

NEWS FEATURES OPINIONS ARTS SPORTS MULTIMEDIA BLOGS SEND A LETTER MASTHEAD JOIN OUR STAFF ADVERTISE CONTACT

14 hours ago

FEATURES» [In Memoriam: Officer Betty Francis](#) 14 hours ago

Thursday, January 27, 2011



Loeb opens with photography exhibition of contemporary Vassar

New photography offers outside perspectives on Vassar

By [Rachael Borné](#)

Arts Editor

Published: Wednesday, January 26, 2011

Updated: Wednesday, January 26, 2011 17:01

In the wake of its grand reopening exactly one week ago, Vassar's Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center will celebrate its freshly renovated space by hosting a contemporary photography exhibition entitled 150 Years Later: New Photography by Tina Barney, Tim Davis and Katherine Newbegin that will open tonight from 5 to 9 p.m. In short, the photographers were asked to capture Vassar. After that, they were each granted complete creative license and freedom to depict the campus with whatever sensibility, style and perspective they saw fit.

In her 'prompt' to the three photographers, Emily Hargroves Fisher '57 and Richard B. Fisher Curator Mary-Kay Lombino explained: "There's nothing that you can't do; we're not going to reject any of your photographs."

Lombino thought of the idea for the exhibition in conjunction with the many sesquicentennial festivities in our midst. "I thought it would be nice to celebrate the 150 years of our history by looking at today and making a sort of comparison of past and present," she explained. The total open-endedness of Lombino's assignment made way for three entirely different perspectives on Vassar's environment, people and culture. Not only are the photos highly varied in their content, but they also totally deviate from traditional photographs of the campus. No archetypal images of Vassar's majestic historic architecture nor photos showcasing our trimmed and tailored arboretum will grace the walls of this exhibition.

Instead, the photographs document hidden places almost unrecognizable as Vassar and aspects of campus life often taken for granted, and also capture the nuances of our school's unique and eclectic culture in an intimate and refreshing way.

Davis, the Visiting Assistant Professor of Photography at Bard College, chose move-out day as the subject of his photographs. Because Vassar is commonly perceived as a pristine and well-kept collegiate institution by outsiders, Davis took this opportunity to contest the public eye by taking images of the campus in a state of disarray.

Of his work, Davis said, "I often find myself only able to make art when I work against the purposes or design or essence of a place," adding, "That's how I find something to say, and I've always noticed that move-out day is a day of derangement on any college campus." The juxtaposition of Vassar's idyllic landscape and ornate structures with overturned furniture, messy piles of mismatched belongings and random giveaways is what really complicates Davis' snapshots.

He sees the medium of photography as a powerful social tool, one capable of altering judgments and challenging assumptions. "Photography is there to add complexity to the way we understand the world." Through his work in this exhibition, Davis questions popular notions of life at what he refers to as "the Platonic ideal of east coast private college campuses."



Juliana Halpert/The Miscellany News

Above, members of the Vassar community celebrate the reopening of the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, which will host a contemporary photography exhibition beginning tonight.

Newbegin's photographs explore areas of the campus most students have never seen and likely never knew existed. Newbegin has distant ties to the school, as both her older brothers attended Vassar in the late 80s and early 90s. Any reminiscent view of the campus was quickly cast aside, however, as she instantly became interested in tracking down what she refers to as "hidden spaces."

"It took several visits to Vassar before I was able to finally get under the skin and discover the stranger spaces with the history that I was looking for," she explained. An individual who quite literally unlocked the opportunity for Newbegin's uninhibited exploration was Mike Bernard, Vassar's generous "key master," the holder of every key to every room in every building. This unlimited access gave Newbegin a special look into the unfrequented and seemingly abandoned areas of the school.

"I think at some ineffable level, the hidden areas interested me because I wanted to unearth parts of Vassar that are not known to the students who live there everyday, but mostly I was curious to see what I could find," she said. Similar to Davis' interest in the dialogue between the arranged and deranged, Newbegin found herself attracted to the split between empty spaces and those hustling with life.

She explained, "As the project evolved, I realized I was more and more compelled by the dichotomy of the energetic world of the students on the surface, and what existed below that, the silent world of the basements and attics."

The works of Barney deal more closely with the human element of the College. Guided by a Vassar student, Barney ventured into dorm rooms, classrooms, art studios and the athletic facilities to get a closer look at the settings and characters at play. Though her photographs directly confront the lives of students behind closed doors in the seemingly private realm, they showcase a general contentment and camaraderie more than they uncover or disclose. "The dorm photos that I did, which I love, are very sweet and I didn't feel as though I was intruding on anybody's privacy or revealing anything private at all," she said.

Barney did, however, consider the high level of properness, saying, "I was thinking that maybe I could come there at two or three in the morning on a Saturday night and see an entirely different scene, but I'm not a voyeuristic type of photographer. That's just not something that interests me." This observation serves as a testament to the entire exhibition's nature—when given such freedom, photographers are able to see very different versions of the same place.

There was one consistent feeling Barney mentioned throughout all of her trips to Vassar, though, and that was the camaraderie and agreement: "I was pleasantly pleased by the harmony; everyone seemed incredibly happy that I met," she said, adding, "And I do think there is a very intimate kind of close feeling among the students. I felt as if I really understood the group that I was photographing."

Perhaps the best part of such an assorted group of photographs is the fact that there is something for everyone. Students will likely respond to the works with an inside-joke like chuckle, whereas parents, professors and visitors, as Lombino put it, "might be surprised when they see the things they don't know happen on campus, but are definitely aspects of the lifestyle here."

On view from Jan. 28 to Mar. 27.