

P R E T T Y

Donigan Cumming

R I B B O N S



EDITION STEMMLE

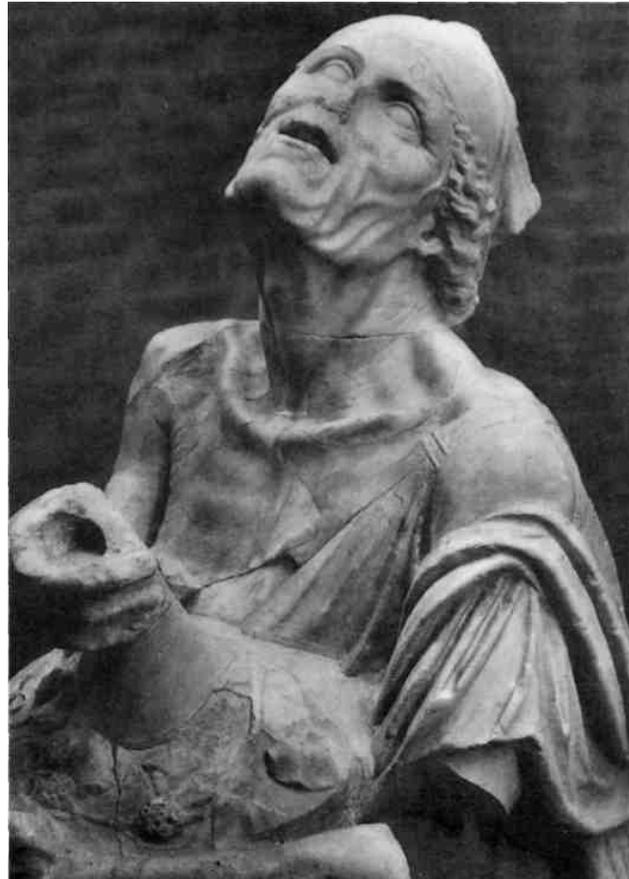
Hans-Michael Herzog
Serious Play: Donigan Cumming Photographs Nettie Harris
in *Pretty Ribbons* (Donigan Cumming) (Edition Stemmler, 1996)

Only rarely does Nettie look at the photographer, and even then her gazes pass through or beyond him. Her eyes are closed most of the time in an expression of mute devotion that has nothing to do with submissiveness. She seems fully collected, concentrated, totally at one with herself and content to accept her own existence. Nettie has no message to proclaim. Surely she knows that her body commands a more eloquent language than her tongue could ever speak.

Nettie carried the touchingly innocent, natural grace of a young girl with her into old age. Nevertheless, her posture, gestures and facial expressions remind us again and again how well aware she is of her staged self-depiction. After all, it was Nettie herself who struck the poses within the situations created by Donigan Cumming in his photographs. "As a film actress, her mannerisms and dramatic expressions can be disruptive. I have never tried to curb Nettie's urge to improvise since I discovered the compelling images in the spaces between her gestures and moods." (Cumming, 1990) "Pretty Ribbons" is concerned with her self-portrayal on her own stage, with her life itself. While she does act in these scenes, she does not play the part of an actress; instead she takes up in great earnest the various roles that make up her own person, remaining fully aware of the serious nature of her play. Conscious of the reality of her existence, she does not attempt to flee from it but rather to depict it. At the same time her staged playing counteracts the gravity of the situation, the serious side of her life.

The artist became acquainted with Nettie Harris in 1982. In the following years, she became his most important model. Her husband having died, her children grown, the former journalist sought work as a film actress. The two began to work together. Gradually, a sense of mutual respect took form and eventually grew to become a relationship of trust which provided the foundation for "Pretty Ribbons", the photo series presented here. The "pretty ribbons" are not to be taken literally; the viewer of these photographs will search for them in vain. Yet they may perhaps be found in the slowly developing ties of tenderness between the photographer and his model.

Nettie's physical and psychic presence is breathtaking. Her desolate corporeality nevertheless evokes hope. Desperation and com-forting security are united in one; vulnerability and triumphant strength stand side by side. Nettie's repertoire ranges from slapstick comedy and amusing irony to scurrilous and absurd situations and even to black humor and crude shock effects. There are only a very few pictures in the history of photography capable of etching themselves in the viewer's memory so deeply as that of Nettie standing with her panty hose hanging from mid-thigh in front of her open, full refrigerator (Page 31). Her laughter in this photograph is demoniacal, a grotesque grimace of exaltation. She plays out the aspect of crassness in the situation to the hilt. The tawdriness of ageing flesh, a senseless consumerist sellout and grinning, naked death form a united front that no viewer can possibly ignore.



III. 1: Drunken Old Woman
Roman copy based on an
original dated circa 190 B. C.
Paros marble, height: 92 cm,
Glyptothek, Munich

In contrast, relief is provided by a photo showing Nettie leaning, cheerful and relaxed - as if during a break in shooting - on the shoulder of a male model and smoking a cigarette in an attitude of apparent amusement with a hint of overconfidence, much like a young girl in the mood for fun (Page 59).

Again and again, the images of Nettie Harris speak of the grey areas of life, of severe exhaustion, of sleep, of weariness of life and of death. Some of the horizontal positions she assumes suggest both the comfort and security of the embryo and the soft approach of death at the same time. Nettie's body shown reclining in a fetal posture alludes to both a prenatal coming-to-life and prehistoric burial rites. Lying in the grass, her limbs extended (Page 85), her body converses privately with death, just as in the photograph showing her in the bathtub (Page 54) with a face reminiscent of a death mask. Nettie was aware of her latent proximity to death, and she never excluded it from her serious play. While the images of Nettie associated with death are dramatic and highly expressive, they are totally devoid of pathos. Their sheer immediacy prevents them from turning to kitsch.

Nettie's sexuality is a matter of interest as well, most notably in the photographs showing her together with male models who are usually nude. Not without a certain amount of vanity and coquettishness,

Nettie's body signals that she is aware of its sensual qualities and quite capable of putting them to use. These pictures are disturbing and shocking in a society which encloses sex in old age firmly in taboo and which is only now beginning to examine this issue, truly an everyday concern, in all of its social ramifications. Nettie's intense involvement with her own physical nature is a major theme in "Pretty Ribbons". Her spectrum extends from desperate attempts at humor to tragi-comical, clownish distortions and on to images of grace, beauty and tenderness. Again and again we are reminded of the close intimacy that underlay the relationship between Nettie Harris and Donigan Cumming and must certainly be regarded as a necessary precondition for the model's ability to open herself without reservation to her photographer. Much more intimate and subject to even stronger taboos than the exposure of her ageing, naked body, for example, is the scene showing Nettie holding her false teeth in front of her mouth, in a sense the ultimate proof of her trust in her male documentarian (Pages 40/41).

Merciless realism is also evident in the photograph showing both a spotlight that illuminates the scene and Nettie, cavorting like a spirit through the room (Page 26). Not only does this picture allude to the technical process of producing the photographs, it also emphasizes in an impressive manner the numerous trials and tribulations that process entails. The photographer's loving concern for his model is revealed in pictures such as that showing Nettie's head inclined to one side as if in sleep (Page 37). In another photo, where Nettie is seen putting her hair up, one has the impression that Donigan Cumming is (photographically) caressing the back of her neck (Page 46). The strong emotional bond is clearly evident in the color photograph showing the severely wrinkled area around Nettie's eyes, with its rays of wrinkles bursting forth triumphantly in every direction (Page 93). Here, Nettie's countless wrinkles and folds, features genera-



ly seen as ugly in the conventional view, are transformed effortlessly into an image full of inner beauty *and joie de vivre*. Thus the image of Nettie Harris is reflected in a countless variety of facets, all of which are captured in the abundant subtleties and nuances of "Pretty Ribbons". Nevertheless, the viewer gains an overall impression of Nettie Harris's psycho-physical condition, as one image above all - her own image - begins to crystallize in our minds, an image that, despite its many contradictions and its open-endedness, reveals this particular woman's being in an incredibly open, intense and immediate manner. It is an image full of inner, living beauty that is also experienced by the photographer, an image whose verisimilitude emphatically evokes consternation. False modesty, illusions and fictions cease to exist, having given way to a clarity of vision rarely found in the history of photography or elsewhere (Ills. 1 and 2). As important as the ambience of Nettie's home, her countless accessories and the male models may be to the individual pictorial creations, they appear secondary in themselves. Ultimately, these things fade from view in Nettie's presence, even though they play a major role in defining the circumstances of her life for us; her surroundings seem almost interchangeable with any others. She herself gives the impression that she has nothing at all to do with her familiar environment. In many of the photos she appears as if cut out and inserted as in a collage.



III. 3: Diane Arbus, Mexican Dwarf in his hotel room in N.Y.C., 1970
Photograph



III. 4: Nan Goldin, Greer in her Bathtub, New York, 1983
Photograph

Her strong personality seems to extrapolate on itself. It makes no difference at all whether she is lying amidst the chaos of countless distributed objects on her sofa at home or standing in a landscape. Wherever she is, she seems to have arrived there accidentally and only for a moment. She is and remains alone — with her photographer.

The photographer, on the other hand, remains

largely in the background. Like a good film director he develops his dramatic sequences, which occupy the viewer in such a way that he hardly takes notice of the author of the images as he contemplates the numerous impressions that present themselves. But despite their apparent spontaneity, Donigan Cumming's ingenious, aesthetically sophisticated pictorial compositions and his keen eye for material-tactile, sensual qualities, masterfully rendered through photography, are irresistibly captivating. A prime example is his treatment of skin, a material of central importance in "Pretty Ribbons."



III. 5: Nicholas Nixon, Catherine and Tom Moran, East Braintree, Massachusetts, 1987 Photograph

Images of extreme tautness and great symbolic power bear witness to the fact that it is he who knows how first to capture Nettie Harris's psychic being in pictures expressive of general truths and then to condense and intensify them. It is he who unites form and content, appearance and being (Pages 99 and 116). He did not disrupt Nettie's behavior with his photographic intervention in her life; instead he supported and encouraged her serious play, whose playfulness could switch to gravity at any given moment - much as it does in the absurd theater of Samuel Beckett. In none of these photographs does Donigan Cumming permit himself any judgment of Nettie Harris. This strengthens the documentary character of "Pretty Ribbons", which exists on an equal footing with the artistic quality of the series. Donigan Cumming set out in the early 1980s to counteract the decline and corruption of documentary photography and concerned himself programmatically with the issue in "Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography", one of his most important series of works. He has now accomplished a work of documentary representation in its purest sense. Such a fascinated and fascinating depiction of grotesque, scur-rilous and absurd situations may also be found in the work of Diane Arbus (111. 3). Donigan Cumming's photography, however, is less devoted to the exotic appeal of the freakish, which is in fact only one of the many aspects of his work. Nor is there any implication of an exploitive attitude in his work with Nettie; after all, "Pretty Ribbons" is the result of a gradual, sensitive approach towards intimacy with his model over a period of several years. Similar in their immediacy are Nan Goldin's emphatically journalistic photographs, which in comparison to Cumming's works seem much more situation-bound and snapshot-like (111. 4). Goldin does not stage her photographs.



III. 6: Ferdinand Hodler, Die sterbende Valentine Godé-Darel (Valentine Godé-Darel Approaching Death), right profile, 1915
Gouache, oil and charcoal on paper, 37 x 52 cm, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva

Her gaze remains more superficial and voyeuristic; only occasionally does she open her view to reveal existential abysses. Nicholas Nixon, in his series entitled "People with Aids", approaches his models in a very quiet, thoughtful, respectful and dignified manner (111. 5). While his work has a documentary quality, he does not seek to penetrate his subject to such depths. Closely related in intensity to "Pretty

Ribbons" are Ferdinand Hodler's drawings depicting the suffering and death of his lover Valentine find both intimacy

and the incorruptible gaze of an objective chronicler. Much like Hodler in his drawings, Donigan Cumming brings art and documentary together to form an indivisible unity.