

ART

Developing focus

The many worlds of Portland photographer Paul Dahlquist

BY TJ NORRIS

The adage "getting better with age" comes to mind upon meeting photographer Paul Dahlquist. Although his mid-length pure white hair, small spectacles and round belly would be a shoo-in for hire at Macy's come November, this Santa ain't what he appears to be.



And as the gay photographer celebrates his 75th birthday this month, there are zero signs of him putting down his signature 35mm. Instead, this septuagenarian will open a compendium show at the Pearl District cooperative Gallery 114.

Visitors have the opportunity to engage with a two-decade-long black and white travelogue of portraits, nudes and locations that are as immediate as they are sensual. The rear wall is a giant montage of a few hundred candid—kisses, smiles, drag queens, crazy hairstyles, men and women in various states of undress, and even a self-portrait or two for good measure.

Many of the striking images are of young, buff and beautiful men. Dahlquist talks about Kimo, an African American man who was his roommate for more than 10 years—an image of a man who has done hard time with an impenetrable body. In this large portrait Kimo's dark skin is in super-high contrast to the underclothes he tears in half, exposing his ripped muscles and attentive endowment.

Dahlquist explains how the man now suffers from debilitating multiple sclerosis, though still asks to be documented, and Dahlquist points to a single image from 2001 of a wasting frame now resembling the emaciated waif models of the late '80s.

Staring into the beautiful face of 1987's "Bashir" from Goa, India, viewers will share with Dahlquist the importance of documenting people on film at their ripest.

The son of a Navy man, Dahlquist first picked up his dad's camera at age 8 while living in China. Images of civil strife, bombs dropping and evacuations informed his later work. The young child was seemingly fearless to point his camera directly toward people fleeing Chefoo, China.

Fast-forward a few years to Piedmont, Calif., where he recalls saving his allowance for several weeks so he could buy his first Brownie camera.

Dahlquist went to college in Washington state before eventually settling in Portland. After 25 years of teaching, he took the opportunity to go on a three-year sabbatical to Cuba, Asia and Spain, among other global corners, recording his journeys on film along the way.

Describing himself as more of a "picture giver than a picture taker," Dahlquist is magically candid as he openly expresses the art of observation and his own photographic voyeurism. Having learned to prepare for interaction but avoid confrontation when photo-

"Beach Boy" is one of dozens of Paul Dahlquist's intimate black and white photographs on display through March 27; (right) Paul Dahlquist celebrates his 75th birthday March 21 at Gallery 114

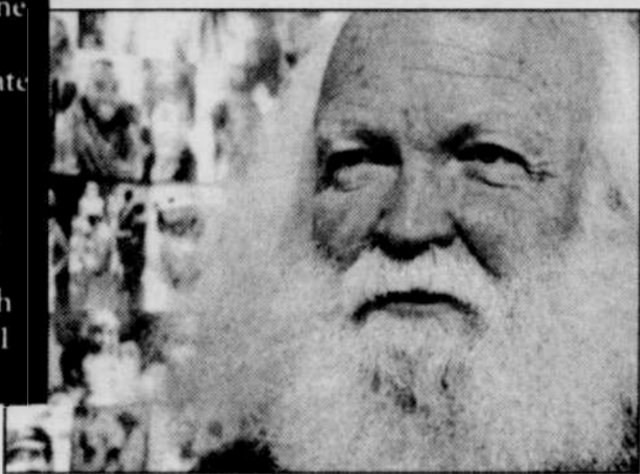


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

graphing people, he passes out his card to encourage interaction on the street or in the gym—hoping to trigger a photo shoot.

Dahlquist admits he pretty much tiptoes across the lines of conventionality when it comes to people's inherent public vs. private beauties. "Celebrating the body vs. being a dirty old man is a very fuzzy line," he belly laughs. Dahlquist sees physical manifestations of beauty in musculature and a strong chin but confirms that the real spirit to the work is learning to accept ourselves as we are in the here and now.

At his Portland home studio Dahlquist jokes about cutting mattes like "the chainsaw massacre," but at the same time, I was completely taken aback by the incredible photographic collection he has amassed: from a sensually twisted and toned Herb Ritts to the generally psychedelic optical art of Jerry Uelsmann to other works by Greg Gorman, Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Sally Mann—a virtual art history lesson.

Like all versed photographers, Dahlquist carries his camera daily for the occasional opportunity. (Even I was not prepared for my close-up, but who can turn him down?)

After discussing this interview with a smattering of artist friends, I learned Dahlquist's name is status in these parts, being dropped among younger emerging talents like last year's Portland Biennial photographer Erik Palmer and lauded queer performance sculptor David Eckard.

Describing himself as a "happy guy who doesn't have many bad days" with a penchant for the Metropolitan Opera, Paul Dahlquist is certainly a model (senior) citizen whose career may just be getting started (again). **J**

PAUL DAHLQUIST: PHOTOGRAPHS runs through March 27 at Gallery 114, 1100 N.W. Glisan St. From 2 to 5 p.m. March 21, celebrate Dahlquist's 75th birthday with him at the gallery.

TJ NORRIS is a Portland visual artist, curator and music critic. Find him at www.tjnorris.net.

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