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Collecting With a Visionary 'I' : An L.A. exhibition provides a unique look at how artists look at themselves. 149 self-portraits span 150 years and speak to the fine art of collecting.

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and

There's shopping and then there's collecting. Fifteen years ago, Sydney and Audrey Irmes began shopping for the occasional photograph, initially influenced by their daughter, photo historian Deborah Irmes.

After buying an 1862 albumen print by the eccentric Nadar, who photographed himself dressed in a fringed Native American costume and wearing an 18th-Century-style wig, the couple decided to narrow their focus to self-portrait photography.

It was the decisive moment that turned their shopping into collecting. They have since assembled a collection of approximately 140 works by artists as traditional as Edward Weston and as unconventional as Bruce Nauman, all revealing some unique aspect of themselves.

The Irmases recently donated their collection to the L.A. County Museum of Art, where it will be presented as the exhibition "The Camera I: The Audrey and Sydney Irmes Collection of Photographic Self-Portraits," opening Thursday. Spanning the last 150 years, the collection brings together works both by unknowns and superstars, artists who use some aspect of photo-reproduction and commercial photographers, Americans and Europeans. And more women are included than in most institutional collections.

This selection of self-portraits is remarkable in no small part for the surprises it may bring to even the most seasoned observer of photography. As Deborah Irmes notes in her essay for the lavish book documenting her parents' collection: "We made many quixotic and idiosyncratic choices, records of the changes in our taste over time. . . . To choose freely, because of one's interest in an image, without pre-existing requirements, is often the most difficult of tasks."

Deborah was still in graduate school at Boston University when the collection was formally launched. Her parents relish the tale: Sometime around 1973, Sydney remembers, when his daughter was home for Christmas vacation, she asked him to buy her a Karl Struss photograph from the Stephen White Gallery for \$200. The dealer would not sell the picture until the opening night of the show, at which point Deborah would have returned to the East Coast. Sydney agreed and asked her to also pick out a few more photographs that he could purchase for himself.

"She gave me the numbers of the photos," recalls Sydney. "I went to the opening, made the deal, wrote the check. And I bought (an image) of Catalina Island because my family comes from there. (Stephen White) put red stars on the six things I bought. I figured I'd better stay a little while, have a glass of wine. A man in an overcoat, hat and suit rushed in. He says to Stephen, 'My wife sent me out here to buy five photographs!' Well, they were the exact five Deborah had

picked out.

"(The man's) wife was a well-known photo dealer in New York. A few days later, I got a letter from her asking if we were willing to sell and for how much. At which point I got great respect for Deborah.

"That was Karl Struss' first show at a gallery. He was 91 years old, but he was at the opening. We talked because he had been a cinematographer at the studios. I worked in the mail room at Fox when I was 17 years old." Laughing, Sydney adds, "So we both came from a background in film."

It was an auspicious beginning for the new collectors. The little-known Struss was soon discovered by the art world, and in no time his work increased in value by 200%.

But just collecting photography seemed too broad a mandate for the Irmases. Audrey says: "I don't like pretty pictures. I tire of them easily. When it was first suggested that we collect photographs, I visualized Ansel Adams, and thought, 'I'm not interested in that.' Until we zeroed in on the self-portraits. It was so interesting to see how different people are willing to reveal themselves.

"It was a lot of fun in the beginning because there was so much material available. It was difficult toward the end to find things we didn't already have." Adds Sydney: "Or that met our requirements of being vintage prints."

Today, the Irmases live in an expansive modern beach house in Malibu, furnished by Mimi London with large-scale comfortable furniture. Glass walls reveal waves crashing outside. Inside is a single self-portrait photograph by the renowned German artist Joseph Beuys. Most of their photo collection is now at LACMA, and the walls of the house indicate the direction of their passion for contemporary art, with works by such artists as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Eva Hesse, John Baldessari, Edward Ruscha and Malcolm Morley. A painting by Kenneth Noland hangs in the hallway. Many other pieces are in storage awaiting completion of the couple's new home in Holmby Hills.

One work, featuring text on metal by Cady Noland, Sydney bought for personal reasons: It refers to Patty Hearst and her escapades with the Symbionese Liberation Army. Now retired from his practice as an attorney, Sydney defended Hearst in the L.A. component of the case.

Visiting galleries and buying photography helped the Irmases develop their sensibility, and their avid interest in contemporary art brought them to a new association with the Museum of Contemporary Art, where Audrey is now a trustee. Paul Schimmel, MOCA chief curator, applauds the Irmases' generosity to the institution, but notes that their photography collection belongs at LACMA, where it will be integrated with extensive existing photographic holdings.

Robert A. Sobieszek, LACMA curator of photography, concurs: "Fundamentally, their collection is the history of photography, from 1850 to the present, centered around a single theme--self-portraiture and the artist. So it fits into our general collecting desire. It's almost as though we are collecting the same way they did--wonderful 19th-Century pieces, modernism up to the 1940s, with half the collection that is post-1940.

"I think self-portraits, in whatever medium, are interesting," Sobieszek says. "Psychology, temperament, biography, we are all fascinated by what goes on in the mind of the creative person. And it is good photography. The examples (they) collected are really remarkable. I don't know of any other collection in the U.S. or in Europe where a collector has amassed a collection of self-portraits."

Although Deborah Irmes acted as adviser at the outset, her mother became the primary force behind the collection.

"My mother has a good eye and likes classically beautiful things," says Deborah by phone from her home in Paris. "Once you let my mother loose, you cannot stop her. What's interesting is that they didn't really get any social credit for it," she continues. "I was at parties at their house where people were saying, 'Why do they collect this stuff?' My mother was very sensitive to that and the fact that she continued to collect is to her--to both of their--credit."

Hesitantly, the elder Irmases do take some credit. "It's rewarding to know that what we've been doing for 15 years is validated by others. It's pleasing to know you had an eye and went down the right road. If you collect something, it should be what is pleasing to you, not to others," Audrey says.

In the early 1970s, collecting photography did not have today's cachet. Nineteenth-Century photographs were especially abundant and, by today's standards, were reasonably priced.

"We made some wonderful buys and we made some mistakes," Sydney adds. For example, they thought their F. Holland Day photograph of a man in an Arab costume was a self-portrait and exceptionally rare, since most of Day's photographs were lost in a 1907 studio fire. After the donation to LACMA, it was discovered that Day had photographed a friend. "We kept it for 15 years believing it was the *creme de la creme* of the collection," Sydney moaned.

"We were sold what we were told was a self-portrait by Baron (Adolphe) de Meyer. One day, (the late photography collector) Sam Wagstaff came over and said, 'That's not Baron de Meyer. That's his chauffeur!' No matter how hard we tried to make sure of what we were getting, mistakes happened."

And miracles happened too. One day, two different dealers offered them self-portraits by the reclusive photographer Robert Frank. They managed to reach Frank by telephone and discovered these were the only two such prints in existence. They bought both.

Dealers often called to offer them pictures. Robert Miller Gallery's Howard Reid tipped them off to the sale of the Diane Arbus self-portrait up for auction at Sotheby's. The startling 1945 black-and-white print shows the young photographer nude except for a pair of white cotton underpants, her belly slightly enlarged by her pregnancy, standing next to a view camera on a tripod photographing herself in a mirror. The image was made to announce her pregnancy to her husband, at the time a soldier stationed overseas.

It was unique in Arbus' *oeuvre* and certain to go above the auction house's estimate. At auction, the Irmases watched other collectors bid up the price. "Our strategy was not to bid, let others bid and see where it went," Audrey says. "It more than doubled in price, the bidding was so fast, and just as the auctioneer says, 'Is that it?' I shot in a bid. Everyone was so surprised that I got the piece for \$20,000. It was one of the most expensive (of our collection). Within two months, I'd been offered more than \$40,000 for it.

"I loved collecting photography," she adds. "I really miss it."

The Irmases decided to donate their collection to a museum in 1992, after a scare from Westec private security officers. "They called to say they felt the house in West L.A. was on fire. The first thing I thought about was the photo collection," Audrey recalls. "They called back and said the house wasn't on fire, but I didn't want the responsibility after that.

"I wanted to share (the collection)," she continues. "I wanted people to go see it. We always wanted it to be at LACMA because Syd was born (in L.A.) and I

spent my whole life here. Our children and grandchildren are here for the most part."

Sydney agrees. "The incentive was the connection to L.A., and a desire to have L.A. be the recipient of these pictures."

Says Audrey: "When Robert came and picked up the photographs, I felt as though my children were leaving home to go to college. I thought of the many years I had devoted to them. Robert said, 'When the opening comes, it will feel as though they've graduated.' "*

** "The Camera I: The Audrey and Sydney Irmes Collection of Photographic Self-Portraits" opens Thursday and continues through Oct. 23 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Museum hours are Wednesday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; Friday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; Saturday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Admission: adults, \$6; students and senior citizens, \$4, children, \$1 (under 5 admitted free). The second Wednesday of every month is free.*