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– SAM TAYLOR-WOOD

During her most active period in the late 50s and throughout the 60s, Diane Arbus shot for just about everyone, from *Esquire* and *Harper's Bazaar* to *The Sunday Times* magazine, *Nova* and *Essence*. She also created hundreds of images for her own personal projects, partly funded by two prestigious grants from the Guggenheim Foundation. Arriving at the Victoria & Albert Museum this month, *Revelations* is the first major exhibition of Arbus's work in more than 20 years, including vast numbers of her photographs (some never before printed), plus writings, magazine articles, scrapbooks and the numerous cuttings she amassed throughout her career.

The daughter of rich Manhattan retailers, Arbus was born Diane Nemerov in 1923. From childhood, she longed to escape the cosseted, sanitised world of the rich and pursue the real New York. Marrying photographer Allan Arbus at the age of 18 and moving out of home, she began to do just that. The couple set up a successful fashion photography partnership in 1947. Diane went solo in 1956 and made it her mission to find out all she could about the world she was once shielded from. “From that point on, she was like a kid in a candy shop,” says Peter Crookston, who commissioned her for *The Sunday Times* magazine and later *Nova*. “She wanted to go down (into society) as far as she could. She had a burning desire to take pictures of what she saw.”

Although Arbus suffered bouts of depression and eventually committed suicide in 1971, she produced an enormous body of work during her relatively short career. She relentlessly pursued every aspect of unseen society and documented her discoveries: dwarves, transvestites, giants, twins, circus ‘freaks’, gay communities and, later, the institutionalised at a home for people with Down's syndrome. Suddenly, those that did not fit society's mould of how we should look and live, were in the spotlight – up close and personal.

Underworld obsessives – and Arbus influencers – Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and Arbus's teacher Lisette Model, had photographed subjects similar to those Arbus explored. Her contemporaries – like Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand – also looked to the streets for their subjects. But it was Arbus's attitude that was different. “The others were about grab and run,” explains Martin Barnes, the curator of the V&A exhibition. “They had a go in, get out, no one gets hurt attitude. Arbus didn't mind getting hurt. She never looked away.”

Arbus entered her subjects' lives to an unprecedented extent. “She was willing to get involved,” says Crookston. “She went where no one else dared to go, sometimes going home with her subjects.” Over the years, she also kept in touch with – and continued to photograph – a female bishop, a Jewish giant, a Brooklyn family and a transvestite. When completing a story on eccentrics for *Harper's*

Sam Taylor-Wood on Diane Arbus

Arbus immerses you in her pictures through the strong sense of collaboration between her and her subject. She obviously had an openness, a big charm offensive that helped her through a lot of doors. She managed to sidestep any voyeurism, her subjects pose for her. And that's something quite different from other photographers at the time that were outside of the image, removed from it. It makes her distinctive, more interesting.

Obviously, it's a big influence to have a really great woman photographer. Although her images don't really have that much direct influence on my work, I love her attitude, the way she worked and thought. It's the collaborative method between her and her subjects – which perhaps is quite female – that I find really inspiring. With “Crying Men”, for example, I had to work with my subjects to get them to trust me, to make them confident that sensitive material wasn't seen in the wrong place, or would be taken out of context.

It's funny though, because the first piece I saw by her wasn't a portrait, like most of her work. It was 1963's “Xmas tree in a living room”. She somehow manages to make this a portrait too, with the Christmas tree hunching over. It looks freaky too, which, of course, she is so good at – she manages to make everything look freaky, including those great pictures of babies. This shot is really interesting when you compare it to the later “Jewish giant at home with his parents”. They're exactly the same composition – with the giant hunching in the corner instead of the tree.

I also find her titles extraordinary. Titles are hard – they either come straight away when you think of the idea or if not, it takes ages to think of one that's not embroidering on the work too much. Arbus's are documentary but also lend themselves to the poetic, like “Child selling flowers at night”. With the “Albino sword swallow”, it's a weird enough picture and then the title tells you even more.

Last year, I went on the road trip to Georgia, when I just wanted to be freer with my camera. I stopped in all these weird little towns and did this picture that's very *Deliverance*. I took one of a street and another with two guys fishing off a motorway into this beautiful little creek. One of them was called “Sunny Moody”. I think Arbus would appreciate that.

If she was working now, I don't think you could do what she did then. It's a well-trodden path with people like Larry Clark and Nan Goldin taking that diaristic approach. When you start out as a photographer, it's important to find your own voice. I was very conscious of that. I like her voice; I hope she'd like mine.