

Black Mountain College

MUSEUM  ARTS CENTER

Looking as Seeing/Looking as Being: Hazel Larsen Archer & Photography at Black Mountain College

Corey M. Loftus

Journal of Black Mountain College Studies

Volume 16: Living with the Land (Fall 2025)

Article URL: <https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/journal/volume-16/Loftus>

Published online: September 2025

Published by:

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

Editor:

Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Guest Editor:

David Silver, University of San Francisco

Production Editor:

Kira Houston, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Note:

The Journal of Black Mountain College Studies is a digital publication, intended to be experienced and referenced online. PDFs are made available for offline reading, but may have changes in layout or lack multimedia content (such as audio or video) as compared to the online article.

**Looking as Seeing/Looking as Being: Hazel Larsen Archer & Photography at
Black Mountain College**

Corey M. Loftus

Thanksgiving dinner at Black Mountain College (BMC) in 1950 took place on a stage set designed to look like the first floor terrace of the Eiffel Tower.¹ Faculty member and poet M.C. Richards translated Jean Cocteau's *Les mariés de la tour Eiffel* (1921), or, *Marriage on the Eiffel Tower*, for the performance, which ensued following the meal. Although Cocteau's early surrealist pièce-ballet lacks a true plot, the strange production basically follows a wedding party assembled for a luncheon. The resident photographer on the Eiffel Tower attempts to take a picture of the group, but the task proves to be challenging. Just before the guests arrive, an ostrich inexplicably leaps out of his camera and runs away. The frazzled photographer pursues the bird, while a hunter with a shotgun runs around the lattices of the cast iron tower hoping to hunt down the ostrich before the photographer can return it back to the camera body. All the while other nonsensical objects and apparitions emerge from the camera at center stage. These include a lion that devours a wedding guest, a cyclist seeking directions to Chatou, and a Trouville bathing beauty. Adding to the chaos and absurdity— multiple telegrams fall from the sky (the ostrich hunter shoots one in midair), a General shares the story of a hunting expedition in Africa involving a tart covered with wasps, and, in the very last scene, the bride and groom disappear *into* the camera, along with all of their wedding guests, swallowed whole. Finally, the camera, "followed by its bellows like a wagon," walks offstage.² The performance must have made it quite a memorable Thanksgiving for the BMC community gathered in the dining hall that overlooks Lake Eden.



Figure 1. Hazel Larsen Archer, June Rice Christensen as the Photographer in Marriage on the Eiffel Tower, 1950. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Courtesy of Erika Archer Zarow.

A tightly cropped photograph of the Black Mountain performance shows the stage camera was just large enough to accommodate the wedding party underneath its pleated skirt (Fig. 1). Dance student June Rice Christensen plays the Eiffel Tower photographer. Sporting a checkered jacket and puffy wig, she attempts to gain control of the unruly camera from her post on the ladder behind the shutter. Meanwhile, “[t]hrough the openings [in the bellows] one sees the wedding guests waving handkerchiefs, and,

below, feet walking.”³ This is the moment right after the chaotic height of the performance, and the blurriness of the photograph suggests movement and imbues the carnivorous camera with a sense of lively—though not entirely threatening—animation. Looking at a photograph of Cocteau’s camera taking a photograph of the wedding guests means we are looking at the camera through the lens of another camera. The photograph ironically subjects Cocteau’s technological intervention to the photographic process it aims to scrutinize.

This pertinent moment of Cocteau’s ballet was photographed by Hazel Larsen Archer (1921-2001, née Hazel-Frieda Larsen)—a former BMC student who was appointed as the school’s first and only full-time photography instructor in 1949.⁴ Surely Archer would have been struck by the implications of Cocteau’s wacky ballet and how the enlarged camera onstage reflected upon the device in her hands. Cocteau’s provocative performance asks audiences to reconsider the seemingly benign relationships humans form with technology. Likewise it asks if misuses of technology are faults of the devices, their operators, or some combination. What, for instance, is the meaning of a camera that consumes its subjects? What is the difference between a photographer and a hunter or their cameras and guns (both devices used to “shoot” their subjects) chasing after an “exotic” bird? And what more of the enigmatic objects that emerge from the camera, seemingly escaped from inside its whale-like belly or train-like bellows?

Archer’s documentation of the performance surfaces numerous medium-specific questions. For as much as photography can be put to menacing use (as the people-swallowing camera suggests), Archer also recognized the camera’s ability to model the forms of reciprocity and curiosity integral to the pedagogical principles she valued throughout her long and impactful career as an educator. Embracing a hands-off attitude when it came to teaching, Archer found a space at BMC, where Dewey’s progressive promotion of “active learning” had a profound effect on the school’s conception and curriculum.⁵ By 1950, a year after Josef Albers (1888-1976) left BMC, the college had also been shaped by his related and oft-quoted objective: “to open eyes.”⁶ As much as she adopted these approaches, Archer also managed to carve out and advance her own pedagogical vision. Her teaching and photographic practice

demonstrate Archer's fervent belief that the visible world invites our engagement and that education serves the student's natural inquisitiveness. She emphasized the importance of process over product in her course descriptions and pedagogical statements in order to advocate for a model of education that did not inhibit curiosity.⁷

Archer first learned of BMC in the Milwaukee newspaper in the mid 1940s at the same time that she was enrolled at the Milwaukee State Teachers' College.⁸ The college's experimental educational model appealed to her aspiration to teach something more impactful and enduring than rote memorization. Founded in 1933 and inspired by the principles in John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), BMC offered an alternative model of higher education that broke with the idea that academic success is based on the ability of the student to absorb the one-way flow of knowledge bestowed upon them by the all-knowing teacher. At Black Mountain, there were no grades (faculty gave students individual comments) and there were no general education requirements (with the exception of a foundational art class derived from the Bauhaus model, students decided upon their path of study and date of graduation on an individual basis in consultation with their advisor). Additionally, the college extinguished traditional hierarchies between students and faculty, evidenced by shared mealtimes and joint responsibilities to work on and maintain the campus farm and grounds.

Archer originally applied as a student to the 1944 Black Mountain Summer Institute. Although she credits former Bauhaus faculty member Josef Albers and her longtime friend and colleague Beaumont Newhall (1908-1993) as her most impactful teachers at BMC, she also worked with other influential faculty, such as former Bauhaus artist Lyonel Feininger (1871-1956).⁹ Soon after she met Feininger in North Carolina, Archer noticed him pausing for long periods anywhere he went, absorbed in silence and nature. As she remembered it, "one would often find students or faculty in what you might call the strangest places sitting or standing."¹⁰ The terms of life, work, and education at BMC encouraged such sensitivities. Whether students were searching for leaves to include in their *matière* studies, harvesting vegetables from the school farm, or taking a hike to get a better view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, being in touch with the landscape at micro and macro scales was an integral part of campus life. And before

long, specifically through her practice of photography, Archer too began to develop an awareness of the most mundane objects and scenes around her.

Because BMC was semi-isolated from major cities in the Blue Ridge Mountains and the sense of community was strengthened by its remoteness, Archer's subjects were often the same people she ate lunch with or conducted chores alongside—perhaps over a discussion of a lecture given by a visiting scientist or guest novelist from the previous evening. Unlike a street photographer roaming the city for snap shots of strangers laden with symbols of the rapidity of urban life in postwar America, Archer could work slowly with subjects whom she knew and saw on a daily basis. In the past, her photographs have been exhibited as mere documentation of BMC, thus obscuring her clear artistic intention and interest in collaboration.¹¹

One of Archer's favorite subjects at Black Mountain was her friend and former classmate Ruth Asawa. Asawa posed for Archer in various emotional states—laughing, crying, indifferent, watchful, or with her face in her hands (Figs. 2-4). In almost all these tightly framed portraits, Archer is so close to Asawa that she could touch or whisper to her with ease, demonstrating the paradoxical proximity and distance involved in making a photograph. Archer favored compositions that were interrupted by hands, slightly off-center, or angled from a position above or below the sitter. Archer clearly did not hesitate to get up close or reveal her subject's vulnerabilities. Seeing her subject meant tuning herself into the subtleties of their own corporeal language. Unlike Cocteau's camera, which consumes its subjects whole, Archer's camera instead seems to mediate the conversation between seer and seen. Further, *seeing* is taken to signal a multi-sensorial process of being and relating that involves more than the visual capacity of the eyes, but also the dedicated attention of the photographer's ears and body to that of the sitter and the camera.



Figure 2. Hazel Larsen Archer, Ruth Asawa, 1947-1948. Courtesy of Erika Archer Zarow.



Figure 3. Hazel Larsen Archer, Ruth Asawa, circa 1946 – 1949. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Courtesy of Erika Archer Zarow.



Figure 2. Hazel Larsen Archer, Ruth Asawa, 1947-1948. Courtesy of Erika Archer Zarow.

Like Archer, Asawa was enrolled at Milwaukee State Teachers' College before she learned of BMC. The tuition was affordable but more importantly, Asawa found in higher education, and through her desire to become a teacher, a ticket out of the Japanese incarceration camp she and her family were forcibly moved to in 1942. Before they were transported to a camp in Arkansas, the Asawa family's farm was confiscated and Ruth's father was separated from the family as hostility towards the Japanese population intensified in the United States. After completing a "loyalty questionnaire" for the United States government and securing a sponsor, she traveled to the Midwest.¹² But as she neared the completion of her degree at Milwaukee State Teachers' College, Asawa was told she would not be able to fulfill the internship requirement for graduation on account of her race. Eventually, Asawa's good friend Elaine Schmitt convinced Asawa to join her in North Carolina for the Black Mountain Summer Institute of 1946. Her teachers and classmates at BMC remembered that she worked diligently and flourished. She drew relentlessly. In Albers's classes specifically, Asawa learned to exploit the characteristic qualities of her materials in *matière* studies and to push the possibility of the line in her sketchbooks. And, much like Archer, Asawa remained invested in her work as an artist and a teacher for the rest of her life.

Archer's portraits of Asawa show her subject in a variety of emotional states and poses. They exhibit Asawa's relative freedom to move and express with her body that seems notable given that Japanese Americans, including Asawa's own family, lost individual independence when subjected to surveillance and incarceration following the 1941 attacks on Pearl Harbor. From 1942-1946, the United States government required Japanese-Americans to carry War Relocation Authority (WRA) identification cards to move outside camp boundaries. Asawa acquired hers to pursue her education outside in Milwaukee. The card featured a stark and alienating photograph of her standing straight against a black background with her hair pinned up neatly and little expression on her face—quite a contrast to the portraits made by Archer. Such a difference exhibits the dual nature of photography that photographer and critic Allan Sekula describes as the medium's capacity to serve both honorific and discriminatory functions.¹³ Archer's photographs look blatantly *anti*-documentary, anti-evidentiary, and anti-romantic because of the compositional range and lack of nondescript background. They are,

indeed, evidence of collaboration between photographer and photographic subject and of Archer's sustained attention to the body's emotive capabilities as framed by the camera. Further, the exercise of returning to the same subject on multiple occasions attests to an unstable and ever-changing conception of the self—in this case, Asawa's—impossible to contain in a single image or document. Archer's portraits of Asawa are less honorific than they are a study in complexity that develops out of a respect for the impossibility of ever fully knowing another person.



Figure 5. Hazel Larsen Archer, Self-portrait, n.d. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Courtesy of Erika Archer Zarow.

A self-portrait Archer made at Black Mountain shows that she knew what it was like to be on the other side of the camera, too (Fig. 5). But Archer is a distracted subject. Her eyes dart over her right shoulder as something out of frame steals her attention. She avoids looking directly at the lens, which would signal the recognition of her simultaneously occupying the positions of seer and seen. This is a self-portrait interested in the physical involvement of looking. Archer sits calmly—brow raised, head turned, mouth closed, and ears available. Even the waves in her short hair exude a certain all-absorbing energy tuned to sense external stimuli. The cropping of the photograph similarly confirms the generosity of her attention because, as closely cropped as it is, it is not as tightly framed around the head as the majority of her portraits. Archer's head fills the lower right corner of the photograph, leaving wide margins at left and above that follow if not expand the direction of her gaze. Her body below her neck is completely unseen. To understand Archer's approach to photography and teaching (two aspects that were closely intertwined for her) means to follow the direction of her eyes out of the frame of her self-portrait and more generally to entertain disciplined distraction as a way of building awareness of one's surroundings.

When Albers arrived at BMC and famously declared his intention "to open eyes," he considered learning to see a social responsibility, not just for artists but for good citizens. Archer similarly considered the development of visual literacy critical to education. In Archer's own words, "[t]oo often, I believe, the educational process has become a training of the memory in a rather parrot like [*sic*] fashion."¹⁴ This nondiscursive approach to learning is consistent with the embrace of "kinesthetic knowing" that architectural historian and Bauhaus scholar Zeynep Çelik Alexander argues can still be acquired rigorously.¹⁵ Looking in order to see rather than to *know* was already part of the ethos of the education program at BMC that Archer's photographic practice both aligned with and expanded. Archer's photographic practice has been under-recognized in the context of BMC and beyond, especially with a focus on the way that she used the camera to look at the world around her.

Although Archer's addition to the faculty made photography a more permanent fixture in the course catalog, photography had been part of academic and everyday life at BMC since it was founded in 1933. Josef Albers brought his Leica from Germany

when he and Anni Albers arrived for their teaching appointments.¹⁶ He offered some classes and independent study for interested students. A number of other photographers, curators, and critics whom are now thought of as stars of the field also visited and/or taught at Black Mountain College. Beaumont Newhall, Josef Breitenbach, Barbara Morgan, Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan, and Fritz Goro taught photography as visiting instructors and lecturers.¹⁷ Albers and Archer organized various small photography exhibitions on campus, such as Barbara Morgan's pictures of Martha Graham, displayed in 1943. The advent of portable commercialized cameras in the mid-1920s, such as the Leica I model, meant a newfound mobility for photography: and photographs could now be shot on the go. Some students brought cameras to campus even if they didn't study photography formally. They exchanged snapshots with friends and sent photographs in letters home. At the same time, BMC recruited photography as a tool in admissions advertisements and fundraising campaigns. Thus photography participated in and determined institutional self-fashioning. Many of the promotional materials the college disseminated to prospective students utilized panoramic views of the Blue Ridge Mountains to offer a sense of the school's idyllic setting (Fig. 6).¹⁸

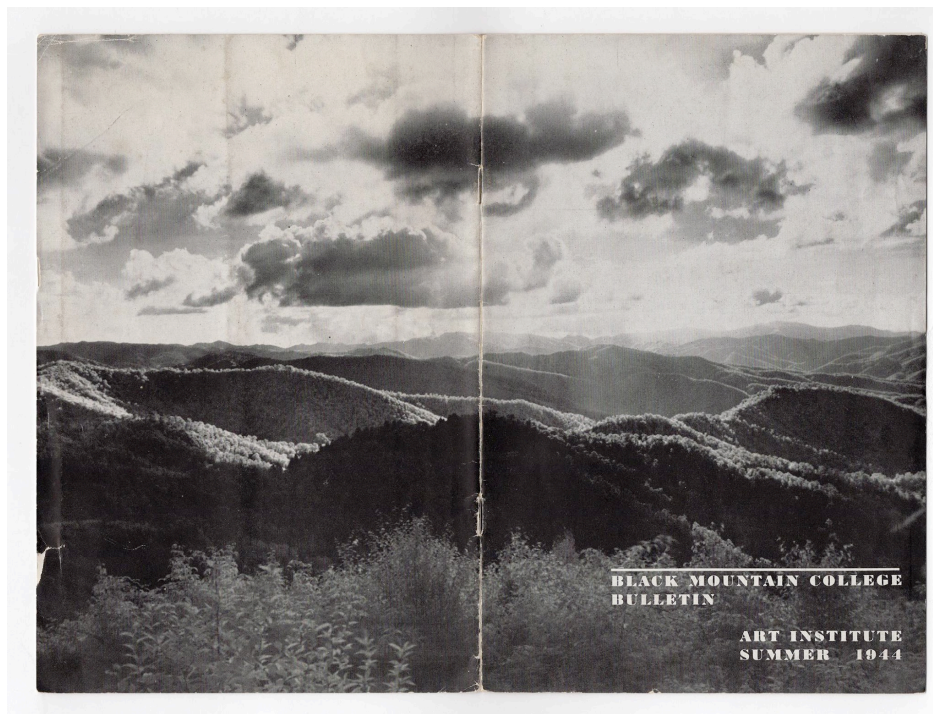


Figure 6. Black Mountain College Bulletin, Summer 1944 Art Institute (Front and Back of Cover). July 17-Sept 16, 1944. Ink on paper. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center.

Archer's approach to photography and teaching are often described as indebted to Albers. For instance, she clearly emphasized process over product when she declared her primary concern in her course descriptions. Her goal was to teach students "the *desire* to take the photograph" (emphasis added).¹⁹ Developing a particular want or willingness to make a photograph was fundamental to Archer's teaching. Secondary were the technological means and photographic ends.²⁰ The process, at least for Archer, involved intense quietude. This is likely the reason why Archer's student Jacqueline Gourevitch remembered "vividly...there was a huge pile of coal" outside the classroom that Archer often asked her class to observe— "just big, black coal, and the sun was always shining on it, and it was just sparkling."²¹ Archer urged students to consider what "value contrasts, or what dark and light, and so forth really mean in relationship [*sic*] to this thing that we could all observe."²² Archer echoes Albers's insistence on the slow cultivation of visual skills just as much as she recalls Feininger's tendency to stand in silence looking closely at objects in his immediate surroundings. It is hardly surprising that she prohibited the use of light meters in her classes, challenging her students to develop a sensitivity to light.²³ She also advocated for what art historian Branden Joseph calls "severe in-camera cropping" to minimize post editing.²⁴ Evidently she demanded her students to nurse the desire to make a photograph by simply paying attention to the light and the seemingly mundane.

In addition to her lectures Archer also wanted to expose her students to the history of photography and a range of photographic styles. In 1951, she organized a summer institute at BMC focused on photography (Fig. 6). She invited Aaron Siskind, Arthur Siegel, and Harry Callahan as visiting lecturers and organized photography exhibitions on campus.²⁵ Still, it is difficult to discern exactly what Archer's own photography classes were like on a day-to-day basis. The lack of codified lecture notes in the Black Mountain College archives suggests that her teaching approach was intuitive and organic.²⁶ What can be gleaned from course descriptions, college publications, and interviews with students and Archer herself, demonstrates that the place of photography under Archer's influence at BMC was all-consuming. Photography was about learning how to pay attention or, consequently, how to be present in the world. "Really there's no creativity. There's just life."²⁷ Concentration is, according to

Archer, “a by-product of being sensitive to something.”²⁸ Archer taught a wide variety of classes at BMC, ranging from straightforward subjects like “Photography” and “Painting” to the more provocatively titled “Anti-design.” Even her former husband (and fellow Black Mountain alum), Charles Archer, identifies a certain core thread permeating through every course she taught- “[y]ou may be working with different materials, but I would say that they all could be under the heading of awareness.”²⁹ The few scholars who have analyzed her photography practice and pedagogy, including Alice Sebrell, Julie J. Thomson, Mary Emma Harris, Kyle Canter, and David Vaughn, note that Archer considered the teacher more of an usher than an authoritarian figure. More specifically, Archer believed that the most rewarding learning occurs when teachers encourage students to follow their curiosity and artistic urges.

Decades after her time at Black Mountain, when Archer returned to Lake Eden for a reunion in 1995, she shared her reflections on life at the college and several excerpts from essays she had drafted about education since then. Surprisingly, photography figured minimally in these remarks, but then again photography permeated everything for Archer, who understood the medium as a way of seeing and a way of life. There was, however, one distinct moment in her talk when Archer expressed her aspiration to lose her identity and behave like a camera obscura. Dressed head to toe in turquoise clothing, she said to the audience of alumni and friends of BMC— “my house of tradition must become a house of no things... unoccupied...no me... no I... I am an empty shoebox with a hole at the end.”³⁰ Emptying her mind of assumptions, beliefs, and self is a radical form of submission. Archer continued, “then the light of life can impress itself on one because one has become receptive.”³¹ Archer’s imagination positions her as the device rather than its master. She embodies receptivity and thus refuses god-like authority.

Archer’s fantasy of becoming a photographic apparatus calls to mind the close bodily relationships photographers often form with their cameras. For instance, Archer’s student Stanley “Stan” Vanderbeek famously marched around making imaginary motion pictures with a camera, even when BMC could not afford to buy film. Vanderbeek clearly understood Archer’s emphasis on teaching the *desire* to photograph. Another student, Nick Cernovich, described the body-camera intimacy: “standing behind a camera,

looking through the ground glass or viewer—the camera immediately becomes part of my own physical structure.”³² The camera, in his words, “imposes its own peculiar limitations on my body, and also releases and creates the possibility of new relationships for me to the whole of my outer world.”³³ Cernovich’s observation is remarkable because he saw the camera as part of his own body. At the same time, Cernovich recognizes that the camera increases his visual perception and extends his ability to relate to the world. Of course, the body imposes its own limitations on the camera as well, illustrating that photography is a constant negotiation between photographer and apparatus in addition to the negotiation between photographer and photographic subject. The body’s continued involvement in the analogical process of photography is evident in the fact that Cernovich suffered “a severe case of metal poisoning” after an accident in the college dark room.³⁴ Photography is a delicate chemical process and as Cernovich’s case goes to show, it involves some degree of danger through exposure. Likewise, Archer’s photographic practice is intimately involved in these questions of photographic relations, bodily vulnerability, and alternative ways of knowing through looking. Of course, the idea of bodily vulnerability also impacted Archer in her own photographic practice. Her mobility was limited due to the polio she contracted as a child. Because of the partial paralysis in her legs, Archer often depended on the help of her friends and colleagues to navigate the campus in her wheelchair or on crutches.

By the time of the 1995 BMC reunion, Archer’s life had taken her to the southwest of the United States where she continued teaching at various schools and later helped found Avalon College in Tucson, Arizona in 1967. Although the school was short-lived, Avalon’s mission statement espouses the view “that the child born into this world is innately capable with unlimited potential” and that, “[t]hese capacities, however, are quickly educated out of him by the use of commonly accepted axioms and beliefs.”³⁵ In other words, traditional education can do serious and irreparable damage to the “unlimited potential” each child is born with. In the best case scenario, education tends to the individual and nurtures their natural curiosity. This understanding of education is common to alternative education models. If taken as consistent with Archer’s own beliefs and her description of her goal at BMC to teach the *desire* to photograph, the

Avalon mission statement parallels Archer's wish to embody the camera. What she values in the makeshift "empty shoebox with a hole at the end" is the potential of the empty space inside. And what is more impressionable and full of unlimited potential than a sensitized photographic surface? The desire to photograph equates to the desire to be receptive: Archer's understanding of photography is inextricable from her pedagogical commitments.

In the same way Archer instructed her BMC students to consider the coal outside her classroom, she saw the opportunity to learn from the world everywhere around her and at all times. As curator Julie Thomson briefly but importantly remarks in the exhibition catalogue for the 2017 exhibition *Begin to See: The Photographers of Black Mountain College*, Archer's conception of photography and self aligns with Kaja Silverman's theory that photography originates in the visible world instead of the photographer's devices or decisions.³⁶ Silverman and Archer also share an optimistic view of photography and believe in its redemptive power. In fact, Archer's photographs seem to anticipate this aspect of Silverman's later reconceptualization of photography. Silverman focuses less on the mechanics of making a photograph and more on the implications of how light, a property of the world, makes its own image against a photo-sensitive surface. According to Silverman's affective and process-based understanding of photography, the world is structured by analogical relationships and this mode of construction reveals itself through the medium.

Thus, Silverman's history of photography constitutes its own social ethics and democratic fervor, which steers her commitment to reassessing the ontology of the photograph through its influence on our ways of being in the world in relation to each other. By this logic, two is always the smallest unit of being. At stake in these linkages, at least for Silverman, is the belief in a world where looking matters because the rules of optics mirror the necessary mediation between two or more bodies, objects, or ideas. As such, her history of photography is deliberately not medium specific. Through Silverman's theory, Archer's wish to become empty, without ego, and receptive like a camera obscura evokes the chiasmus. Light enters through the pinhole of a dark empty room or box, it projects an image of outside phenomena on the opposite interior wall, but flips it upside down. Curiously, Archer's description of this apparatus requires

nonjudgment and total emptiness from her. Much different than the wedding guests seemingly trapped in Cocteau's bellows, Archer willingly subjects herself to the space of image-making. Here is the transformation—when being inside the camera is a position worth occupying and not a present danger.

Archer's photographs also offer their own desires and meanings. She often worked in series with thematic foci, among them— portraits, hands, nature, dance.³⁷ These images reflect Archer's tendency to linger with her subjects and sometimes return to them. Looking at Archer's photographs is a lesson in looking and composing with the deliberate intention to see. Seeing expresses an action governed by Silverman's analogizing principle and her call for the production of relationships of difference via the photographic process. The sensibility that defines Archer's photographs has also shaped the visual legacy of BMC given the inclusion of her work in major exhibitions centered on BMC's significance as a nexus for progressive art and pedagogy at the midcentury over the last decade.³⁸

There was one building on BMC's campus that Archer often returned to with her camera. Her engagement with this building illustrates the broader stakes of her photographic theory. The Quiet House was designed by student Alex Reed in memory of Mark Dreier, director Theodore Dreier's 8-year old son who tragically passed away in a vehicle accident on the Lake Eden campus in 1941. Reed built the stone structure by hand and wove the curtains for the windows. As a conscientious objector, Reed also considered this focused work a Quaker gesture. BMC scholar Michael Beggs describes this commitment "not only a memorial to a dead child, but also an anti-war statement and a plea for peace and contemplation amidst both cruelty of war and rampant militarization of the home front."³⁹ Archer tended to photograph the house in cropped close-ups with few exceptions, including a noticeably odd photograph taken at a far enough distance to picture the whole front of the building (Fig. 8). It looks odd because the house is surprisingly caught off-center and awkwardly cropped on the left side. This tilted composition seems less likely the product of carelessness or a mistake than evidence that the house was not the main subject of the photograph nor the subject of Archer's immediate interest. A thin barren tree in the foreground and the shadows on the stone facade are the real points of interest and entry. As for the Quiet House, it was

always the doors that drew Archer close. The crisp white painted wood were blank surfaces upon which the surrounding trees cast their shadows (Fig. 10). John Cage’s description of Robert Rauschenberg’s later *White Paintings* as “airports for light, shadows, and particles” comes to mind here—even more so given the fact that Rauschenberg painted those haunting canvases with house paint like the doors.⁴⁰



Figure 7. Hazel Larsen Archer, The Quiet House, 1950. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Gift of Marie Tavroges Stilkind. Courtesy of Erika Archer Zarow.



Figure 8. Hazel Larsen Archer, Quiet House Doors, n.d. (ca. 1948). Vintage gelatin silver print. Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Courtesy of Erika Archer Zarow.



Figure 9. Robert Rauschenberg, Quiet House–Black Mountain, ca. 1951. Gelatin silver print. 14 3/4 x 14 3/4 in. (37.5 x 37.5 cm). © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. RRF Registration# 49.P002.

Rauschenberg was Archer's student at BMC, and, like her, he visited the Quiet House with a camera.⁴¹ While the exterior doors captured Archer's attention, Rauschenberg found himself drawn into the quiet interior. And even in the absence of bodies, these photographs demand different types of bodily presence and offer their own means of interacting with the space. For instance, Archer's photographs of the Quiet House doors directly entice the hand. A door left slightly ajar could receive a body

if it was opened just a little wider. The long black door handles remind the viewer that the hand always initiates the body's physical contact with architecture. To enter requires a push or pull at that handle, to move beyond the door that distinguishes between interior and exterior. But even the supposed boundary between inside and outside wanes in Archer's photograph. The leaves on the nearby trees cast a shadow on the surface of the door that is beautiful and delicate in its resemblance to lace. When the door opens, the shadow falls inward and casts its variegated pattern onto the floor on the inside (Fig. 8). Light gains entrance and so do the leaves. Curator and BMC scholar Alice Sebrell notes that Archer's sensitivity to light and the formal elegance of the photograph finds a special resonance with the Quiet House as its photographic subject, which, as a memorial to Mark Dreier, was reserved as a secluded space for silent meditation.⁴²

Light falls on the Quiet House in Rauschenberg's photograph (1949) as well, filtered through one of the nine square windows Reed incorporated into the architecture (Fig. 9). The image reveals the austerity of the Quiet House interior. There are stucco white walls and two identical wooden chairs huddled together in a corner.⁴³ Rauschenberg's close attentiveness to geometric forms shows in the way the stripe of light cuts down the wall at a steep diagonal. Whereas light and shadow transgress boundaries in Archer's photograph, they seem to impose them here. Rauschenberg uses light and the hard-edged shape it takes on as it passes through the window to structure his composition. Notice, for example, how the white stripe of light in his photograph runs precisely tangent to the ear of the left chair so that the entire seat and back are contained in a triangular shadow. From there this defined beam touches the second chair on the right and drags its shadow down across the wall with its diagonal force. Two of the same chairs look radically different depending on the path of light as determined by the time of day or the location of the sun in the sky. Rauschenberg's interest in light and shadow explored through closely cropped photographs shows Archer's influence on his work.⁴⁴

As a student at BMC, Rauschenberg worked across mediums, but his work and career necessarily stem from his early and sustained preoccupation with photography. Contemporary art curator Helen Molesworth characterizes two series of paintings

Rauschenberg worked on during his Black Mountain years—namely, the *Night Blooming Paintings* (Summer 1951) and the *Black Paintings* (1951-3)—by a similar bodily absence and indexical presence.⁴⁵ In their authorial abandonment and commerce with printmaking, both series fall under what Silverman calls the “non-medium specific” category of photography. To make the *Night Blooming* works, for instance, Rauschenberg essentially painted large canvases with oil and then pressed them directly into the North Carolina dirt under light of the moon. For his *Black Paintings*, like *Untitled [Asheville Citizen]* (1952), he layered newsprint with thickly applied matte paint, producing a cracked surface on a long vertical panel. That black paint and the daily production cycle of the inky news draws Molesworth to identify a surprising bodily index in *Untitled*. Frankly, the paintings remind her of shit. But Molesworth’s excremental reading importantly situates us inside the body in order to argue that physical access to the body’s interior (via shit, sex, or even—quite morbidly—bodily mutilation/dissection) attests to “the impossibility of self-knowledge.”⁴⁶ In other words, neither physical nor visual access to one’s own or another’s body guarantees complete knowledge of a person. Molesworth describes this desire to know as a fantasy played out through a collection of bodily “data” that is forever ungratified. We can never fully know *anyone*, let alone ourselves. Molesworth’s critical analysis of Rauschenberg’s early work is an invitation to stop grasping at a fantasy that knowledge of the body is characterized by access and acquisition. Mirroring Rauschenberg’s surrender of his canvas to the North Carolina dirt, she urges the artist to behave more receptively like Archer’s camera.



Figure 10. Installation view of the exhibition "Photography (6 Women Photographers)." October 11, 1949–November 15, 1949. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN425.4. Photograph by Soichi Sunami.

The Quiet House cropped up in a few of the photographs that Archer exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in the fall of 1949 (Fig. 10). The group exhibition, curated by Edward Steichen, highlighted photography by six women photographers: Margaret Bourke-White, Helen Levitt, Dorothea Lange, Tana Hoban, Esther Bublely, and the "young amateur" Hazel-Frieda Larsen.⁴⁷ Archer contributed seven portrait studies. Two of these that featured the Quiet House were hung closely together: on the left, a photograph of Asawa in profile in front of the Quiet House doors, and on the right (a slightly smaller photograph), a closeup on one of the door handles. Asawa is absent from the second photograph, but it is still a portrait of the door handle. The screws on the circular part of the upper handle are anthropomorphized by the pairing. They look like a face with two eyes and a mouth. Archer's photographs attest to her curiosity in the ways that surfaces communicate temporary states— be they

emotions in the case of a human subject, or shadow/time of day in the case of non-human subjects including the Quiet House.

That same fall of 1949, Archer participated in another exhibition at MoMA. The Museum hosted a Polio Poster competition in collaboration with the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis to promote vaccine research.⁴⁸ A total of twenty-four artists and photographers designed posters for a cash prize. A small (albeit difficult to make out) reproduction of her poster design from the competition was also displayed on the same wall as her photographs in Steichen's show, thus linking the two exhibitions and standing in as a reminder of Archer's own bout with polio.⁴⁹ This detail is significant in that the Quiet House was one of the least accessible buildings on campus. It stood on the hill up from the lake along an unpaved route. Archer's limited mobility would have made the destination less accessible to her.

Archer's portraits, in their clear interest in the body in its capacity to signal something internal and personal yet shared, contrast with the general national anxiety around the body in the 1950s before the first polio vaccine was made available in 1955. Many of the poster submissions to the MoMA focused on polio and its visible legibility through the relationship between text and image. For instance, the first prize poster (designed by Herbert Matter) features two young children skipping in tandem and overlaid with the statement "One of them *had* polio—skilled teamwork brought recovery" (emphasis added, Fig. 12). In effect Matter goads the viewer to scrutinize the two young bodies for signs of implied deficiency to determine which one had polio. While the poster advocates for care and research, the image and text celebrate the invisibility or undetectability of paralysis and the restoration of the "normal" body, pictured as a white young boy and girl holding hands.

Coincidentally, the same year MoMA hosted the poster competition in 1949, it also acquired Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World* (1948), which is perhaps the most famous and important art historical depiction of a subject with polio.⁵⁰ Wyeth painted his frequent model, Christina Olson lying alone in a grassy field with her back to the viewer. She directs her gaze, her left hand, and even a wisp of dark hair towards the house in the background, generating a sense of distance and longing. In real life, Christina would propel herself forward using the strength of her upper body because she was a

paraplegic from polio. Art Historian Randall Griffin argues Wyeth invests and burdens his subject with anxiety defined by “the era’s heightened awareness of the vulnerability of the body...from a society peopled with veterans who had recently returned from traumatic experiences in World War II and from wide-spread contemporaneous fears about polio.”⁵¹ Although Wyeth sketched Christina in preparation for his realist painting, by the time he started on the canvas, he ultimately decided to substitute her body with his wife Betsy’s younger and abled body.⁵² Griffin convincingly contends that Wyeth wanted to “normalize” the body— perhaps in a similar fashion to the children in Matter’s poster— and posed her “as a well-rehearsed signifier for human suffering” at once isolated and vulnerable but also full of hope and defiance.⁵³ Regardless of the artist’s intentions, the painting positions the body as a site for making social meaning. That Christina’s face is hidden from view only increases the desire to project greater historical and societal fears onto the painting.

In light of Archer’s polio, the sheer coincidence that her photographs of Asawa and the Quiet House, her poster promoting polio research, and the newly acquired (or at least in the process of being acquired) Wyeth painting *Christina’s World* would have all occupied MoMA’s orbit at the same time is remarkable. Archer’s photographs figure the racialized body and the disabled body alongside a museum initiative to promote polio research and the acquisition of the painting that dramatizes the restoration of the abled body much as it also romanticizes the crippled body. Both Wyeth and Archer concern themselves with the body’s vulnerabilities and the subtleties of their depictions is formally relevant. Archer’s photographs in Steichen’s show did not appear to have anything to do with the polio poster she submitted to the competition in another part of the same museum, but the miniaturized version of her poster that was stuck next to her photographs connects them. Steichen featured Dorothea Lange’s work in the same six-person photography exhibition alongside Archer. Lange, who also contracted polio at a young age was invited to participate in the polio poster competition but declined the offer. Archer’s poster featured a photograph of two young children at center with text above- “Don’t be afraid” and below, “Knowledge is a weapon against polio.” Like the child conjured by the Avalon mission statement who is born with natural curiosity and potential, the image of the child functions here as the pure and innocent representative

of the entire community. This poster's relationship with polio is complicated, as is Wyeth's painting. Still notable, however, is Archer's recognition of "knowledge" as the antidote to fears surrounding polio.

As Archer's poster suggests, "knowledge" unlocks bodily freedom. Likewise, her teaching and photography practice imply a potential for freedom in the pursuit of knowledge, or a life dedicated to learning. At BMC Archer taught the *desire* to photograph and later imagined the joy of inhabiting the camera. Clearly the Quiet House was one of Archer and her students' most beloved locations to exercise this desire. Archer's attraction to the house is clear from the Quiet House photograph (Fig. 8). The architecture is so embedded and secluded in the mountainside that the house—outside, inside, and especially those white doors—becomes a surface perfect for the dedicated photographer's study of light's capacity to both make and dissolve forms. Archer illustrates this with an extreme frontal view that flattens the building and erases any sense of depth. The unbalanced crop on the left side of the frame de-centers the Quiet House (unlike a conventional documentary photograph) and pushes the viewer to the right side where there is more space and that tree with the narrow trunk. The thick diagonal shadow on the facade likely belongs to another tree with a thicker trunk somewhere out of view. This photograph immediately prompts the viewer to ask questions about where position, light, setting, and weather. The viewer becomes the photographer, who has just made their way to the building, knowing both the history of its memorial function and the photographic lure of the same building. Archer is always teaching.

¹ Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 210. For more on performance at Black Mountain see Annette Jael Lehman, "Pedagogical Practices and Models of Creativity at Black Mountain College" in *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment, 1933-1957* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015), 98-109 and Eva Díaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

² "L'appareil se met en marche vers la gauche, suivi de son soufflet comme de wagons. Par des ouvertures on voit la noce qui agite des mouchoirs, et, par-dessous, les pieds qui marchent." Jean Cocteau, *Les Mariés de La Tour Eiffel* (Paris: Editions Hoëbeke, 1994), 220.

³ Cocteau, *Les Mariés de La Tour Eiffel*, 220.

⁴ During her time at BMC, Hazel Larsen Archer went by Hazel-Frieda Larsen. Note that I refer to her as Hazel Larsen Archer throughout this article for consistency. Hazel Larsen Archer, "Photography at Black

Mountain College” in *Five Photographers*, ed. Hazel Larsen Archer (Black Mountain: Black Mountain College, 1950), Western Regional Archives.

⁵ Hazel Larsen Archer, Interview with Hazel Larsen Archer, interview by Walt Park, n.d., Box PC. 1678.5, Western Regional Archives, 60. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, ed. Nicholas Tampio (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024). Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997)

⁶ *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes*, ed. by Brenda Danilowitz and Frederick A. Horowitz (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2009).

⁷ In an example she gives related to childhood education, Archer lamented that assignments like book reports can have an effect that “the sheer joy of reading is hammered away at.” Hazel Larsen Archer, Interview with Hazel Larsen Archer, interview by Walt Park, n.d., Box PC. 1678.5, Western Regional Archives, 30.

⁸ There were a handful of Black Mountain Students who came from Wisconsin including Elaine Schmitt, Elizabeth (née Schmitt) Jennerjahn, and Pete Jennerjahn. Ruth Asawa was also a student at the Milwaukee State Teachers’ College before Black Mountain College. Asawa felt especially encouraged to go to Black Mountain College after she was denied the opportunity to teach in Milwaukee—a requirement of the teaching degree—on account of her race. See Marilyn Chase, *Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2020).

⁹ Hazel Larsen Archer, Interview with Hazel Larsen Archer, interview by Walt Park, n.d., Box PC. 1678.5, Western Regional Archives, 14.

¹⁰ Archer, interview by Walt Park, 15. Western Regional Archives.

¹¹ During her lecture on the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 2023 exhibition *Ruth Asawa: Through Line*, curator Kim Conaty claimed that historically Archer’s photographs are considered for their documentary value before their artistic merit. Kim Conaty, “Ruth Asawa Through Line,” Paul Lott Lecture, The Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, December 12, 2023.

¹² Marilyn Chase, *Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2020), 34-5.

¹³ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive.” *October* 39 (1986): 3–64.

¹⁴ Archer, “Photography at Black Mountain College,” *Five Photographers*.

¹⁵ Zeynep Celik Alexander, “Designing: Discipline and Introspection at the Bauhaus,” in *Kinaesthetic Knowing: Aesthetics, Epistemology, Modern Design* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 167-202.

¹⁶ Josef Albers began his photography practice at the Bauhaus, where he experimented with collage. See John Szarkowski and Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Photographs of Josef Albers: A Selection from the Collection of the Josef Albers Foundation* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1987). Also Michael Beggs, “The Flattest Kind of Picture: Texture and Matière at Black Mountain College,” in *Begin to See: The Photographers of Black Mountain College*, Julie J. Thomson ed., (Asheville, NC: Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, 2017). Reid’s exhibition catalogue *Convergence/Divergence: Exploring Black Mountain College + Chicago’s New Bauhaus/Institute of Design* (Asheville: Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, 2015) recognizes some of the links between Bauhaus progeny in the United States, including through the shared interest in photography. Students like Diane Woeffler, who assisted Archer in her photography classes in the summer of 1949, for example, studied photography at the Institute of Design in Chicago (ID) before she went to Black Mountain. Archer’s invitations to ID faculty Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind to teach at BMC during the summer of 1951 further established institutional links through photography. For a different focus on Albers’s photography practice see Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye, “Making Mesoamerica Modern: Anni and Josef Albers as Collectors of Ancient American Art” in *Small-Great Objects: Anni and Josef Albers in the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 2017), 25-72. Reynolds-Kaye argues that Albers’ photographs of objects in anthropology museums in Mexico displays an ethnographic gaze that differs from his contemporaries.

¹⁷ According to student Nancy Alice Smith (Wright), Breitenbach “took pictures of the odor of bacon cooking. The fragrance of bacon cooking...the fragrance of coffee beans, and the fragrance of a rose petal.” Nancy Alice Smith, interview by Mary Emma Harris, March 30, 1971, Middletown Connecticut. Western Regional Archives.

¹⁸ An article in *The Asheville Citizen* “Photographs of W.N.C. [Western North Carolina] Scenery Prove Popular: Pictures of Mountain Attractions Widely Distributed” 18 Aug 1935, page 24, suggests that the

increased popularity of mountainscape photography was a larger phenomenon for the time beyond Black Mountain College.

¹⁹ Archer, "Photography at Black Mountain College" in *Five Photographers*.

²⁰ Ibid. To quote Archer in full, "The courses place emphasis not on taking the photograph, but the desire to take the photograph, with the photograph itself being the natural end result. It means that we are learning to see and become aware of life around us."

²¹ Jacqueline Herman Gourevitch, interview by Mary Emma Harris, March 13, 1971, Middletown Connecticut. Western Regional Archives.

²² Ibid.

²³ Archer, "Photography at Black Mountain College."

²⁴ Branden W. Joseph, "The Gap and the Frame," *October* 117 (Summer 2006): 65.

²⁵ Archer asked Walker Evans but he respectfully declined. Telegram sent to Hazel Larsen from Walker Evans March 14, 1952. Box 39. Black Mountain College "II. General Files 1933-1956." Western Regional Archives. The "Black Mountain College archives" noted here refer to the school files at the Western Regional Archives.

²⁶ Alice Sebrell has also suggested this was likely the case. Conversation August 23, 2023.

²⁷ Archer, interview by Walt Park, 33.

²⁸ Archer, interview by Park, 33.

²⁹ Charles Archer, Charles Archer Interview ("Transcript Rough Draft"), interview by Mary Emma Harris, (December 18, 1971), 19. Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center.

³⁰ Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, "Untitled" [Video, 49:10, Hazel Larsen Archer], Black Mountain College 1995 Reunion, accessed August 23, 2023.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Nick Cernovich, "Even Monkeys Can Take Pictures," *Five Photographers* (Black Mountain: Black Mountain College, 1950), Western Regional Archives.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Hazel Larsen Archer, "Cernovich Nick, Student Evaluation: Photography, Fall 1949" (Fall, 1949), Black Mountain College. Western Regional Archives.

³⁵ "Avalon Mission Statement," PC.1678.13, folder "Files About Individuals: Larsen, Hazel (Archer)," Western Regional Archives.

³⁶ Julie J. Thomson and Michael Beggs, *Begin to See: The Photographers of Black Mountain College* (Asheville, NC: Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, 2017).

³⁷ These categories reflect the subject-based organization of the Plates in the exhibition catalogue *Hazel Larsen Archer: Black Mountain College Photographer* (Asheville: Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, 2006)

³⁸ See for example, *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957* (Hammer Museum and the ICA, Boston, 2016); *Black Mountain College: An Interdisciplinary Experiment, 1933-1957* (Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, 2019).

³⁹ Michael Beggs, *The Quiet House: Stillness in Lake Eden*, vol. 4, Faith in Arts, Hannah Lack, ed. (Atelier Editions & Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, 2022), 11.

⁴⁰ "Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting* [three panel] 1951, SF MoMA, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.308.A-C/#:~:text=In%201961%2C%20composer%20John%20Cage,t o%20the%20world%20around%20them>. See also Branden W. Joseph, "White on White," in *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: October, 2007), 25–72.

⁴¹ According to Branden Joseph "Although the literature on Rauschenberg and Black Mountain College always stresses his studies with Joseph (sic) Albers, Larsen [Archer] was actually the faculty member with whom Rauschenberg was closest." See Joseph, "The Gap and the Frame," *October* 117 (Summer 2006): 65.

⁴² Conversation with Alice Sebrell, August 23, 2023, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center.

⁴³ Much of the furniture was made in the woodworking shop on campus headed by Molly Gregory. Curator Whitney Richardson's exhibit *Modernist Design at Black Mountain College* (2021) at the Asheville Art Museum emphasized chairs and wood furnishings as expressions of modern design.

⁴⁴ See Branden Joseph, "The Gap and the Frame," *October* 117 (Summer 2006): 65. Though Joseph has already drawn attention to Archer's under-recognized influence on Rauschenberg, the consequences of prioritizing her impact on such a momentous figure in the history of twentieth century art bears promising implications beyond the scope of this essay.

⁴⁵ Helen Molesworth, "Before Bed," *October* 63 (Winter 1993): 68–82. Rauschenberg was a student 1948-1949 and returned for summer sessions in 1951 and 1952.

⁴⁶ Molesworth, "Before Bed," 75..

⁴⁷ "Photographs by Margaret Bourke-White, Helen Levitt, Dorothea Lange, Tana Hoban, Esther Bubley, and Hazel-Frieda Larsen" (October 11, 1949- November 15, 1949). In the press release, Archer is described as a "young amateur" exhibiting her "portrait studies" and later- "Hazel Frieda Larsen is teaching at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, and is establishing a reputation for her revealing closeup studies of faces. She is a polio patient, and during her convalescence has done some of her photography from a wheelchair." Lange also had polio and was invited to participate in the polio poster competition but declined. This seems significant as evidence of different relationships to polio- Sally Stein writes about the Lange's interest in the body as a form of architecture with its own social meanings in Sally Stein, "Peculiar Grace: Dorothea Lange: Her Words and Images," in *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life* (Washington: Elizabeth Partridge, 1994), 57–152.

⁴⁸ Larsen won \$500 for her submission. *Black Mountain College Bulletin*: Fall 1950 (Vol. 8, No. 3, August 20, 1950), Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, gift of Barbara Beate Dreier and Theodore Dreier, Jr. on behalf of all generations of Dreier family, 2017.40.049.

⁴⁹ This was also the case for the other photographers who contributed to the poster competition, such as Tana Hoban, Esther Bubley, and Margaret Bourke-White but notably not Dorothea Lange who was invited to make a poster but did not.

⁵⁰ Laura Hoptman, "One on One: Andrew Wyeth's Christina's World," *MoMA Magazine (Online)*, May 2, 2023,

<https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/895#:~:text=The%20painting%20was%20acquired%20by,Street%20in%20New%20York%20City>.

⁵¹ Randall C. Griffin, "Andrew Wyeth's Christina's World: Normalizing the Abnormal Body," *American Art* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 31.

⁵² Griffin, "Andrew Wyeth's Christina's World," 36.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 41.