

moniquemeloche

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Slate

A Photographer's Response to the Lack of Women in Our Literary Canon

By David Rosenberg



Left: Sarah reading Zora Neale Hurston (*Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-Tales from the Gulf States*, pub. 2001).

Right: Vicky reading Gloria Fuertes (*Historia de Gloria: Amor, Humor and Desamor Letras Hispanicas*, 1983).

Carrie Schneider courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

One might almost feel the need to whisper while talking about **Carrie Schneider's** portraits of women reading, but, to Schneider, the inspiration behind the photographs is something worth screaming about.

Throughout her life, Schneider has been keenly aware of the lack of women represented in the canonization of art and literature, a point raised in Linda Nochlin's 1971 historical text "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Motivated by that work, as well as through discussions with friends and colleagues and a criticism published on **Slate** about lopsided coverage of major book reviews, Schneider wanted to work on a series that spoke to this discrepancy.

"Representing women friends, many of them artists, writers, and musicians reading women authors sought to undermine this dominant cultural narrative," Schneider wrote via email about

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her series. Beginning in 2012 and continuing through 2014, Schneider photographed 100 women reading other women's work in their homes. She calls the series "**Reading Women.**"

Schneider said the manner in which she chose to create the work was "key" for the project. She asked friends who were artists (including writers, visual artists, and musicians) and who lived in New York to sit silently while reading a book of their choice in their home or studio for a couple of hours. While they were occupied, she took their portraits, often near a window, not only for the historical motif (she cites Vermeer as an example) but also a practical choice since she elected to use film ("nothing like the way color film captures light!") and wanted to adhere to a more natural look without the use of artificial lighting.

She used long portrait lenses to keep a distance so not to disturb them and said the longer duration of time spent with them helped to create more relaxed, natural portraits.

"There is something rare about the depth of concentration that can be experienced while reading, and these are the moments I'm after: where the woman becomes immersed in her text, and begins to lose awareness of the camera, and a pose," she wrote. "The history of representing women is so fraught. Representing each woman doing something intellectual, of their own volition, in their own self-defined space was my starting point, as an attempt to do the woman justice in the portrait."

Schneider said that although the images have been staged for the camera, it is important to her that the events actually took place. She titles each portrait after the sitter, the author of the book they are reading, its title, and the publication year. Altogether the information "provides the important context I was seeking, and cumulatively, the 100 portraits create an archive revealing a constellation of influences and knowledge among my creative peers."

In a way, it's also a reminder to slow down and allows the viewer to take in a part of life that still feels relevant even as technology moves toward alternative ways of reading books.

"We are entering the era of the end of the printed page!" she wrote. "I think there is something physical, visceral about reading a book that is unlike anything else. And again, there is something rare about the depth of concentration that can be experienced while reading. Living in a culture obsessed with speed, 'progress,' consumption—these moments of pure immersion, belied by stillness, are rare, political, and powerful."

"Reading Women" is on view at **California Museum of Photography** through March 7.