

**Permanent Collection work:**

**Imogen Cunningham**  
***Pregnant Woman, 1959***  
**gelatin silver print**  
**Helen Johnston Bequest, Focus Gallery Collection**  
**6.26.1989**

**Essay written by student, Lindsey Wylie, Spring 2001**

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### **Imogen Cunningham: *Pregnant Woman***

*"You might say I invented the nude."*  
- Imogen Cunningham

Though today's society is replete with images of the nude figure, when Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976) first confronted the theme, such imagery was far from commonplace. Society was emerging from the Victorian era and was still largely marked by its conservative attitudes. Cunningham, however, was not deterred by these reservations. Propelled by her free spirit, her fascination with the human body, and her love of portraiture, she pursued the theme throughout her career.

Though Cunningham once told Dorothea Lange that she would photograph anything that could be exposed to light, her works most pointedly centered on portraiture.<sup>1</sup> For her, portraiture was not limited to images of human faces. She stretched the idea, creating portraits out of plants, faces, and all aspects of the human body. Characterized by her ability to connect with her subject and to choose the "right" moment

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<sup>1</sup> Margery Mann. Imogen Cunningham: Photographs. Introduction. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970) np.

to take the photograph, Cunningham's works capture the personalities of her subjects in a fascinating and memorable way.

Along with Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, John Paul Edwards, Sonia Noskowiak, Willard Van Dyke, and Henry F. Swift, Cunningham was a member of the West Coast photographic society Group f/64. Dedicated to the promotion of photography as art, many of the members of f/64 made works in the tradition of purism. They shot photographs of clearly defined images using a lens opening of f/64, which provided the most precise resolution and depth of field. Following the f/64 tradition, much of Cunningham's work is characterized by this realist presentation, but unlike her contemporaries, she never fully abandoned the romantic style that had imbued her early works. Cunningham did not dedicate herself to one method, but rather experimented, using whichever style she felt was most effective.

Taken in 1959, *Pregnant Woman* is a quintessential example of Cunningham's work. Here, she has ever so slightly altered the tradition of portraiture, presenting the model's breasts and stomach as a representation of self rather than her face. The image also is an example of Cunningham's variety of style. The body of the woman is shown in sharp focus, revealing minute details ranging from the coarseness of her hair to the texture of her skin. However, in contrast to the precision of the foreground, the background is obscured, creating a foggy atmosphere, with subtle organic shadows, that are reminiscent of her more romantic pieces.

The subject, too, is representative of a significant portion of her work, as the nude was a theme that she touched upon continually. In portraying the nude figure so unabashedly, Cunningham sought to explore its beauty and its significance as a natural

representation of the self. Many of her contemporary critics were unable to make the distinction between vulgarity and beauty, but Cunningham continued to pursue the subject in an attempt to elevate photography to the status of art, which has featured nudes for centuries.

Though nudes were included in her portfolio from the beginning (starting in 1906 with a self-portrait) it was not until 1946 that she introduced the body of a pregnant woman, which was an unusual image to show at this time in American culture. Throughout the 1950s, Cunningham repeatedly examined the pregnant body, creating beautiful images that addressed women's issues through visual representation. In *Pregnant Woman*, for example, the focus placed on the woman's pregnant belly and full breasts reiterates the importance of childbirth, and the human, especially female, lifecycle. In portraying her model, Merry Renk, without clothes, Cunningham also emphasizes the naturalness of nudity – we are born without clothes, die without clothes, and undress every day in between.

In addition, the manner in which Cunningham has cropped the work, isolating the torso of the woman, creates a composition of organic shapes that are reminiscent of plant photographs (some of her most well-known images) that she took during the 1920s. Though the image is recognizable as a pregnant belly, it can also be read more abstractly. Interpreting Renk's body as a landscape strengthens the image by equating it with nature.

Finally, though the photograph is obviously a presentation of Merry Renk, Cunningham's presence and personality is inherent in the work. A portrait is, after all, a transaction between that photographer and the sitter, and in the midst of the interchange each imbues the work with part of his/her personality. Thus, in shooting *Pregnant*

*Woman*, Cunningham exposes herself almost as fully as she does Merry Renk. The image reveals Cunningham's infatuation with the human body, her obstinacy and refusal to conform to conservative social norms, and her resistance to the marked photographic style of many of her contemporaries.

## Annotated Bibliography

**Conrad, Barnaby III. "Photography: An Interview with Imogen Cunningham." Art in America. (May/June 1977) 42-47.**

This is the last interview that Imogen Cunningham gave before her death in 1976. In the interview Cunningham and Conrad discuss multiple aspects of her life and photography, centering on her early life and her work as a portrait photographer. The article is useful as a first-hand account of her perspective on photography and portraiture.

**Hill, Paul and Thomas Joshua Cooper. "Homage to Imogen." Camera v. 54 no.10 (October 1975) 5- 44.**

Published shortly before her death, this article serves a verbal retrospective of Cunningham's life. It includes two interviews, one by Tom Cooper and Paul Hill, the other by Judy Dater and Diane Wiseman. The interviews address a number of topics, including her life experiences and her attitudes towards photography. Aside from being useful as a primary source, the article also includes a chronology of Cunningham's life and a list of photographers whose lives overlapped with hers, thus creating a historical perspective.

**Lorenz, Richard. Imogen Cunningham: On the Body. Introduction. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1998.**

This is the most useful source for this particular project because it is the only one that addresses Cunningham's exploration of the nude. It also references *Pregnant Woman*, providing an interpretation that places the work within the larger context of her nude studies.

**Mann, Margery. Imogen Cunningham: Photographs. Introduction. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970.**

As the opening essay to an exhibition catalogue of Cunningham's work, this piece provides biographical information as well as interpretive information on her photographic style. The essay largely focuses on her traditional portrait photography, but also enabled me to gain an understanding of her more non-traditional portraits.

**Mann, Margery. Imogen Cunningham: Photographs, 1910-1973. Introduction. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974.**

Similar to the other essay by Margery Mann, this writing is the opening to an exhibition catalogue. Though in many ways it is a shortened version of the above entry, some of the information is different. The essay is primarily a source of biographical information.

## Bibliography

- Conrad, Barnaby III. "Photography: An Interview with Imogen Cunningham." Art in America. (May/June 1977) 42-47.
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- Lorenz, Richard. Imogen Cunningham: On the Body. Introduction. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1998.
- Mann, Margery. Imogen Cunningham: Photographs. Introduction. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970.
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