



Photo op: Judith Golden poses with "Temperance/Star," a 1991 Polaroid print in *Crossings*, on display at the UA Center for Creative Photography.

## A Life With Light

Judith Golden's Work Goes Into The Archives At The Center For Creative Photography.

By Margaret Regan

IT'S NOT EVERYDAY that the Center for Creative Photography creates an archive chronicling a photographer's life's work. In fact, there are only about 40 artists who have thus far been honored, with some 90 others represented by partial archives.

Last week Tucson's own Judith Golden was initiated into the select company of those with major archives, joining such stars as Ansel Adams, Richard Avedon and Edward Weston. An innovative photographer who paints, collages, boxes and otherwise transforms her pictures, Golden was feted with a reception at the Center and the kickoff of a small show, *Crossings: A Celebration of Judith Golden*, which concentrates on her work of the last 10 years.

"It's definitely an honor," Golden said the day before the doings during an interview in her light-filled studio in the Tucson Mountains. "I'm really pleased."

The Center's curator, Trudy Wilner Stack, says Golden is an important photographer who has turned out "groundbreaking work dealing with gender identity and popular culture." And that groundbreaking work—particularly her *Magazine Series* of self-portraits with her own face almost concealed by fashion model photos—came along before Cindy Sherman and others tackled the same subject. More recently, Golden's turned toward magical realism, making haunting pictures of painted children blending into the earth, of magicians and jugglers, of women sprouting butterfly wings.

Sitting in a comfortable slipcovered chair in a corner of her big studio, her dog Max sleeping at her feet, the photographer explained that in her recent work she explores "the human connection to all things. Every aspect of the human being is part of the whole. I'm interested in the life/death/rebirth cycle."

Ironically, at a time when her work is delving into timeless human cycles, Golden's own life is going through a sea of change.

After 15 years of teaching in the University of Arizona art department, Golden, 61, has taken early retirement. Teaching, she said ruefully, was both "wonderful and frustrating. Part of it gets so administrative. There's so much besides the actual teaching...I realized I was more of an administrator and educator than an artist. It really shook me up."

And even though, as she says, "the women in my family live forever," she decided it was high time to tackle her own work every single day. After all, except during sabbaticals, she simply has never had the chance to do that, especially since she got a late start on her art career.

She sighed as she told the tale. At the age of 18, she won a scholarship to the prestigious School of the Art Institute of Chicago in her hometown, but her parents wouldn't let her take it. They reasoned, Golden said, that "no one 18 years old could possibly know what they wanted. It was better to go to the university."

"I knew what I wanted," Golden said emphatically, remembering that even as a child she delighted in sharpening her pencils, lining them up and doing art. "But it didn't fit into the family thinking. This was the early '50s and I was raised to get married and have kids...It's difficult for some families to understand what it's like to be committed as an artist."

So young Golden was packed off to one university, then another. After a few years, she dropped out of school to marry. In quick succession she had two children, a son and a daughter. Nevertheless, "I always kept my fingers in art or I panicked." She did some freelance graphic design work, and when the kids were past the toddler stage packed them off



continued on page 27

# Golden

continued from page 26

to preschool two days a week so she could work in her studio. Eventually, after the children had made it into



*Persona XI*, 1985, by Judith Golden, is one of several of the artist's works on display through September 21 at Invisible Theater, 1400 N. First Ave.

elementary school, she enrolled full time at the Art Institute.

This was the late 1960s, a heady time to be in school. Majoring in printmaking, which still influences her multi-layered photographs, Golden did antiwar political art, picturing, for instance, her young son and a nephew surrounded by war images. As she found new friends among her fellow artists, her own marriage grew less satisfactory and eventually she and her husband divorced. BFA in hand, Golden "took two kids and two cats and drove in a baby-blue Mustang to California and to grad school, where I knew no one."

At UC Davis, Golden found a more relaxed attitude toward art. "In California I could lighten up. I could do political work but I didn't have to hit somebody over the head." It was during her years at Davis, and later during a four-year teaching stint at UCLA, that Golden did her playful photographic takes on women's roles, particularly as they are shaped by the media.

She came to the UA in 1981, which in those days had only three other women teaching in the art department. The Arizona landscape, startling to Chicago-raised eyes, soon inspired new subjects. She began her *Elements* and *Cycles* series, visions of painted, masked children and women merging with the earth. There were connections with the earlier work, though. Like the old pictures, the new ones challenged the convention of the photograph as "reality." Did they picture painted studio backdrops or real earth? Were they photographs of painted things, or paintings on top of photographs?

And she continues to use masks of many varieties. In the older pictures, the fashion models' faces stood for the

"facades we wear." But in Arizona Golden discovered an alternative view of masks, particularly during visits to the Hopi and Zuni. For her, the Native American masks submerge the individual and reveal the universal, tapping into "a more spiritual

essence...another realm that is magical or mystical."

Golden's work hasn't had widespread commercial success but it's gotten the attention of curators and historians. She's won an NEA fellowship, studio grants from Polaroid, and had a book of her photographs published by the Friends of Photography. For now, she's gathering up her teaching records and journals and negatives and correspondence for her Center archive, and pondering her future. She's trying to figure out a way to display her most recent work—startling black-and-white pictures of dead chickens and women in Day of the Dead masks—and considering how to live in Oaxaca part of the year.

But for sure she'll stick to photography. Speaking of why she switched to the medium years ago, she said, it was "the alchemy in the darkroom. You could go in there and step out of time. It really attracted me." □

*Crossings: A Celebration of Judith Golden* continues through November 17 at the Center for Creative Photography Library, University of Arizona. Library hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. For more information call 621-7968.

Several Golden works can be seen through September 21 in the Invisible Theatre lobby, 1400 N. First Ave., during the run of *Whatever Happened to Tina Louise?* There are two Golden pieces in *Picture This Too*, an exhibition at the UA Joseph Gross Gallery, running through Sept. 27.