Brattleboro Museum & Art Center launches statewide tour of photographs by Dona Ann McAdams

“Performative Acts” covers four decades of work by acclaimed artist and activist

Photos available for download:
- Dona Ann McAdams, “Madrid, 1988” silver gelatin photograph, 8 x 12 inches, courtesy of the artist
- Dona Ann McAdams, “Lori E. Seid assists Ethyl Eichelberger, PS122, NYC, 1987” silver gelatin photograph, 9 x 6 inches, courtesy of the artist

BRATTLEBORO, Vt. — Photographer Dona Ann McAdams first met civil rights icon Harvey Milk when he was the owner of Castro Camera. McAdams had run out of film while shooting in a nearby park and stopped into Milk’s store for a roll of Tri-X. “I was 21 at the time and attending classes at the San Francisco Art Institute, lucky enough to have teachers like Hank Wessel and Dennis Hearne and Gary Winogrand,” McAdams said. “They taught me how to make a good photograph—how to make art—but Harvey Milk taught me how to use that art to encourage social change. Ever since those days in San Francisco, the artistic and the political have been inseparable for me.”

This year and next, “Dona Ann McAdams: Performative Acts,” a major retrospective of the photographer’s work, will be on view at venues around Vermont, beginning at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center (BMAC), where it opens on June 22. Curated by John Killacky, the exhibit features dozens of black and white photographs of activism, performance art, farm animals, and more, spanning McAdams’ oeuvre from across the past four decades.

Killacky first encountered McAdams in the 1980s, when she was the house photographer at P.S. 122 (now Performance Space New York), an avant-garde performance venue where McAdams took photos for 23 years. The two got to know each other better in the early 1990s during the national controversy over the “NEA Four,” performance artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller.

As a curator at the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis, Killacky had presented the work of Finley and several other artists who became, in his words, “a lightning rod for malicious conservative outrage.” McAdams had photographed all four of the artists, and her image of Finley, popularly known as “the chocolate-smeared woman,” was brandished by then-Senator
Jesse Helms as evidence that the NEA was funding “indecent” art.

“That’s how we got to be friends,” McAdams said of Killacky.

Both McAdams and Killacky later ended up in Vermont—McAdams on a goat farm in Sandgate where she and her husband, writer Brad Kessler, have lived since 1998; and Killacky at the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts in Burlington, where he was executive director from 2010 to 2018. After stepping down from his role at the Flynn, Killacky approached McAdams about curating an exhibit of her work that would tour Vermont, starting in Brattleboro.

“My first time at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center was during the Roz Chast exhibit,” said McAdams. “I was very moved to see illustration treated with such respect, as an art equal to all other arts.” McAdams visited BMAC again to view “If she has a pulse, she has a chance,” a recent exhibit of Michael Poster’s photographs of people in recovery from addiction. “A museum that will do this is okay with me,” she said. “I’m excited to be part of anything BMAC presents. It’s community, it’s political, it’s art on the highest level.”

“When the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center gave me the opportunity to curate this exhibition,” Killacky said, “I was thrilled to work with McAdams again, to visit her farm and studio and select a sampling of her resplendent black and white images. She continues to shoot film with her Leica and print her own work in an analog darkroom, work that is of its time but timeless.”

“Performative Acts” includes images of P.S. 122 performances, as well as McAdams’ photos of anti-nuclear, pro-choice, war protest, feminist, queer liberation, and AIDS activism protests over the years.

In the book “We Are Everywhere: Protest, Power, and Pride in the History of Queer Liberation,” Matthew Riemer and Leighton Brown wrote, “There have always been photographers who capture the work of those involved in organized resistance, but there are very few activists who use photography to record the struggle. Dona’s photography exudes a familiarity—a brief respite from the pressures of life, a hand over a heart, a subtle grin in the middle of a warzone—because Dona is among, of, and with those she photographs.”

Also included in “Performative Acts” are McAdams’ photographs of nuns from St. Mary’s Convent, backstretch workers at a Saratoga Springs race track, portraits of people with mental illness who participated in an art workshop that McAdams ran for 14 years on Coney Island, and working farm animals, including Lou and Bill, a pair of oxen at Green Mountain College whose planned euthanasia became a national news story in 2012.

“It has been a joy working with Killacky and McAdams to illuminate the scope of McAdams’ photography,” said BMAC Director Danny Lichtenfeld. “The work is incisive, uncompromising, and forthright, just like the artist herself. Yet it is also meticulously crafted and suffused with empathy, especially for those who inhabit the margins of mainstream society.”
In conjunction with “Performative Acts,” BMAC will present a series of related events, including a talk by McAdams (July 16); a guided tour of the exhibit with McAdams and Killacky (August 13); a talk by Riemer and Brown about their book “We Are Everywhere: Protest, Power, and Pride in the History of Queer Liberation” (September 7); a discussion about the new generation of Vermont artist-farmers with McAdams, Kessler, and four other Vermont artists and goat farmers (September 12); and a look at four decades of queer history in Vermont (September 20), presented in partnership with the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont and Out in the Open (formerly Green Mountain Crossroads) and sponsored by the Samara Fund of the Vermont Community Foundation.

After showing at BMAC from June 22 through September 23, “Performative Acts” will tour Vermont through November 2020, with exhibits at Castleton University’s Bank Gallery in Rutland, Catamount Arts in St. Johnsbury, Helen Day Art Center in Stowe, and the Amy E. Tarrant Gallery at the Flynn in Burlington.

“Dona Ann McAdams: Performative Acts” was made possible by a generous gift from Molly Davies and the James E. Robinson Foundation. The accompanying 60-page exhibition catalogue was supported in part by the Vermont Humanities Council.

Founded in 1972, the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center presents rotating exhibits of contemporary art, complemented by lectures, artist talks, film screenings, and other public programs. The Museum’s galleries and gift shop are open every day except Tuesday, 11-5. Regular admission is $8 for adults, $6 for seniors, and $4 for students. Members and children 18 and under are admitted free of charge. Located in historic Union Station in downtown Brattleboro, at the intersection of Main Street and Routes 119 and 142, the Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information, call 802-257-0124 or visit www.brattleboromuseum.org.

Major support for BMAC is provided by its members and Allen Bros. Oil, Brattleboro Savings & Loan, C&S Wholesale Grocers, the Four Columns Inn, Sam’s Outdoor Outfitters, and Whetstone Station Restaurant & Brewery.

# # #