

Joanne Leonard at Belle Isle Viewing Room

runner

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Youth, west Oakland

The collection of photographs exhibited at Belle Isle Viewing Room marks a notable moment in the gallery's effort to bring extraordinary work to the contemporary art scene in Detroit. For their final show, they present Joanne Leonard, a world renowned photographer whose work spans decades and leaves a trail of influence in its path. Visitors to the gallery are graced with black and white photographs that bring them back to her early days as a photographer in 1960s-70s Oakland, California. As highlighted in the corresponding text by Laura Larson, Leonard has demonstrated time and time again an ability to “delicately negotiate distance and intimacy” as she captured everyday life of Black Americans in her home-town. This distance fostered the invaluable authenticity captured in her pictures, allowing her subjects to air a comfort usually only felt when unobserved. The artist's ability to visually suspend the potency of the moment that a photograph was taken is one of the many reasons why her work has previously been shown at institutions like The Museum of Modern Art in New York, The Jewish Museum, Brooklyn Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and SFMoma.



The museum quality installation at Belle Isle Viewing Room encompasses over fifty individual compositions either matted and framed behind glass or laid inside wall mounted displays that resemble an anthropological showcase. Not only does this method of presentation do justice to the sensitive tone of the prints but also highlights Leonard's unique approach to the study of human culture. Like Ghanaian photographer James Barnor, whose retrospective recently came to the Detroit Institute of Arts, Joanne Leonard continuously chooses to highlight the confidence and joy of her sitters and the playfulness of her off-guard subjects despite the societal challenges that they may have been facing at the time. The subtlety of her attention to issues of race relations and gender roles allow for a gentle meditation to occur, which is only further facilitated by the beauty obtained in her gaze. Children of her West Oakland neighborhood share these gallery walls with her own daughter Julia and scenes of private domestic spaces that elicit a curiosity similar to a game of I-Spy or a calmness similar to a still life by Giorgio Morandi.

Influenced by popular creative techniques of the 1970s, Joanne Leonard embraced minimalist methods of framing and lighting to only enhance her role as a poetic documentarian of her time. In *Youth, west Oakland*, the figure becomes a sculpture through abstraction of form by light. *Children Hugging*, *Children (seen from my window)* and *Lonny Scoggings and his horse Blazer* explore minimalist shapes through a mode of circular cropping. The collages encompassed in the *Ithaca Series* from 1977 challenge the tangible boundaries of dimension which is revisited later in *Antananarivo and Gainsborough* or *Artemesia's "Suzanna"* and *Men Conspiring* from the early 2000s to further propose new ways of thinking about photography as a conceptual art medium. Excerpts from her 2008 memoir *Being in Pictures* are dispersed on placards throughout the exhibition to promote a deeper engagement with the work and confirm the essential role that story-telling plays in her practice.

Children (seen from my window above), West Oakland



Julia



Shadow: Cup and Coffee Pot

Her reflections about the photographs reveal more about the particular moments in time, including details about how she became a professor at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor, than they do about her thought processes as an artist. Regardless, the inventiveness of her decision-making continues to harness trends that allow her to bridge the gap between fine art and photography without compromising her position as an anomalous observer whose adaptive qualities illuminate the shadows and gild the mundane.

Joanne Leonard at Belle Isle Viewing Room opened on November 4 and will be on view until December 9, 2023. It is the galley's final exhibition.

You can learn more about this exhibition as well as previous shows that took place at Belle Isle Viewing Room here: <https://www.belleisleviewingroom.com/>



Artemesia's "Suzanna" and Men Conspiring

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