



Parting Shots

By Michael Paglia, Thursday, August 24, 2000

It was a couple of years ago that Jane Fudge, at the time an assistant curator at the Denver Art Museum, came up with the idea for *Colorado Masters of Photography*, the exhibit currently on display in the Merage Gallery on the DAM's first floor. But the show, which is more interesting than impressive, was overshadowed on the eve of its June opening by the news that Fudge, after more than ten years of serving in various capacities at the museum, not only was leaving, but was being pushed out the door early.

Here's what happened.

Last summer, Fudge's elderly mother, who was living in a nearby nursing home, died after a long illness. Then, in a perverse twist of fate, Jane's husband, John Fudge, a respected Colorado painter, died unexpectedly just a few weeks later of a massive heart attack. Fudge dealt with her tremendous grief by throwing herself into her work. But she decided last winter to move to Portland to join her daughter and her family. "I always regretted that I couldn't get my mother to move here until she was quite old and it was too late for us to enjoy each other," says Fudge. "I didn't want to make the same mistake with my own daughter."

Always the straight arrow, Fudge dutifully informed the DAM in January that she intended to leave on June 15, just a week after the opening of *Colorado Masters*. In retrospect, she should have just given them two weeks' notice.

Everything went on normally for a while: Fudge carried out her duties and was always ready to aid the museum and promote her department, to which she was fiercely loyal. (She wouldn't allow anyone -- including the likes of me -- to criticize the department or its policies in her presence. Not, at least, without a rousing defense.) She was always ready to give walk-throughs to students, the press and other interested groups. And her scholarship was consistently outstanding.

But in early April, she was mysteriously summoned to the office of the DAM's deputy director, Joan Troccoli. "This was weird," says Fudge. "Joan and I spoke all the time, and suddenly I was called to her office. I had no idea why -- which was also strange, since ordinarily, the topic of a museum meeting would be known to the participants before hand.

"I got to Joan's office earlier than she did, and I was sitting there waiting for her," Fudge continues, "and she pops her head in the door and says she's going to get a drink of water first. And then when she does come in, she starts watering her plants. Poor Joan, she obviously didn't want to do what she'd been told to do. She even avoided looking at me. Finally she told me what was up -- the museum wanted me to leave not in two months, as I had requested, but as soon as possible." Fudge was shocked. "I couldn't imagine what I'd done to deserve being treated this way. Couldn't they have waited? They knew I was leaving soon anyway."

No explanation was given, either by Troccoli or, later, by DAM director Lewis Sharp. But Fudge believes it was her boss, Dianne Vanderlip, who made the decision.

The powers that be at the DAM are closemouthed about the situation, and they say they are concerned that media interest in Fudge's leaving might cast negative aspersions on her, which would

harm her chances for future employment. But the truth is, it isn't Fudge who needs to worry about looking bad in this story. It's the DAM that's been soiled by this sordid mess.

The museum's administration has made it clear to me -- by phone, fax and in person -- that Fudge wasn't fired. And they're absolutely right. She was paid her full salary through June 15, the date she herself had chosen for her departure. She was also given a generous bonus on her retirement.

But just as she was bringing *Colorado Masters* to fruition, Fudge was tossed out of her office, losing access to the museum's computers and other office equipment, and she was ultimately forced by these circumstances to give up on the show itself, handing final arrangements over to Blake Milteer, the department's newly hired special-projects assistant, who had previously served as Fudge's intern.

Unfortunately, the show has some problems, not all of which can be blamed on Fudge's early departure.

For instance, it lacks a Rocky Mountain flavor, since Fudge decided to disconnect the show from Colorado as a place. I think that was a mistake and would rather have seen Colorado as the subject of these local talents. But according to associate curator Nancy Tieken, who helped Milteer install the show, "Jane intentionally chose photos taken outside of Colorado, because she didn't want the show to be dominated by the local landscape."

Although I disagree with it, the move is typical of Fudge, who has always explored a wide range of expressions as opposed to establishing a tight central theme.

Another problem, which can't be blamed on anyone, is that two of the four photographers -- Fudge selected Myron Wood of Colorado Springs and Ferenc Berko of Aspen -- died within months of one another, after plans for *Colorado Masters* were well under way. Fudge had intended the show to highlight living artists only.

The last problem is the nearly total lack of biographical material concerning the four featured photographers: Wood, Berko, Crestone's Mary Alice Johnston and Denver's own Hal Gould. Had Fudge remained at her post, surely this would not have happened. We're hard-pressed to blame Milteer and Tieken, however, since they took over at the very last minute and presented a valiant effort despite the circumstances.

Of the four artists, Wood is probably the most famous. Born in Oklahoma in 1921, he was fascinated with New Mexico and southern Colorado. He spent nearly sixty years photographing the Taos Pueblo, the chapels of the Penitente Brotherhood, farms, ranches and small towns, as well as the inhabitants of each place. He is best known for his studies of Georgia O'Keeffe and her adobe homes and studios in Abiquiu and in Ghost Ranch, done between 1979 and 1981. Several of these have been included in the show at the DAM.

In a single page of information that accompanies the show, Tieken has written that Wood was interested in "precise composition" and that he had an eye for "romantic detail" -- a combination of attributes that is shown off in "Taos Pueblo," a gelatin silver print from 1961. The cubistic composition of the pueblo, exaggerated by the bright, sunlit portions contrasting with places in deep shadows, fills the picture from one side to the other. Standing inconspicuously on a parapet is a draped female figure. Other beautiful signature Wood photos include "Elder, San Francisco Church, Ranchos de Taos," from 1964, and "Penitente Morada," from 1978.

Wood's photos fill the entire wall and then wrap around the corner. The rest of this adjacent wall is devoted to Johnston's photos, many of which were taken in Paris, where she lived from 1950 to 1958, and during her travels around the world. Johnston, who was born in Michigan in 1921, was inspired by French street photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, and, like his work, hers has a lyrical and intimate character. Especially charming are her photos of children playing at the beach, such as "Ballet," a gelatin silver print from 1968, and "The Sandman Cometh," a color photograph from 1978.

Europe is also the locale for many of the Berko photos. Berko was born in Hungary in 1916 and came to this country to flee the Nazis. In Chicago in 1949, he was hired by the late philanthropist-industrialist Walter Paepcke to record the cultural life in Aspen that Paepcke created. But here again, Fudge left out these photos in favor of Berko's work from his trip into exile and, later, his Mexican vacations.

Berko was a rare example of a post-war photographer who was interested in color, and he was a pioneer in the use of color in fine-art photography, as seen in the sumptuous dye-transfer print "Chicago," a 1948 shot of a serpentine staircase. Also striking is 1952's "Poster Series," another dye-transfer print, this one depicting the peeling image of a clown.

Last up is Gould, who was born in Wyoming in 1920 and was a commercial photographer for thirty years before becoming a curator and gallery director, first for the Colorado Photographic Arts Center and then for his Camera Obscura Gallery, just across the street from the DAM.

"Penguin Hallelujah Chorus," a gelatin silver print set in Antarctica, is an example of his most recent work; it was done earlier this year. There's also one of Gould's photos of bristlecones, "The Wild One," from 1991, and one Western landscape, "Bent's Fort," from 1996. Both are gelatin silver prints.

Really out of the ordinary is "Vino: 'Hal-o-gram,'" from 1985, a gelatin silver photogram in which Gould laid metal corkscrews and wine-bottle openers on the photo-sensitive paper.

More than most people associated with the DAM, Jane Fudge had a high profile in the local art world. I've often thought of her as the museum's ambassador to Denver. That's what made the unpleasantness surrounding her leaving such a public-relations error on the part of the museum. Too bad, because whether they like it or not, it's the summer's biggest art story.