



AFTER  
SARGENT

*Lydia Panas*

# AFTER SARGENT

*Lydia Panas*

Acknowledgements by Heather Sincavage  
Essay by Gail Buckland

Exhibition curated by Heather Sincavage

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Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania



What does it mean to be seen?  
What does it mean to return the gaze?  
Time never stops, but a moment can be crystalized, visualized.

The power of photography.  
The power of Lydia Panas' photography.  
The power of the space between Panas' lens and the person willing to be seen.  
The light rays bouncing between photographer and subject form an emotional web,  
binding them momentarily; reaching into eternity.

*I asked the models three questions:*

*What do you long for?  
What do you regret?  
What are you afraid of?*

—Lydia Panas

It is a well-worn assumption you can never fully know another human being. Viewers of photographs (believed erroneously to be the most truthful of mediums) like clarity over ambiguity, but why? Why not luxuriate in beauty born of complexity, imperfection and subtle, inscrutable gesture? Panas skillfully delineates what is on the surface, making what lies underneath achingly unclear. She wants people viewing her photographs to feel they are in a precarious state of being. They stand looking over Panas' shoulder, feeling her tenderness towards her subjects while experiencing the deep mysteries—the unknown—within each individual.

Panas' portraits are not like anyone else's. Her subjects might feel awkward in front of the lens, but they know they are being caressed by Panas' camera.

Panas' pictures are about relationships. Always, there is the core relationship between her and the individual in front of her camera. She speaks about falling in love with her subjects. She doesn't take a picture. She embraces a person. The people she photographs gain a new existence in that moment of transformation from flesh to photograph. What an honor and what a gift when Panas transforms her model into a work of art. Like all great portraitists, she does not flatter, she probes. Her pictures are often disquieting. She herself says, "My photographs are not calm."



Photograph © [January 2017] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

*After Sargent* is Lydia Panas's creative exploration in portraiture inspired by the painting *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* by John Singer Sargent. Many of her themes, as well as her muted colors and soft lighting, are prefigured in the painting. Erica Hirshler, Croll Senior Curator of American Painting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, wrote a book

about the painting. Hirshler observes, "The girls [in the Sargent painting] seem so vivid and alive, as if they were in our own space—it's hard not to respond to their presence. The painting is very accessible in that way, but it's mysterious enough for people to create their own stories about it."

Vivid, alive, accessible, mysterious, create their own stories. What is true for Sargent is true for Panas.

Both Sargent and Panas were/are fascinated by family relationships. They were/are both aware that the artist looking at his or her subjects is also being looked upon. The artists portray; the subjects project and through the eyes there is connection. The artistic endeavor gives everyone license to stare.

Lydia Panas speaks about her images showing inner conflict—ambivalent longings, anxieties, fears and desire for intimacy—all of which Panas shares with her subjects. Wipe the smile off someone's face (or, it can be said, remove the mask) and a visual dialogue begins. Not every portrait will resonate the same for each viewer. That is the beauty, the mystery of art. Why one portrait can be so meaningful depends on one's subconscious, on the effort one makes in looking, what one brings of one's own personal history.

I fall in love with *Amy and Christine* (pg. 28). Is because I can't remember being that physically close to my sister or best friend, although I identify emotionally with the connection? It is an exceptional double portrait, perfectly composed with Christine's head touching Amy's cheek and shoulder, with the dark space between them helping to define the young women's features. We know part of the success of this double portrait is because each woman supported the other during the photographic session. Just look at the interlaced fingers.

Why am I haunted by the sequence of *Maria and Corinne* (pg. 8)? Their features are so clear, their skin so delicate, their t-shirts simple yet sculptural. They could be two of the four sisters in the Sargent painting, now grown-up and living in the present day. Panas allows each young woman to have her own powerful presence. Unifying all three photographs are the soft hues. The blue brocade backdrop connects the women's eyes, clothes, skin tones and hair. Tension is built upon a balance of sharp and soft focus and a

brilliant understanding of the spacing of the figures within the frame. The photograph of the men of the Boothe family (pg. 27) also shows Panas' remarkable ability to compose figures, for emotional impact, within the rigors of the square format.

*Carmen* (pg. 22) is off centered, collar up, collar down, arm up, arm down. The dark backdrop with its creases, folds and tear, speaks of a life lived. Carmen has age and experience on Maria and Corinne. She, along with *Martha and Ricardo* (pg. 18), seems to know herself in a way the younger women do not.

One of my favorite portraits is *Rachel* (pg. 25), possibly because the lighting is so delicate. I want to know Rachel. I want to know why she wears a modest (yet fascinatingly patterned) dress with a prim lace collar along with dangly earrings and a long tight braid extending from the back of her curly hair. Mostly, I want to know what goes on in her mind, behind the wide-open green eyes. I want to know these things because Panas has organized the portrait to pull the viewer into Rachel's emotional world, the creases of the cloth serving like radiating rays.

If, as mentioned, one can never truly know another human being, the next logical question is, "can one ever truly know oneself?" The people in her pictures are struggling to be "themselves" even as they begin to realize, during the course of the intimate exchange that is at the heart of Panas' photography, the impossibility of the endeavor. The search for oneself is the "conflict" she photographs.

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Gail Buckland is the author or collaborator on 14 books of photography and history and has written the introductions to numerous others. Buckland, former curator of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, is the Benjamin Menschel Distinguished Visiting Professor and the former Olympus Visiting Professor of the History of Photography at The Cooper Union, New York City. She has held the Nobel Chair in Art and Cultural History at Sarah Lawrence College and taught at Columbia College, Chicago and Pratt Institute, Brooklyn.

At the time of this printing, her exhibition *Who Shot Sports: A Photographic History, 1843 to the Present* was on view at the Brooklyn Museum in New York.



**Gracie**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Gracie (far)**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Maria and Corrine**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Corrine**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Maria and Corrine 2**  
Chromogenic Print  
*2012-13*



**Claire and Sonia**  
Chromogenic Print  
*2012-13*



**Shayline (back)**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Margot**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13





**Casey and Emily (far)**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Ana (red fabric)**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Pana**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Pana (far)**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Ricardo and Martha**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Emma**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Kristina**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Tia Angela**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Carmen**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Reanna**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Sally and Sawyer (far)**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Rachel**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Ilene (far)**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Boothe**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Amy and Christine (in front of the cloth)**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



**Martha**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13





**Tia Angela (back)**  
Chromogenic Print  
2012-13



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