

Portrait Untaken

by

Kelsy Chauvin

Kelsy Chauvin  
Brooklyn, NY  
(917) 548-6466  
kchauvin@nyc.rr.com

WGAE registered

BERENICE  
My work reflects the city as it is.

STIEGLITZ  
Portraiture of New York City!

BERENICE  
In a sense.

STIEGLITZ  
I tried that once. And do you know  
what I came up with? A series of  
images capturing other people's work.  
Namely, architects'.

The men are amused again.

BERENICE  
The city is one gigantic subject for  
a photograph that needs to be taken.  
(pause)  
The camera can catch the city's swift  
surfaces better than other forms.  
And even better--it is intelligible  
to everybody.

STIEGLITZ  
But to document the city--simply to  
put it on film--is *not* to breathe  
new life into it. Is that art?  
Documentation?

BERENICE  
It is a medium that can supply several  
perspectives of the same document.  
Art is labeled by the beholder.

INT. MAN RAY'S STUDIO, 1926

MOS - Man Ray is taking portraits of various people, most of them women he has posed and made to look like pretty objects. Berenice is helping set up, printing, etc. He's clearly pleased with her work.

MOS - Berenice takes a few portraits of various people and prints them herself. Among them are Jean Cocteau (one a close-up of his hands; one with hat and pistol), Djuna Barnes, MARIE LAURENCIN, and JAMES JOYCE (with eye patch). She is skilled and diligent.

INT. MAN RAY'S STUDIO, 1926 -- DAY

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM (27) enters carrying her small lap dog. She is clearly wealthy, well-dressed and elegant. Man Ray is huddled over a desk reviewing contact sheets.

PEGGY

Manny?

MAN RAY

Peggy!

He gets up and greets her.

MAN RAY (CONT'D)

What a nice surprise! Have you come for a catch-up?

Berenice joins them from the dark room.

PEGGY

Ah, no.

(nods at Berenice)

I'm here for a portrait!

Man Ray looks at each of them.

MAN RAY

You mean...

He processes this.

PEGGY

Ms. Abbott's reputation as one of Paris's rising stars of portraiture precedes her, and I decided that it is time to experience it first hand.

Berenice demurely looks at Man Ray, whose temper is beginning to show.

MAN RAY

Peggy, if you wish to have your portrait made, you know you can rely on me.

PEGGY

How kind of you, Manny.

(pause)

But I am here for Ms. Abbott.

He manages to bite his tongue.



INT. SMALL NEW YORK APARTMENT, OCTOBER 28, 1929 -- DAY

Berenice is finally unpacked, though her suitcases, photo equipment, and other belongings barely fit into the cramped apartment. She sits on her bed (the only piece of furniture where there is room), sighs and looks around. She sees her handheld camera on her nightstand and picks it up, looks at it for a moment, then stands, grabs her coat and leaves.

EXT. SW CORNER OF CENTRAL PARK -- MOMENTS LATER

Berenice passes a newsstand at the corner of the park. A PAPERBOY (12) is holding a stack of papers and excitedly shouting.

PAPERBOY

Biggest crash the market's ever seen!  
Stock Exchange tumbles! Read all  
about it!

Berenice picks up a paper and examines the headline of the *New York Times*:

INSERT: "PRICES OF STOCKS CRASH IN HEAVY LIQUIDATION, TOTAL DROP OF BILLIONS / PAPER LOSS \$4,000,000,000 / 2,600,000 Shares Sold in the Final Hour in Record Decline / MANY ACCOUNTS WIPED OUT"

PAPERBOY (CONT'D)

Billions of dollars lost!  
(to Berenice)  
Sure glad I ain't playing the market  
yet, right lady?  
(shouting to public)  
Wall Street in ruins! Read all about  
it!

She tosses the paper back down, gazes out, then closes her eyes in pain.

INT. BLACK SPACE

A white ball bounces across a table in a pitch-black room.

INSERT: BOUNCING GOLF BALL PHOTOGRAPH, WITH CARD:

"Multiple Exposure of Bouncing Golf Ball, circa 1940"

FADE OUT

INSERT CARD: "III"

FADE IN

INT. BERENICE'S SMALL NYC STUDIO, 1930 -- DAY

Berenice (32) is setting up her camera on a tripod in the close quarters of her New York portrait studio. It's packed with full shelves, boxes, equipment, and of course the Atget prints. Edna St. Vincent Millay (38) is seated across from Berenice, slightly fidgeting with her feet.

VINCENT

I don't know how I've let you talk me into this again.

BERENICE

Nonsense. It's common sense that an author of your stature should have her portrait taken. So much the better that it can be done by such a professional as myself. I studied in Paris you know.

VINCENT

(in French accent)

But of course, Madam Abbott!

(normal)

It makes me nervous nonetheless.

Berenice chuckles as she adjusts a light and camera setting.

BERENICE

Besides, you're doing me a favor. Portraiture in 1930 is not the most lucrative business.

VINCENT

Nor is poetry.

(pause)

And what is your price again, madam?

BERENICE

(pausing to look at her)

Lunch at the Automat?

They laugh.

VINCENT

I do wish I had the money of some of your Parisian patrons.

BERENICE

So do I! Not everyone can be Bryher and Peggy, of course.