal ills. The incessant attention paid such aberrant cases is disconcerting, given the apparent lack of "newsworthiness" generally accorded women's endeavors (the aforementioned 15%). Considering the crime stats cited above, there is no lack of other perpetrators ripe for media exploitation.

The accompanying texts that Yourman has selected appeal to familiar aspects of each scenario, but her exposés prove most effective when she inserts images that connect the particular "female offender" to her identity. *Do a Good Turn Daily* consists of six monitors that display identical videos of a skater performing figure eights, placed on the floor beneath a banner that contains six different arresting images of Harding frozen in a classic ice-skating spin. Phrases from a 1964 *Girl Scout Manual*, like "No Nice Girl Ever Boasts or Swears" or "Always Honor and Obey," flow across Harding's knees (the site of Nancy Kerrigan's injurious attack). Since the Girl Scouts aim to create productive and independent young women, linking scouting lore to Harding's cowardly act of malice poses an interesting paradox. And, as subversive subtexts, slogans like "Exhibit Elegance and Grace," "Smile," "Display Modesty in Attire" and the series' title "Do a Good Turn Daily" express ice skating's competitive requirements in remarkably ladylike terms.

Yourman's photos feature Harding in the active role of skating, yet those employed in the *Susan Smith Series* (1997) and *Amy Fisher Series* (1994) problematically present their subjects as passive/defenseless victims of uncontrollable circumstances. Yourman's use of familiar footage suggests that she's implicating the original source material's role in planting "truth" to harvest "history." However, Yourman the artist is effectively ed-

iting new exposés that revise each case (different texts/same pictures), so she could have sampled less heroic images of Harding, or more empowered images of Smith and Fisher.

Thus, Yourman's image choices risk repeating the moralizing schemes that once deemed Harding's ploy justifiable in light of Kerrigan's imposing perfection, drove news editors and lawyers to seek redeeming images of Smith's tearful regret, and rewarded cameramen who cast Fisher as pathetic and unappealing. (The routine complaint that President Clinton lacks contrition was just an editorial request for more persuasive images of penance.) It remains to be seen whether images that characterize Smith or Fisher in active terms (a loving mother or a spirited teen) would render them immune from media demonization.

As if to coerce Smith's remorsefulness, passages from Jules Michelet's *La Femme* (1860) underscore two multi-panel photo/text works ("And Happy is She" and "Mad with Motherhood") plus two freestanding accordion-fold digital books. Originally considered motherly virtues (providence, love, beatitude, patience, devotion and maternal instinct), such premises read here as essentializing sentiments that warrant renovation, lest more moms go "mad with motherhood." Similarly, the "Easy Does It" text establishes strict boundaries, whose '40s mores, like "virtue surrendered is never regained," Fisher eagerly transgressed. However, Fisher, flanked by her lawyers, fails to project the fearlessness and brazenness one might expect of the "Lethal Lolita," and lacks the innocence that ordinarily disguises a preteen seductress' saucy taunts.

Because of the unanticipated role that Yourman's casual curiosity would play during the Helmsley trial, *Self-Portrait with Leona Helmsley* stands as the most fascinating story in the exhibit. With this, her first project, she made *herself* susceptible to scrutiny and transgressed the borders of intrigue to capture the

Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry

works by Jim Goldberg, Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, Jack Radcliffe and Kathy Vargas

trial on Super 8 film. Like Mike Isikoff, the *Newsweek* reporter who found himself at the center of Kenneth Starr's Clinton investigation, Yourman experienced events before they became news, pointed out key players to the press, and eventually felt Helmsley's condemnation.

Given her precarious antics, Yourman must appreciate women like Fisher, Smith and Harding who risk crossing barriers. Though she wouldn't necessarily approve of their behavior, she apparently empathizes with those who have transgressed traditional viewpoints. Yet Yourman "fends off" their stories so as to reverse their media spell. By nudging the public's fascination with such nefarious acts, she symbolically clears out the cache—i.e. column inches—for what counts, enabling the media to pursue that 35% still due women.

NOTES

¹ David Firestone, "One of These Pictures is Worth 1,000 Words," *New York Times*, May 9, 1999, p. WK4.

² Handguns killed 9390 people in the U.S. in 1996. (Bob Herbert, "Addicted to Violence," *New York Times* April 22, p. A31.) Domestic violence is still the leading cause of death for women. (Surgeon General, 1984.) 61% of rape victims are under 18. ("Rape in America, National Women's Study," National Victim Center and Crime Victims Research Center, 1992.)

³ Naomi Wolf, "The Future is Ours to Lose," *New York Times Magazine*, May 16, 1999, p. 135.

⁴ Dan Barry, "Still Gawking After All These Years," *New York Times*, May 16, 1999, p. WK1.

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POST-EXHIBITION COMMENT
JUDITH YOURMAN
OFFENDING HISTORY

3/19/99 - 5/16/99

Hospice: A Photographic Inquiry was exhibited at the University at Buffalo Art Gallery June 11 through July 25, 1999. *Hospice* was organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in collaboration with the National Hospice Foundation. The exhibition was curated by Dena Andre, Philip Brookman, and Jane Livingston. Major funding was provided by Warner-Lambert, a pharmaceutical and consumer products company, as part of its ongoing commitment to supporting hospice care in the United States and around the world. Additional support was received from the Public Welfare Foundation, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Greenwall Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Hospice Foundation, the Prudential Foundation, the Glen Eagles Foundation, and Learning Design Associates, Inc.

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**WARNER
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BELOW: Jim Goldberg, *Piss Bottle*, (detail of right panel) 1992-93, Polaroid photographs.

RIGHT: Jack Radcliffe, *Barnie with Patricia and Lisa*, November 4, 1994, black and white photograph and accompanying text.

