



Ruth Bernhard.
Still from a YouTube
Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaf0rgRd8v0>

Bernhard, Ruth (1905-2006)

by Tee A. Corinne

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Ruth Bernhard, one of the preeminent twentieth-century photographers of the nude female, was born Ruth-Maria Bernhard on October 14, 1905, in Germany. Her father was an artist who specialized in posters and elegant typeface design.

Bernhard studied art in Berlin before following her father to New York City in 1927.

In New York, she worked as a magazine photographer's assistant and began to make personal photographs. During the 1930s, she photographed for her father and for industrial designers.

Bernhard met many lesbians in Manhattan, including photographer Berenice Abbott and Abbott's lover, critic Elizabeth McCausland. Around 1934, she began making images of women in the nude.

In 1935, Bernhard met photographer Edward Weston. His work and personality had a major influence on her life. Although they exchanged passionate letters, Bernhard decided against a physical relationship because she did not want to become another of his conquests.

Bernhard moved to Los Angeles in 1936, but returned to New York City during World War II. Around 1943, she met Eveline (Evelyn) Phimister (1908-1996), an artist who designed fabric, wallpaper, window displays, and sets for Broadway shows. They lived together in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles for about ten years.

Although Bernhard had many love relationships, Phimister was the only person with whom she ever lived.

In 1953, Ruth Bernhard moved from Los Angeles to San Francisco where she became part of an influential group of photographers that included Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham. She made her living by photographing a variety of subjects, including the dogs of the rich.

She also began to teach, inspiring several generations of photographers through her emphasis on personal vision and the qualities of light. Public knowledge of her work spread through exhibitions and books of her images.

Her most significant lesbian-themed photograph is "Two Forms," made around 1963. In it, a black woman and a white woman--who were lovers--are shown pressed against one another. The photograph strikingly distills passion. Other works that resonate with lesbian audiences include images of nude women in boxes and studies of sea shells.

In 1967, Bernhard met Colonel Price Rice of the United States Air Force, an African American ten years her junior. He courted her for a decade before they became lovers. Although they maintained separate residences, their relationship continued until his death in 1999.

In the early 1970s, Bernhard was poisoned by fumes from a faulty heater. The poisoning cost her the ability to concentrate for extended periods. After that event, she made no new negatives.

Bernhard lived the actively lesbian part of her life during a time of widespread social oppression of homosexuals in the United States. Perhaps understandably, just as the lesbian liberation movement sought to embrace her, Bernhard chose to privilege the bisexual side of her nature.

However, in her nineties, Bernhard cooperated with biographer Margaretta K. Mitchell in revealing publicly her many relationships with women, her non-consummated affair with Edward Weston, and her long involvement with a younger man. Her willingness to discuss her life openly attests to a bravery beyond that of many contemporary lesbian and bisexual artists.

[Bernhard died at her home in San Francisco on December 18, 2006.]

Bibliography

Bernhard, Ruth. *Collecting Light: The Photographs of Ruth Bernhard*. Carmel, Calif.: The Friends of Photography, 1979.

_____. *Gift of the Commonplace*. Carmel, Calif.: Center for Photographic Art, 1996.

Mitchell, Margaretta K. *Recollections: Ten Women of Photography*. New York: Viking, 1979.

_____. *Ruth Bernhard: Between Art and Life*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000.

About the Author

Tee A. Corinne was a photographer and writer. Her articles about lesbian art and artists appeared in numerous journals and encyclopedias. Her books include *The Cunt Coloring Book*, *Yantras of Womanlove*, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*, *Courting Pleasure*, and *Intimacies*. She was the editor of *FABB: The Feminist Art Books Bulletin*, co-editor of the *Queer Caucus for Art Newsletter*, and member of the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.