

### ORDER OF IMAGINATION: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF OLIVIA PARKER

Peabody Essex Museum • Salem, MA • [pem.org](http://pem.org) • Through November 11, 2019

If a retrospective is to succeed, then it must give the viewer both an intimate sense of the artist's vision and a holistic one. The current retrospective (and her first) of the work of Massachusetts-based Olivia Parker, at the Peabody Essex Museum, succeeds in both—from Parker's '80s-style photographs of found objects in quirky arrangements (rarely overtly narrative in focus) to her spare, otherworldly ciphers against ethereal backgrounds. So much lies in between, encompassing influences such as the saturated, chiaroscuro still lifes of the Old Masters, reimagined as a single peach, say, or an explosion of objects into space, to the digitally layered tableau of two photographed copperhead snakes entwined over an 18th-century celestial map with its own dragon-headed serpent. Equally unexpected, the snakes in their intimate, defensive posture are poignant rather than menacing.

Parker achieved all of the above through the medium of photography, yet with a painter's sense of color and composition—



Olivia Parker, *Child*, 1980, dye diffusion print.  
© Olivia Parker.

and particularly in later works, emotion. Each section of the show, representing various stages of Parker's career, leads to the next, revealing a narrative of her aesthetic, intellectual and even

spiritual pursuits. Yet perhaps the true subject, the one that links and arcs across each body of work, is time and light.

Her 1979 image of four whelks seemingly suspended in outer space—are they shells, or futuristic buildings in a science fiction fantasy?—is the reverse of *Last Writing*, from 2015, a slip of dark paper scrawled with nonsensical cursive, floating in a pearly, gauzy background, also other-worldly, but more like heaven. Both invite us to ponder: Who are we, really, and what else is out there? In the case of the latter photograph, from her series *Vanishing in Plain Sight*, which interrogates the dissolution of her husband's sense of self and the world due to Alzheimer's, one can almost hear the static of such an unanswerable question, like the sound of a whelk cupped over an ear. But each viewer brings his or her own questions to the art. As Parker wrote, "I have said what interests me. I cannot explain the photographs."

—Julianna Thibodeaux

## PREVIEW: *Massachusetts*

### PHOTO REVOLUTION: ANDY WARHOL TO CINDY SHERMAN

Worcester Art Museum • Worcester, MA • [worcesterart.org](http://worcesterart.org) • November 16, 2019–February 16, 2020

**P**hoto Revolution: *Andy Warhol to Cindy Sherman* is a voluminous exhibit which argues for a new understanding of photography's place and role in both fine art and contemporary culture by highlighting not only the depth of the photographic works themselves, but their influence and impact upon other artists and media as well. The show includes over 200 works that range from the traditionally presented high art photographs to printed paper dresses, movies and television clips, collage and found images on Polaroid. The show even includes works in other media that have been shaped by the visual expectations photography has brought.

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #7* (1978) shows a woman leaning against the frame of an open sliding door, hair disheveled, a martini glass in one hand, cigarette in the other, her slip hitched up to reveal her garters and hose.



Andy Warhol, *Mao Tse-Tung*, 1972, color screenprint, National Endowment for the Arts Museum Purchase Plan, 1977.91. © 2019 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In the bottom left corner, another woman is concealed by a large sun hat, an image both so iconic and familiar that one may be forgiven for thinking they have seen the film. This is one of Sherman's many imaginary alternate existence self-portraits.

This same blurring of the line between photo as a tool for documenting and as a tool for artistic expression is explored again and again throughout the show from various vantage points. While Sherman

is in the role of staging an image to appear posing as a moment captured, the works of Garry Winogrand are documentary images which manage, through their composition and perspective, to cross over into artistic expression. In *Elliot Richardson, Press Conference* (1973), the camera has pulled back to reveal not only the man in the suit speaking while seated at a table, but the slightly absurdist trail of cords leading to the numerous tape recording machines laid on the floor at his feet.

The conversation about photography's dance between art and record, reaches its zenith in curator Nancy Burns's decision to place found images, Polaroids of unknown people in moments of their lives, beside works by Andy Warhol. The similarities and reflections between the works cause the viewer to reconsider the base nature of art and both its role, and all-pervasive presence, in our lives.

—Heather Martin