



The Europeans Photographs by Tina Barney



cover

Tina Barney

American, b. 1945

The Orchids (detail), 2003

from *The Europeans*

Chromogenic color print

48 x 60"

Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York

Tina Barney

The Tapestry (detail), 1996

from *The Europeans*

Chromogenic color print

40 x 30"

Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York

The Europeans Photographs by Tina Barney
January 18 - May 20, 2012

The roll call is long and illustrious of Europeans who visited the United States in the 19th century and discovered a popular market—at home as well as here—for accounts of their travels. French and English authors used to vie over which better understood the American, a new ex-colonial species viewed as an inspiration and a warning for the Old World. Alexis de Tocqueville, Mrs. Frances Trollope, Charles Dickens, James Bryce, and Oscar Wilde earned reputations as social observers and impudent wits for their barbed, firsthand impressions of a nation emerging as a global rival.

Equally noteworthy were those Europeans who came here to photograph in the latter half of the 20th century. Curious about what they had read or seen in earlier publications, many toured the country extensively and took pictures with an earlier continental innovation, the handheld 35mm cameras manufactured by Contax and Leica. Via these instruments, which could go anywhere and were easily concealed, readers of European and English magazines and newspapers gained unprecedented views of a country that was now a world power.



These photographic reports, like the verbal ones of Dickens and Wilde, mixed admiration, envy, disappointment, and sheer terror. Henri Cartier-Bresson crisscrossed the United States in 1946 and, despite affection for individuals, found that the vulgar energy of the country as a whole—spared the economic devastation he had witnessed in Europe during and after World War II—presented a troubling model of the future and one to be avoided for France.¹ This low opinion was confirmed by the Swiss émigré Robert Frank, whose acerbic and mournful book *The Americans*, published in

France in 1958 and in the United States in 1959, remains for many Europeans the defining vision of their NATO partner.

Tina Barney is one of the few American photographers brave enough in recent years to have attempted to correct this transatlantic imbalance. Her 2005 book of portraits, *The Europeans*, was a record of trips made to Austria, England, Italy, Spain, France, and Germany between 1996 and 2004. This present exhibition is a selection from that body of work.

Tina Barney

The Foyer, 1996

from *The Europeans*

Chromogenic color print

30 x 40"

Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York

In their own discreet fashion, Barney's pictures here exhibit a similar quivering excitement about strangers and their native abodes.

In some ways her project resembles that undertaken by Frank, except in reverse. The animating impulse was the same: curiosity about a group of people and an unfamiliar way of life. Just as a Negro couple riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle in the 1950s was unlike anything a Jewish boy had ever seen growing up in Switzerland, likewise a hunky young Spaniard being cinched into a matador costume was outside the experience of a woman raised on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

Diane Arbus once remarked that for her the thrill of being a photographer was the license it granted to enter the homes of strangers. "If I were just curious, it would be very hard to say to someone, 'I want to come to your house and have you talk to me and tell me the story of your life,'" she said. "I mean people are going to say, 'You're crazy.'"² Her camera gave her access to people she didn't know, and would have no way of knowing were she not a photographer. More often than not, this transaction satisfied both parties: they were flattered by the attention she paid them—attention they were not used to—and she might get a wondrous picture she could never have anticipated.

In their own discreet fashion, Barney's pictures here exhibit a similar quivering excitement about strangers and their native abodes. Nowhere except in Austria would she have found herself inside a house decorated with Josef Hoffmann wallpaper and sconces (*The Foyer*), and one can sense her delight. Unlike her previous and celebrated body of work, in which she photographed family and intimate friends in New York and New England, the portraits here were taken on a foreign shore and under terms dictated by her hosts.

European cities can seem particularly unwelcome to Americans eager to meet locals in private rather than public places. Barriers of language present only one obstacle. The boulevards in the residential heart of Vienna, London, Madrid, Paris, and Berlin are lined with apartments that to outsiders look as unbreachable as medieval castles. Facades of creamy stone stretch unbroken for blocks except where lacquered doors or iron-gated courtyards allow the privileged to enter.

Having been invited inside these fortresses—with help from well-placed friends, contacts at Sotheby's, and museum curators—Barney wants to show us what she discovered there. These portraits can be seen as a series of arranged meetings between strangers. Each

¹ Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 63.

² Arbus expressed these sentiments more than once, in talks and slide shows to students in 1970 and in 1971.

encounter had an improvisatory quality, as she sought to orient herself in social situations that were continually surprising and that she had to figure out in a hurry. Once the introductions had been made, the clock started ticking. Barney and her assistants had to survey the pictorial opportunities, and decide on a relative few, before the patience of her subjects ran out.

In important ways, however, Barney's photographs have little in common with the spontaneous investigations of an alien culture that one observes in photographs of America by Cartier-Bresson or Frank. There is nothing furtive or surreptitious or spur-of-the-moment about her approach. Her photographs are made with a large-format camera, often with lights she and her assistants bring to her sessions, which can take long minutes and sometimes hours.

Nor is she nosy or wide-eyed about her subjects, as was Arbus. Whomever she photographs, Barney's point of view is reliably cool and distanced, never mordant. It is one of social equals. She usually shares with them a high degree of cultural sophistication and material comfort. No one in her portraits looks disadvantaged. They know where their next meal is coming from and probably who will serve it to them. This is decidedly not the Western Europe that has in recent decades accepted record numbers of immigrants from the Eastern Bloc, Africa and Asia.

Although she is the ultimate arbiter over what appears in her frames, each portrait is a negotiation. Were any of the people here uneasy about her as a person or artist, or angry with the result of her photographing them, they could have shown her the door and these pictures would likely not exist. People taken unawares or ambushed without their consent on a city sidewalk seldom have a choice in the matter. Barney's characters have an innate confidence that they aren't entirely at her mercy.

A respectful guest careful not to overstep, Barney at the same time knows far more about the individuals in her pictures than we do. Her reluctance to share any secrets about them she might have learned on her visits seems both polite and strategic, what happened (or not) in these sessions being knowledge that would be unprofessional and artistically confining to disclose.

Her titles are open-ended and noncommittal (*The Ancestor*, *The Oriental Jacket*), like those of a Chekhov or William Trevor story. Even when they betray biographic tips about kinship (*Father and Sons*, *The Daughters*, *The British Cousins*), she tells us nothing about their emotional histories. By a reading of expressions on faces, of postures, gestures, clothes, and decor, we have to imagine the economic circumstances of these people and the valent bonds of different sorts that have brought them together at the time the picture was taken.

Tina Barney

The Ancestor, 2001
from *The Europeans*
Chromogenic color print
48 x 60"

Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York

Tina Barney

The Oriental Jacket, 2001
from *The Europeans*
Chromogenic color print
30 x 40"

Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York





And given the deceptive realism of photography, so-called truths that within a wider context turn out to be unsupported assumptions, we have to accept the possibility that our eyes are leading us astray. The clues that Barney drops about her subjects don't lead us very far and, more likely than not, we're headed down the wrong trail.

Her role in editing these photographs even before they were taken should not be overlooked. She is an unseen player in *The Butterfly*, her multigenerational group portrait

of a German family around a table. The man in a red jacket holding a baby and the woman, perhaps his wife, are the only two of the six looking at Barney and her camera. An older woman stares off in another direction, seemingly bored or impatient, while a little girl and another woman (sibling? nanny?) are absorbed in an activity of their own. Not only has she captured the dynamics of a family, but she is also acknowledging that not everyone is always happy to sit and take instruction from an American female outsider for what can seem like forever.

Tina Barney

The Yellow Wall, 1997

from *The Europeans*

Chromogenic color print

30 x 40"

2011.23.2

Museum purchase and partial gift of Michael Parish

Collection of the Haggerty Museum of Art

Her lens almost never comes unnervingly close to people in an effort to rattle their existential cages.

We can't tell whether or not Barney asked the rumpled teenager in *Young Man with Dog* to dress in this manner, with the French cuffs of his shirt hanging loose and his red belt uncinched, or to pick up the family Jack Russell terrier. But we must accept that she was pleased enough with those telling elements of preppy slovenliness *à la française* to ask him to hold still while she pressed the camera's cable release.

Surfaces are the paradoxical essence of photography. Richard Avedon famously said that his photographs didn't "go below the surface. They don't go below anything. They're readings of the surface. I have great faith in surfaces."³

Barney is an acute depicter of surfaces, too, although her style could not be further from Avedon's. His post-1975 style bleached out the backgrounds of his subjects and presented them as nothing more than skin and rags; she wouldn't think of reducing hers to specimens by taking away their possessions. Her lens almost never comes unnervingly close to people in an effort to rattle their existential cages.

Surroundings are everything in a Barney portrait, a quality even more pronounced in her European series. The color of a room

often has a sharper emotional pitch (*The Yellow Wall*) than the human beings who pose there. How parents dress themselves and their children, the wear and texture of sofa fabrics, interests her appraising eye. In the care given to include tapestries and murals, cassones and ancestral paintings—I lost count of the frames within her frames—she demonstrates a sympathetic appreciation for the objects people inherit and pass along over generations or centuries.

It is tempting to interpret these figures and interiors as "originals" for her portraits of upper-class New Englanders and New Yorkers—as the genuine article, hard-wired aristocrats, the achieved thing that high net worth Americans can only aspire to and never quite become. Not only do the Renaissance heirlooms and bloodlines of these Italians, Austrians, English and French seem older and thus more solid, so do the floors they stand on.

Henry James believed the relative immaturity of America as a social entity was a problem for its artists. He moved to Europe in the 1870s, living first in Paris and thereafter in England, because he believed the more developed layers of civilized intrigue in those countries might be more exciting backdrops for the actions of his fictional characters. The

³ Interview from 1980.

Barney's photographs don't dispel the suspicion that Europe is a diminished presence on the world stage, a museum rather than a furnace of activity and invention.

theme of innocent American women and crafty European men was reworked again and again.

In the first chapter of his book on Hawthorne, a writer who in his opinion had been hobbled by New England provincialism, James wrote that, "Americans have as a general thing a hungry passion for the picturesque, and they are so fond of local color that they contrive to perceive it in localities in which the amateurs of other countries would detect only the most neutral tints. History, as yet, has left in the United States but so thin and impalpable a deposit that we very soon touch the hard substratum of nature."⁴

This essay appeared in 1879, however, before the 20th century tilted the balance of cultural influence in America's favor. Since the end of World War II, a common anxiety among many Europeans has been fear that they had become irrelevant in world affairs, with a hegemonic U.S. military dominating the board in the great game of power politics.

Barney's photographs don't dispel the suspicion that Europe is a diminished presence on the world stage, a museum rather than a furnace of activity and invention. Had her good manners not prevented her, she could have shown us the many ways that

Europe has in recent decades been colonized by America. Many of the well-to-do children here no doubt were listening to hip-hop and playing video games; and somewhere in their bedroom closets could be found T-shirts emblazoned with commercial logos. This series was completed before iPods and iPhones and iPads flooded the market. But it's a good bet that *The Two Students* and *The Daughters* are devoted Apple customers.

Barney began her series as the continent had decided to integrate politically and economically as never before in history. The European Union was formally established in 1993 with the Maastricht Treaty and has steadily added members since. The motivation behind the EU was a perceived need to withstand the coercion of the two superpowers during the Cold War. These photographs were made soon after that conflict was settled, the United States having been the victorious protector of a democratic Europe for the third time in the 20th century.

Intellectuals from the other side of the Atlantic have not tired of America as a fretful topic. More than 150 years after Tocqueville and Dickens published their spirited analyses, books regularly appear in France and Germany that examine with concern our international

4 Henry James, *Hawthorne* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), 13.

5 Bernard-Henri Lévy, *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* (New York: Random House, 2006).

6 None of the American portrait photographers of Barney's generation and stature in art photography—Judith Joy Ross, Sally Mann, Nicholas Nixon, Joel Sternfeld—have worked in Europe for any period of time, if at all. The closest analogies to this series can be found in the work of other Europeans, notably Patrick Faigenbaum and Thomas Struth.



behavior and domestic habits. Bernard-Henri Lévy is only the latest Parisian to take an all-American road trip in order to draw sweeping conclusions about our character.⁵

The fascination has not been mutual. Barney is almost alone among her American peers in choosing to make portraits in these countries.⁶ It was her desire that *The Europeans* be published by Steidl in Germany, but the subject is not one that interests U.S. publishers anymore. Perhaps once Barney's

travel discoveries are more widely seen in museums, more of us will be encouraged to be as seriously interested in the Old World as it still is in us.

Richard B. Woodward
New York City
November, 2011

Tina Barney

Father and Sons, 1996
 from *The Europeans*
 Chromogenic color print
 48 x 60"

Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York



Tina Barney
The British Cousins, 2001
from *The Europeans*
Chromogenic color print
48 x 60"
Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York



Tina Barney

The Butterfly, 2004
from *The Europeans*
Chromogenic color print
48 x 60"

Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York



Tina Barney

The Daughters, 2002

from *The Europeans*

Chromogenic color print

48 x 60"

2010.17

Museum purchase with funds from George L. N. Meyer, Sr., Mrs. John C. Pritzlaff, Mr. Philip Fina and Mr. Ray H. Wolf (by exchange)

Collection of the Haggerty Museum of Art

The Europeans Photographs by Tina Barney

Acknowledgments

The museum wishes to thank the artist Tina Barney for her willingness to share her work for this exhibition and Richard B. Woodward for providing the essay for this publication. We are also grateful to Janet Borden, Emma Bowen, and Matthew Whitworth of Janet Borden Inc, New York, for facilitating this exhibition.

The Europeans Photographs by Tina Barney and related programs are made possible through funding in part by the Friends of the Haggerty Museum of Art, the Marquette University Women's Council Endowment Fund, the Martha and Ray Smith, Jr. Endowment Fund, the Richard P. Herzfeld Endowment Fund and the Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Works in the Exhibition

All works are chromogenic color prints from *The Europeans* and courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York, unless otherwise noted.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. <i>Father and Sons</i> , 1996
48 x 60" | 8. <i>The British Cousins</i> , 2001
48 x 60" | 13. <i>The Two Friends</i> , 2002
48 x 60" |
| 2. <i>The Foyer</i> , 1996
30 x 40" | 9. <i>The Oriental Jacket</i> , 2001
30 x 40" | 14. <i>The Young Lady</i> , 2002
48 x 60" |
| 3. <i>The Orange Room</i> , 1996
48 x 60" | 10. <i>The Two Students</i> , 2001
48 x 60" | 15. <i>The Brocade Walls</i> , 2003
48 x 60" |
| 4. <i>The Schoolyard</i> , 1996
48 x 60" | 11. <i>The Daughters</i> , 2002
48 x 60"
2010.17
Museum purchase with funds
from George L. N. Meyer, Sr.,
Mrs. John C. Pritzlaff,
Mr. Philip Fina and
Mr. Ray H. Wolf (by exchange)
Collection of the
Haggerty Museum of Art | 16. <i>The Matador</i> , 2003
48 x 60" |
| 5. <i>The Tapestry</i> , 1996
40 x 30" | | 17. <i>The Orchids</i> , 2003
48 x 60" |
| 6. <i>The Yellow Wall</i> , 1997
30 x 40"
2011.23.2
Museum purchase and
partial gift of Michael Parish
Collection of the
Haggerty Museum of Art | 12. <i>The Hands</i> , 2002
30 x 40" | 18. <i>Young Man with Dog</i> , 2003
48 x 60" |
| 7. <i>The Ancestor</i> , 2001
48 x 60" | | 19. <i>The Brothers in the Kitchen</i> , 2004
48 x 60" |
| | | 20. <i>The Butterfly</i> , 2004
48 x 60" |
-

HAGGERTY ♦ MUSEUM OF ART
at Marquette University

HAGGERTY MUSEUM OF ART
Marquette University
13th and Clybourn Streets
Milwaukee, WI 53233
marquette.edu/haggerty
414.288.1669

