

# Photo L.A. to honor Jo Ann Callis, Among an Array of Programs and Exhibitors Covering Historic to Contemporary Photography This Week

22 JANUARY 2019



Jo Ann Callis, "Untitled (detail)," circa 1976, archival pigment print. (ROSEGALLERY)

On view from January 31st - February 3rd, 2019, in the Historic Barker Hangar, Santa Monica, Calif. is the longest running international photographic art fair on the West Coast. Photo L.A. has been in operation for nearly three decades. The fair offers a curated roster of local and international exhibitors as well as highly anticipated special installations, docent tours, film screenings, panel discussions, artist talks and programming lectures.

This year, Photo L.A. 2019 honors Jo Ann Callis, with a special installation and artist talk. A central figure in the Southern California photography scene since the 1970s, Callis is known for her provocatively staged scenarios with a poetic dimension. In her work, the inner world of the artist finds material expression through creative juxtapositions, bold colors, playful constructions.

An Artist panel talk at 3:30 pm on Feb. 2, with independent curator Claudia Bohn-Spector, LACMA curator Rebecca Morse and artist Brandy Trigueros, explores what Callis' work can tell us about womanhood and female art-making during a politically charged time in which her concerns appear as germane and compelling as ever.

Both Callis' early black & white and color pictures, taken while studying under Robert Heinecken at UCLA, attest to the artist's singular and lasting influence on photography through her inventive analysis of the pleasures and terrors of domestic comfort. In her work from the 70s, Callis merges perceived pain and apparent pleasure into a complex, inclusive representation of sensuality and sexual curiosity. Her deft use of opposing textures invites the viewer to lightly graze a sumptuous silk pinned to a grubby wall and tug at the taut string crisscrossing the model's backside.

The subjects in the black & white photographs are often robed in shadows, reflections, masks, and veils, lending a sense of foreboding to their lush settings and nubile bodies. Yet in every image the artist's presence is palpable and lends a pervading sense of safety to the recalculated play. Callis dances just beyond the frame, delighting the world she has created—a world of fragmented narrative and a childlike sense of continual experimentation.

The lively resurgence of Callis' mid-1970s images suggests that her creative preoccupations remain relevant and fresh to this day. The uneasy tensions, strange vibes and fetishistic delights conveyed in her work continue to inspire young image-makers and point to Callis' lasting impact on contemporary art.

# Review: Jo Ann Callis' perplexing photos are as evocative as a Hitchcock film

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  
4 OCTOBER 2018 | 6:00 AM



Jo Ann Callis, "Untitled (detail)," circa 1976, archival pigment print. (ROSEGALLERY)

A forensic quality marks a suite of perplexing color photographs made by Jo Ann Callis in the late 1970s but not printed until the last few years.

Rather than evidence uncovered, however, as one might expect from an analysis of illicit activity, her pictures at ROSEGALLERY are clearly staged. This is manufactured evidence, forensics engineered. Evocative pictorial stories have been "fabricated to be photographed," to use the now-established camera term the artist helped to pioneer, in order to dig up truths.

Among the more bracing of nearly 20 works in the front gallery is an image focused on a man's hands grasping the ankles of a woman standing on a chair. Her expensive high-heel shoes are festooned with tiny gold chains.

Callis has lighted the darkened scene with a soft spotlight, which creates the aura of a theatrical performance. Coupled with the chains, the man's firm grasp and the woman's stylishness suggest an unexpectedly dynamic interplay between them.

Is he stopping her from doing something ominous? Is he being ominous himself? Is she thwarted in an attempted escape? Is this a benign view of one person helping another to be steady as she reaches for something on a high shelf?

Are the feminine shoes a stylized representation of acquiescence to bondage with heterosexual male desire?



Jo Ann Callis, "Woman With Blond Hair," 1977,  
archival pigment print. (ROSEGALLERY)

The ambiguities of interpersonal relationships, especially between men and women, play out frequently in the exhibition. A nude woman lies face down, her blond wig neatly parted down the back of her head as if in some fetish ritual. Elsewhere, a rectangular lump formed in tousled bedsheets sports two pinkish dots, like nipples on a torso.

A man dressed in white sprawls on his side across an unmade bed, his shirt pulled up over his head. Another man, glimpsed only as a pair of crossed legs wearing gray slacks and a black shoe, is seated next to a table on which a feminine garment is laid out. Callis has carefully cropped these scenes like



Hitchcock with a still camera – “Rear Window” without the mounting panic, but with all the queasiness intact.

None is more disorienting than “Black Cloth in Water,” a close-up torso of a young, unidentifiable child seated at the edge of a bed, the titular items in a glass bowl held precariously on his or her lap. Peer in closely to make out that wet black cloth, and you realize suddenly that, even in the complete absence of prurience, you are intruding where you shouldn’t.

At her best, Callis masterfully manipulates her fabricated scenes. She leads a viewer to the edge of what could be a violation of social norms – or what could just as easily be nothing remotely untoward. Details of form, composition and color are explicit, but the possible narrative outcomes never are. A viewer is left standing at the brink, which is a very good place to be.



Jo Ann Callis, "Man With Black Shoe," 1979, archival pigment print. (ROSEGALLERY)

ROSEGALLERY, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 264-8440, through Nov. 24. Closed Sunday and Monday. [www.rosegallery.net](http://www.rosegallery.net)



Milk Bath, 1977 © Jo Ann Callis, Courtesy of ROSEGALLERY

**What was the A-ha moment that led you to art & did Los Angeles play a part in your career decision?**

1. I knew I wanted to be an artist since childhood when I was praised for artwork I made. It was that simple, and of course I always loved making things. It is hard to say what might have been had I stayed in Ohio but I am sure my career would have been very different if I had not moved to Los Angeles in 1961. I finished my education here and the art world opened up for me here.

**How has living in LA informed your approach & aesthetic? (describe your work, material, themes)**

2. I studied at UCLA and was mentored by Robert Heinecken, who introduced me to photography and encouraged the work I was making at that time. My interests really began in my teenage years, and in many ways the core of my work has not changed over time even though my projects may not look the same as they did before. I have always been interested in portraying reality and the commonplace in a new light, with an edge of tension and pleasure added to the mix. I work in a theatrical mode, setting up scenes with which I make photographs. I also make objects, either to be photographed or to exist on their own, and I have also painted with the same intent.

In my photographs I sometimes use people as models and sometimes I make still lifes, but everything I do is set up with a keen interest in the formal aspects of picture making. Composition always matters to me. There is a challenge in making photographs in which the subject matter is clearly seen meanwhile the meaning or emotion of the photograph is also achieved through metaphor.

**When & how did you first feel embraced by our LA art community?**

3. My photographs were noticed by the photo community practically from the time I started making them when I was in my 30's. I don't know about the wider art world because there was always a division between photography

and other mediums. That is less true today than it was in the past however, but I think it somewhat exists, even today.

**The exhibition speaks about the vitality of our art community. Which pioneering LA artist influenced you the most? And who's work do you find intriguing right now?**

4. The pioneering L. A. artist that influenced me the most was Robert Heinecken, not so much by the art he made but by what he taught me about finding my own voice and exploring that to the fullest. Paul Otterbridge influenced my artwork from the beginning of my career. I find inspiration from all the arts and from looking at everything from graphic arts to design, sculpture, painting and photographs.

**What is your favorite art accident?**

5. My favorite art accident(s) - literal accidents)

There was the time when I was a student and was posing in the nude for my own photograph, which I rarely did, and I sat in a bed of poison oak. That was most unfortunate to say the least.

There was another time when I was acting as my own nude model and almost fell down a laundry shoot from the second floor to the basement of a fancy home in Holmby Hills. The housekeeper saved my life, but who knows what she thought of me when she answered my cries of help?

## Artist's exhibition captures interplay between pleasure, tension

SIDRA RASHID  
8 OCTOBER 2018 | 10:54pm



UCLA alumna and California Institute of the Arts professor Jo Ann Callis said she constructs shots that express either anxiety or playful sensuality. As she does with many of her works, Callis infuses tension in her photo "Man on Bed with Crumbs." (Courtesy of Jo Ann Callis/ROSEGALLERY)



Jo Ann Callis doesn't produce images of everyday life.

Instead, she said her photographs depict a state of mind, creating a metaphor for feelings.

The UCLA alumna's latest exhibition, "Now and Then," is on display at ROSEGALLERY in Santa Monica until Nov. 24. It includes never-before-seen photographs Callis took in the late 1970s, as well as her more recent sculptures. She said she enjoys creating work that focuses on two broad themes – playful sensuality, or anxiety and tension – usually in a domestic setting. Callis, an art professor from the California Institute of the Arts, wants viewers to walk away contemplating the meaning and position of the subjects in her photographs, and she uses light and color to achieve these effects.

"I think there's a thread that goes through everything, (no matter) the medium I'm using," she said. "Some of it is about tension and anxiety, some of it is about pleasure and beauty, and those two ideas are in my head all the time when I'm making art."

Colors have emotional and psychological effects on a person, Callis said. For instance, two rooms may share the same interior, but one with dark gray walls creates a different mood than one with bright yellow walls. Callis said she is drawn toward using pastel colors, such as shades of pink and purple, that tend to subtly clash with accents of red.

One of Callis' photographs, "Milk Bath," depicts a girl in a bathtub filled with clouded liquid with only her face and hands showing. The red on her fingernails and the rosy color of her lips are the main focuses of color in the piece, accenting the girl's feminine features.

Zoe Lemelson, a gallery associate at ROSEGALLERY, said Callis' use of color and lighting is always deliberate and helps to accent the emotive ideas Callis has, while allowing the audience to interpret it using their own experiences.

"She provides just enough of a narrative where she's not telling you a story, but she gives you the space to imagine what's going on, so still give that platform for your own imagination," Lemelson said.

Callis said her art is meant to depict the underbelly of people's inner thoughts. She wanted to show the juxtaposition between the internal and external composure of a person in any given moment. She said people experience the world in two ways: what they see and how they act on the outside, and their thoughts. For instance, while a person is going on a walk, they may enjoy a sunny day but also be worried about the heat, discomfort, pain or some unrelated concern. Thus, many of the inner feelings of tension and pleasure can be constantly working in tandem, Callis said.

"These opposites exist in life, and I'm just trying to extend situations that call that to mind," Callis said.

Photographer Gay Block met Callis when the two taught at CalArts together in 1987. Block said Callis has never been one to walk around with her camera and photograph her everyday environment. Instead of shooting spontaneously, she tends to construct images that resonate with the audience. Block said Callis' work is able to construct people's private thoughts into art.

"(It) suggests what many of us think but could never translate into an image the way (Callis) can and has," Block said. "People relate to the work because it relates to the sort of secret thoughts many of us have. I think much of (Callis') work is about secrets."

Lemelson said Callis puts anxiety into her images with what she allows the viewers to see and what she keeps hidden. In another of her photos, Callis depicts a man in a partially unbuttoned and untucked shirt lying on a bed. His arm is covering his forehead and his eyes are closed, while cracker crumbs lay beside and under him.

More recently, Callis has instead been working on the small clay sculptures – about 8 inches in height – that are showcased in "Now and Then." She said she was looking to make something a little more humorous but also finds the pieces sensuous. Callis said the pieces are round with straight edges but look fleshy – nearly all of them are off-white, some with pink undertones. The sculptures are not recognizable body parts and are purposely meant to remain abstract. She said the pieces are intended to reference the human body and bring attention to form, accentuating ideas of sensuality in a more comedic form than her photos do. Block said Callis' art is often told through insinuation and suggestion rather than literal imagery.

"She manages to make things that feel so physical and accessible, and yet it is not identifiable (as) being a body part," Block said. "It is her genius of suggesting something without saying it, without rendering it exactly."

Callis said her work's themes of anxiety and sensuality are part of who she is. She said those ideas are the way she experiences her life – she never decided to photograph pleasure and tension. Rather, it was all she knew how to do and has always been the way she experienced life.

"It could maybe look like something we do all the time – natural in a way, although staged," Callis said. "On the other hand, the circumstances are not quite natural. There's something off, there's something amiss. There's a feeling of something else going on, an undercurrent."

# Interview by Amanda Quinn Olivar, West Coast Editor

10 AUGUST 2018



Jo Ann Callis, "Untitled (detail)," circa 1976, archival pigment print. (ROSEGALLERY)

"I have always been interested in portraying reality and the commonplace in a new light, with an edge of tension and pleasure added to the mix."

— Jo Ann Callis

A central figure in the Southern California photography scene since the 1970s, Jo Ann Callis is known for her provocatively staged scenarios with a poetic dimension. In her work, the inner world of the artist finds material expression through creative juxtapositions, bold colors and playful constructions. Jo Ann Callis enrolled at UCLA in 1970, where she began taking classes with Robert Heinecken, among other prominent artists. She started teaching at CalArts in 1976 and remains a faculty member of the School of Art's Program in Photography and Media. She has continued to photograph, draw, and paint, and her work has been widely exhibited in such venues as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Hammer Museum; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In 2009 a retrospective of her work, *Woman Twirling*, was presented by the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Callis has received three NEA Fellowships and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

**What was the aha moment that led you to art... and did Los Angeles play a part in your career decision?**

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Jo Ann Callis, *Performance*, 1985 Signed in ink on verso, Vintage Cibachrome Print  
96.5 x 109.2 cm/ 38 x 43 in , Courtesy of ROSEGALLERY

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**How They Ran**

Over The Influence

August 12 - September 5, 2018



## JO ANN CALLIS: "I WANTED TO EXPRESS MY SEXUALITY AND MY ANXIETY"

By Clémentine Mercier

April 13, 2018 at 20:24

In the 70s, Jo Ann Callis, American artist born in 1940, made "Early Color", a series of intimate photos. She returns to this time and this pivotal moment in her life.

Exhibited at the Miranda Gallery, in the 10th arrondissement of Paris, the artist Jo Ann Callis answered by telephone our questions about Early Color , a photo and color series, made at home in the 70's.

### **Why did you study photography so late?**

I was 33 when I started using a camera. I had been married very early, without being able to finish my studies. I finished them in their thirties at UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles, ed]. Then, I started to teach. I was mainly interested in sculpture and collage, a little bit of painting, but the picture seemed too technical. I did not really know about art photography at that time, which was not as widespread as it is today. I ended up taking lessons with Robert Heineken, a fantastic teacher.

### **In what spirit were you back then when you did the Early Color series ?**

I had just divorced. I was very anxious at the time to ensure my survival and that of my children. And I did not know what I was going to do with my life. This deep anxiety is reflected in my photos. Our teacher did not impose us subjects, we did what we wanted, what we wanted: that's what I did. It was at the time of the sexual revolution, the demand for women's rights and the pacifist movements. I wanted to express my sexuality, my anxiety, my taste for staging, for beauty and for formal ideas. I wanted to arrange things so that they look even more beautiful. And also,



Early Color Series . Photo Jo Ann Callis. Courtesy Miranda gallery

**One of your pictures shows the hands of men who are gripping a woman's ankles ...**

This photo is intentionally ambiguous: it can be taken in two ways. Either the man holds the woman standing, or he holds her on the chair by the ankles.

**Who were the models? Some are androgynous ...**

Friends or friends of friends. People I knew, others less well. Some came from school. I am indeed fascinated by androgyny. What is masculine, what is feminine? It is interesting and curious that the body looks double ... Myself, I have a very small chest, I do not wear ruffles, I love Japanese clothes, very sculptural. But maybe I was thinking of myself by making these pictures, maybe these models were a bit of a part of me, whether they were boy or girl. They were human, they had feelings, a touch, sensitivity. I like to look at someone and ask myself the question: what kind is she? Today, sexual ambiguity is much more widespread, people are much more open with that. At the time, I found it interesting.



Early Color Series . Photo Jo Ann Callis. Courtesy Miranda gallery

**This series looks very contemporary.**

I did not realize anything. I was really just trying to get out of it no matter what and did not plan for the future. I lived from day to day. Some pictures, I did not show them because I was afraid for my work,

actually. At Cal Arts [California Institute of the Arts, the art school of Los Angeles, ed], at that time, everything was very conceptual. Everything was cold and emotionless. There was much French philosophy, Foucault, Bourdieu. I needed to get a job and I was afraid to show this work ... It was so far from what was fashionable ...

**You exhibited at the Women's Building, were you particularly feminist?**

My first exhibition was held there. A friend who was part of this group of girls was scheduled. As she was not ready, I took her place but I was never militant, it's just not in my nature ... I had children to raise. Of course, I looked at feminist art and women of my generation. It was amazing, because at last we felt free to do the art we wanted. But with hindsight, all this art shouted: it's time! What makes it so dated today. For me, it was not great art but it was such a necessary art. It was important to finally have a voice in the chapter, to be shown and to be heard.



Early Color Series. Photo Jo Ann Callis. Courtesy Miranda gallery

**Was William Eggleston an inspiration?**

Oh no ! Not at all. Completely the opposite. I think of Paul Outerbridge: he had a great influence on my work. He died in 1958 but his work was rediscovered in the mid-1970s. I came to a halt. Color could

suddenly bring emotions. I admit that I never had that feeling with Eggleston. Just because he was photographing what was in front of the camera, he was not putting on the stage. And me, I always needed to do the staging. Paul Outerbridge is the one who brought me to color.

**You wear a bitterly sweet look on American culture ...**

I am rather cynical. But, yes, it's true that in the 50's, there was some bitterness. I was raised in those years, when men came back from the war. And women had to stop working to make work for men. They were supposed to be good housekeepers and content themselves with all the new home appliances gadgets to make life better, make work easier ... Basically, everyone preferred that women stay home. I stayed there for ten years with my children and I did art in the garage ... And of course, being a housewife never made me happy. In my photos, I wanted to express that, that the house can be a refuge but also a place of discomfort.

# Jo Ann Callis

## Review by Jody Zellen

OCTOBER 2018



Jo Ann Callis, Purple Table Cloth, 1979, archival pigment print. (ROSEGALLERY)

Jo Ann Callis is a contemporary Surrealist. For over 40 years, she has been making photographs, paintings and sculptures that are witty, sensual and unexpected. Whether photographing people or objects, Callis infuses her subjects with an uncanny aura that causes pause and then delight.



The selection of images that make up "Now and Then" illustrates the scope of Callis' vision. Photographs from the 1970s fill the front gallery, whereas a few from the '80s and '90s share the backroom with an installation of her latest sculptures. Eight table-top ceramic, paint and beeswax objects are presented as curiosities that can be looked at from all sides. Less than seven inches high, each is a combination of strange organic shapes in pastel tones that suggest featureless and headless figures. Each sculpture is placed upon a Lazy Susan so they can be spun and seen from all sides.

In addition to the photographs and ceramics, Callis paints. Always pushing personal boundaries, she paints pictures of clouds, interiors, dogs and babies. What is peculiar about her close-cropped, realistically rendered canvases depicting babies is not only that the child's head fills most of the space, but that they are almost double life size. The hairless child in "Untitled (C.S.)," (2000) has dark, deep-set eyes and a complacent expression that feels alien. "R.C." (1999) appears furious to be dressed in a frilly outfit. With arched eyebrows the child appears to already have adult moods and a distinct personality. Callis' baby paintings do not evoke an innocent awww. They are more creepy than angelic.

Callis' photographs have an affecting sense of composition. She also excels at achieving a synthesis of light and color. "Woman with Blond Hair" (2017) is an enticing image depicting a woman lying face down on a bed, her head atop a pillow. Shot from the back, Callis has arranged the woman's blond hair so that it fans out to cover her neck and most of the pillow, somewhat reminiscent of Cousin It from the Addams Family television series. A drawn line extends from the part in her hair down her back, dividing the body in half. The body and hair have a golden glow. Glowing or spot lit body parts also appear in "Cigarette in Toes" (1976-1977), a dramatically lit image of the legs of a woman resting on a wooden dresser. Between toes with red nail polish is a lit cigarette. The image is suggestive and humorous. "Wet Jacket" (1979) is another example of Callis' dark sense of humor. The point of view of the photograph is from above, looking down on a bathtub partially filled with reddish water. The water drips from a wet purple jacket with pink buttons that hangs on a rack above the tub in front of turquoise colored tiles. A round drain cap with a detached chain is submerged in the pink water and echoes the shape of the buttons in the jacket above.

The who, what, when why, and even how are suggested but never answered in Callis' photographic images. What makes her work so intriguing is that her pictures are full of innuendo and possibility. Her works have a grace and formal beauty that coincides with the implied but never stated narrative that envelopes them. Over the decades Callis' work has continued to evolve and impress.

## JO ANN CALLIS

By Annabel Osberg  
14 NOVEMBER 2018



Uneasy undercurrents seep from Jo Ann Callis' delusively simple images. Her versatile talent for finding eeriness in the everyday is amply demonstrated in "Now and Then" at ROSEGALLERY. This manifold selection of paintings, sculptures and photographs from the 1970's to present is diverse yet insightfully arranged, educating correspondences among various bodies of work. In the main gallery, photographs of similar subjects are hung in suggestive pairs or trios hinting at ambiguous stories extending between their separate frames. For instance, *Yellow Room* (1977), a sallow rendition of a spartan chamber with unmade bed, is displayed next to *Wet Jacket* (1979, pictured above), depicting tub water sanguinely reddened from a sopping sweater. These two unsettling scenes together intimate the dreariness of austere lives such as in dormitories or halfway houses. Across the room, close-cropped views of tables

and their awkwardly posed human inhabitants evoke moments where senses of normalcy fleetingly dissolve into impressions of total weirdness. Scatological insinuations are frequently embedded in Callis' domestic settings and utilitarian household items: a soaking black towel, for instance, appears excremental. Drastically oversized and framed by drab curtains, a naturalistically painted baby portrait is imbued with inexplicable oddness. A set of diminutive new abstract sculptures occupies turntables near a sign encouraging visitors to touch them. Nothing ever seems quite right in Callis' work, a feeling that intensifies the longer you look or touch. Yet generally you are left at a loss for putting your finger on precisely what is wrong in her strange scenarios that, deceptively, appear so normal.

# 7 Female Photographers You Should Know from Paris Photo

By Jacqui Palumbo  
15 NOVEMBER 2018 | 6:03PM

Too many women photographers have been nearly lost to history, while those working today encounter an industry rife with sexism. But photography is having its reckoning. Even though the spotlight is beginning to shine more brightly on women photographers, past and present, cementing that legacy into history takes a sustained effort.

At Paris Photo this month, curator Fannie Escoulen contributed to that effort. She conceived Elles x Paris Photo, a project that offered a different way to tour the art fair, by viewing work made exclusively by women—from pioneers such as Dorothea Lange to young visionaries like Charlotte Abramow—in chronological order. Below, we share seven contemporary women photographers, some of whom Escoulen singled out, who exhibited at Paris Photo this year.



Jo Ann Callis, *Woman with Blue Bow*, 1977, ROSEGALLERY

Jo Ann Callis's early color work from the 1970s centers on fetish, ritual, desire, and intimate moments that happen behind closed doors. At the time, such conceptual, staged photography was in its infancy, and Callis was a young mother in Los Angeles. She was starting out as a photographer, having finally completed an undergraduate degree that she'd put on hold nearly two decades earlier.

Now, Callis is a Guggenheim fellow and a longtime educator at CalArts. A retrospective of her work at ROSEGALLERY in Santa Monica, "Now and Then," is currently on view, which includes the work shown at Paris Photo.

Callis first debuted her color work in 1974, three years before Cindy Sherman would begin her famous staged "Untitled Film Stills" series, and 12 years before David Lynch would direct the noir cult-classic *Blue Velvet* (1986). These prescient images are reminiscent of both. And though it might be easy to make a connection between the bold female sexuality and gender power dynamics that play out in front of Callis's lens, as well as the feminist era in which she made the series, ascribing political significance to Callis's photographs was never her intention.

"When I made that work, I was in the midst of leaving a marriage while trying to break into the art world at the same time," she explained to *The New Yorker*. The artist wanted her photography to be "strong in its own right, rather than using it to make a statement." Callis presents her perspective, and hers alone. "All of my work is about me. My stuff, my insecurities," she said in a recent interview. "I'm never representing anyone else, ever."



# Jo Ann Callis

## The Uncanny Everyday

by Willemijn van der Zwaan

Jo Ann Callis (b. 1940, United States) started her experimental photography practice long ago, but without a context you could easily mistake her early colour work for something that could have been produced more recently – in fact, the work stems from the 1970s. These images from everyday life, contain a certain uncanny atmosphere and erotic tension, which are now considered common characteristics in the work of many young contemporary artists.

Callis is hailed as a driving force of the Southern California art scene of the 1970s. However, before she ended up in the Golden State, she followed a somewhat more traditional route for women of that era. Although her art education started while she was at high school in Ohio in the 1950s, her academic career was interrupted by marriage and children. After relocating to Los Angeles, Callis picked up where she had left off, and joined a graduate studio programme. While her initial focus was on sculpture and painting, it was her teacher, Robert Heinecken – a highly unorthodox photographer himself – who encouraged her to experiment with photography, and to incorporate it in her other media.

The contemporary art world was in a state of flux at the time, and the social environment that surrounded Callis was also coming undone. To speak in the slightly cynical words of the inimitable essayist Joan Didion: the centre was not holding in 1970s California. However, while there was general social upheaval in the state – largely among counterculture youths 'dropping out' of society and getting heavily into drugs – things were also changing for the better.

Second-wave feminism was making strides in promoting equal rights for women, and although Callis was not on the front line of the movement, it did affect her artistic practice. The often frank sexuality and pleasure evident in her work is a reflection of the era, as are the social and gender dynamics that Callis included in her staged images.



Cigarette in Toes (Legs on Dresser), 1976–1977 © Jo Ann Callis







Girl With Black Washcloth, 1979 © Jo Ann Calis



Untitled (Hand Grabbing Ankles), From Early Color Portfolio, ca 1976 © Jo Ann Calis





The Dish Trick, 1985 © Jo Ann Callis

## Callis never aimed to push her message on the viewer

Her fabricated scenes seem playful at first glance, but there is often a slight uneasiness about them. Take, for example, the image of a man grabbing a woman, who is standing on a chair, by the ankles. While it is unclear what this scene is actually dealing with, Callis's use of what seems to be office furniture, as well as the corporate shoes and clothing worn by the subjects, suggests an underlying power dynamic. The harsh lighting adds to the effect, stressing the sinister nature of the situation.

The inventiveness of Callis's constructed scenes and the avant-garde themes she explored are still of great relevance for the world of today. Things are not always so severe; a tenderness often shines through in her work. In one image, we see a young girl, sitting naked on the edge of her bed, soaking a black washcloth in a glass bowl on her lap. The soft light adds a warm glow to her quiet contemplation.

Overall, regardless of the subject, Callis never aimed to push her message on to the viewer. Her early colour photographs exude a timeless freshness and leave room for interpretation. This is a key quality of her work and, whether or not they are inspired by Jo Ann Callis, it is the kind of ambivalence that so many talented young contemporary photographer manage to incorporate in their work too.

[joanncallis.com](http://joanncallis.com)

Jo Ann Callis: Now and Then  
- November 24, 2018

Rose Gallery, Santa Monica

[rosegallery.net](http://rosegallery.net)



PHOTO BOOTH

## JO ANN CALLIS'S COLOR WORK

By Siobhán Bohnacker March 6, 2014

Jo Ann Callis was born in Ohio, in 1940; by the age of twenty-three, she was living in California with her first husband and two young children. After taking evening classes for several years, with a focus on sculpture, Callis enrolled as an undergraduate at U.C.L.A. There, as a student of Robert Heinecken, she was inspired to take up color photography after seeing the work of Paul Outerbridge. An early collection of color photography, which Callis calls her fetish project, shows solitary models in semierotic poses, using props—nylon wire pulled tight over bare skin, a flashlight probing a woman's thigh—to sexual effect. Callis exhibited this work for the first time in 1974, at the Woman's Building, a hub for feminists in downtown Los Angeles.



I recently asked Callis how her fetish project was received during that turbulent time. "I wasn't politically engaged in the feminist movement," she said. "I'm in agreement with the tenets of equality, of course, I just wasn't taking a public stance. There is that saying, 'The personal is political.' You are a product of the society you live in. During that whole movement, people were ardent—and they needed to be, to instigate change, to get things moving and understand that, yes, women are objectified—but in making art, gender is not something you assign to describe the whole person. At the time, I thought, Well, does this mean we can't show a female nude again? For me, it was more about representing an inner state of

mind. When I made that work, I was in the midst of leaving a marriage while trying to break into the art world at the same time. I was more concerned with making work that was strong in its own right, rather than using it to make a statement."

Callis's later work expresses tension and conflict through less erotic imagery. In her 1984 series, "Woman Twirling," she photographed her subjects in a studio that adjoined her house, which she styled to look like the interior of a home. "As time went by, I became acutely aware of how we are confronted by the transience of the people in our life. I wanted to juxtapose that idea with very still objects. It's really an attempt, photographically, to reconcile the two." Callis's carefully staged tableaux make oblique reference to this psychological conflict: in one photo, a tablecloth is being snatched from a set table; in another, a man laughs maniacally behind a house plant in the corner of a living room.

Callis told me that while the word "domesticity" is often invoked to describe her work, she finds the label pejorative. "The images are more about the routine of life, the actions in which we partake every day. I set my photos in a home because having a home is something for which I'm so grateful and consider a backbone to my life. It is the stage for so many crucial things that occur in a lifetime." Home, she said, "is a place of comfort and discomfort. There is a parallel between the two in most everything. I wanted to make work that represented that dichotomy."

All images courtesy of Rose Gallery.