



# PHOTOGRAPHY

MOMA'S 'DOMESTIC COMFORT' CAPTURES A THREATENED HABITAT.

**E**VER SINCE THE END OF THE FIFTIES, WHEN ROBERT Frank discovered that Americans were not universally happy, serious photographers have been trying to take the country's pulse. In the sixties and seventies, they recorded our public demeanor as we hurried to work or staged demonstrations; in the seventies and eighties, they documented the media myths that shaped our lives. Now Peter Galassi, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, points out that in the past decade photographers rather suddenly began to focus on the home as well: *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* (September 26 to December 31) brings together more than 150 images of how things are going in the place where the heart is.

There's no end of dailiness on view, no moment from window washing to afternoon snoozing too trivial to have meaning. Household portraits and narratives, some jolly, some not, report quiet events on the home front—no prodigal sons returning, no child abuse or wife battering. Instead we have Lee Friedlander's picture of a girl playing a trombone while a mountainous dog listens closely (Friedlander has referred to this as his answer to the RCA logo); Larry Fink's photograph of a family posing with such energetic goodwill, they just might march out of the frame and hug us till it hurts; Philip-Lorca diCorcia's man looking into a refrigerator where he appears to recognize his fate in the vegetable bin.

Some of the pictures reenact the dress rehearsals of life. Nicholas Nixon's young boy and girl obligingly fall into admirable compositions as they practice being children. The twelve-year-old girls who sit for Sally Mann range from sultry and sullen to overweight and awkward; Doug Dubois's brother examines his acne in a mirror. Geoffrey Biddle pictures a family in a tub, the baby girl sitting between her mother's parted legs; five years later, the same little girl, fully clothed, squats on the floor with a doll posed at her crotch.

Although most of the photographs are straight observation,

even the constructed tableaux pretend to be domestic. Laurie Simmons's two sleek plastic ladies glide through a shelter magazine's dream living room. In Ken Botto's toy world, a tank diligently guards suburbia. Gregory Crewdson's kitchen-window view on an artificial garden would do David Lynch proud.

The general idea of home is the old-fashioned notion; only a few photographs hint at the changes that have recently overtaken domestic life. Sage Sohier's "Gordon and Jim, with Gordon's Mother Margot" shows Gordon hugging his mother while holding hands with Jim. Carrie Mae Weems's couple eye each other with a mix of sexual bravado and caution. Mary Berridge catches a teenage mother gazing suspiciously at her child.

During the eighties, many photographers seemed to find home life fraught with tiny terrors. Lots of the folks in these pictures neither pay much attention to their companions nor trust them, and household incidents quietly bode ill: William Eggleston's gaping stove might be waiting for the cook to lay her head in it; Mary Frey's housewife looks up from her dustpan above the deliciously implausible caption "She quickened with the realization that things would never be the same."

Apparently, the moment the homeless rolled out onto the streets, the art photographers went home. Why, when they'd gone elsewhere for so long? Partly because photography-school graduates of the past two decades now have families; partly because many people have retreated into private life in disgust with the public alternatives. Besides, life on the streets is so dismaying it cries out for social commitment rather than art.

But surely the major reason is that domestic arrangements are so tenuous and the family so fragile today. Like environmentally concerned photographers, the men and women here are moved to record a threatened habitat. Some members of our species have more home and family in their albums than in their lives; it may be that you can't go home again, but there's always the consolation of photographs.

VICKI GOLDBERG

## FALL PREVIEW