

THE BATHERS



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNETTE WILLIAMS



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Electronic images available

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<http://cds.aas.duke.edu/press/fbp/williams/index.html>

DUKE PRESS PUBLISHES THE BATHERS, WINNER OF CDS/HONICKMAN FIRST BOOK PRIZE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Judge Mary Ellen Mark Selected Jennette Williams's black-and-white images of women bathers for prestigious prize

DURHAM, NC—Duke University Press is proud to announce the publication of *The Bathers*, the fourth winner of the fourth Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography. Jennette Williams, a fine arts photography instructor at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, was selected to receive the prize for her stunning platinum prints and color photographs of women at European and Turkish bath houses.

Celebrated photographer Mary Ellen Mark judged the competition and chose Williams for the prize because of her “original and beautifully rendered” photographs. “Jennette is both an excellent documentary photographer and a superb portraitist—a rare combination.” Mark also commented on the difficult decision she had to make, given the quality of the submissions. “It was a long and challenging process—especially knowing how much passion and work the photographers put into their projects.”

Jennette Williams received a grant of \$3,000, in addition to the publication of *The Bathers*. There will also be an exhibition at Duke University, and inclusion in a Web site devoted to presenting the work of winners of the prize.

“What makes for beauty in women? How do we as a society perceive women as they age?” Williams writes of the bathers she portrays in these sublime and sensuous photographs. “I began with what were simple intentions. I wanted to photograph without sentiment or objectification women daring enough to stand, without embarrassment or excuse, before my camera and I wanted my photographs to be beautiful. . . . I drew upon classical gestures and poses from Titian, Ingres, and Pre-Raphaelites (to name a few) and utilized the platinum printing process to assure a sense of timelessness, as if the older or ‘normal’ woman has always been a subject of the arts.”

Jennette Williams is from New York City, and in 1994 she began making photographs of women attending exercise classes at the “once elegant, now dilapidated, indoor pool” on the Upper West Side of Manhattan where she took her children for swimming lessons. Eventually, she expanded the scope of her project “to include new sites and their bathing rites and rituals, to broaden the age range of the subjects, and to photograph the aging body usually (safely) covered from view.”

Williams has a master’s degree from Yale University and has been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, a Golden Light Award from the Maine Photographic Workshops, and grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Her work has been featured in exhibitions at the Bonni Benrubi and Robert Mann galleries, New York; the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego; and the Photography Gallery at Florida International University, Miami. Her images have also been featured in such publications as *Blind Spot*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and the *Village Voice*, as well as

in the book *The Spirit of Family* by Al and Tipper Gore. This collection of photographs of women bathers will be her first book.

Williams's work was selected from three hundred entries in the fourth biennial First Book Prize competition. Offered every other year, the Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman First Book Prize competition is open to American photographers of any age who have never published a book-length work and who use their cameras for creative exploration, whether it be of places, people, or communities; of the natural or social world; of beauty at large or the lack of it; of objective or subjective realities. The prize honors work that is visually compelling, that bears witness, and that has integrity of purpose.

Previous winners of the prize are Danny Wilcox Frazier, whose *Driftless: Photographs from Iowa* (2007) was a New York Photo Award finalist for Best Photography Book of the year; Steven B. Smith, whose photographs of Western construction sites was entitled *The Weather and a Place to Live* (2005); and Larry Schwarm's pictures of Kansas prairie fires, *On Fire* (2003).

The next First Book Prize in Photography competition will be held in 2010. For more information, see the CDS Web site at <http://cds.aas.duke.edu/bp/index.html>.

The Bathers

Jennette Williams

with a foreword by Mary Ellen Mark

ISBN 978-0-8223-4623-4, \$39.95 cloth trade

76 pages, 43 duotone photos

Duke University Press in association with CDS Books of the Center for Documentary Studies
Winter 2009

Electronic images available: <http://cds.aas.duke.edu/press/fbp/williams/index.html>

Publicity Contact: Laura Sell, Duke University Press, 919-687-3639, lsell@dukeupress.edu

About Jennette Williams



Jennette Williams is a photography instructor at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Williams has a master's degree from Yale University and has been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship and grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Her work has been shown in exhibitions at the Bonni Benrubi, Robert Mann, and Opsis galleries in New York and the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego.

Williams's images have been featured in such publications as *Blind Spot* and the *New York Times Magazine*, as well as in the book *The Spirit of Family* by Al and Tipper Gore. Based on her pictures of women bathers, Williams was chosen from three hundred entrants to win the fourth biennial CDS/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography.

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Selected Interview Topics for
Jennette Williams, photographer of *The Bathers*
 (Duke University Press, Winter 2009)

- How did Williams come up with the idea for *The Bathers*?

Williams began photographing a few months after the birth of her child. She, like many parents, wanted to chronicle her child's growth and development, and make sense of the foreign landscape of motherhood. In 1994 she attended "Mommy and Me" swim classes with her child, and became intrigued by a group of women who met for water exercise after her class. She was impressed by the lack of self-consciousness of the mostly older women as they stretched and moved their semi-clad bodies without the slightest awkwardness. She took pictures of that group of women for five years.

- How did Williams end up in Eastern European and Turkish bathhouses?

In 2000, she received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation that enabled her to travel to the bath houses of Eastern Europe and Turkey, where she found not only a natural backdrop for photographing the female form but was able to explore more fully two elements that are foundational to her work. The first was water, with its connotations of birth, purification, sustenance, healing. The second was a broader age range of women who were not culturally indoctrinated, as Williams puts it, into believing "that looking young (be it through cosmetics, absurd diets, plastic surgery, or other compulsive measures) was a requirement for living a relevant and purposeful life."

- What was it like to work with the women?

Williams began by just hanging out at the baths, getting to know people. She asked many women to pose for her, and at first only a few adventurous souls showed up for the after-hours photo shoots. But women told their friends, and eventually she had a diverse group of women that included factory workers, saleswomen, secretaries, managers, Ph.D. candidates, teachers, and college and secondary students. First she photographed the women in bathing suits, which is their normal bathhouse attire, but as they grew more comfortable with her, she encouraged them to disrobe. Williams herself was naked during the sessions. She traveled with a large notebook full of hundreds of scans of paintings, which she shared with the women for inspiration. As Williams didn't speak Hungarian or Turkish, most of her direction was done in gesture and pantomime.

- Did Williams have any technical difficulties while working in the bathhouse environment?

The steam bath is a hostile environment for even the most obdurate photographer. The intense heat could not be moderated, and Williams could only work in eight-minute intervals. The conditions were so wet and unpredictable that the Polaroid emulsion would melt in a matter of minutes and leak down Williams's arm. At one point a photo assistant dropped a camera in the water.

- What types of cameras and lighting did Williams use?

Williams used a variety of different cameras including two Mamiya 7s, one 6 x 9, and a 4 x 5 field camera to make Polaroids, and to check light and scenes. Williams prefers to use natural light whenever possible, but in Hungary she used one light on a stand for shots in the steam bath. There was always a concern about electric shock when using lighting. The lights and cords were carefully wrapped in plastic and sealed with duct tape.

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Paintings that Inspired *The Bathers*



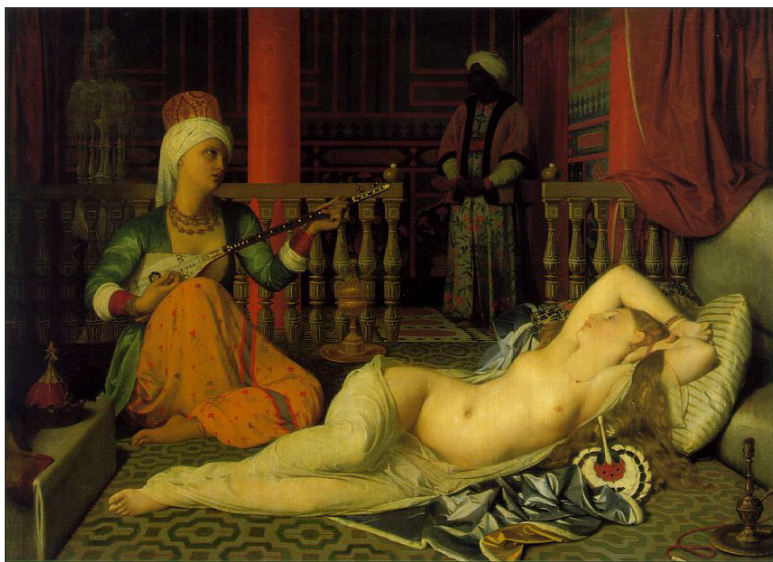
Paul Cezanne, *Large Bathers*, 1899-1906
(Philadelphia Museum of Art)



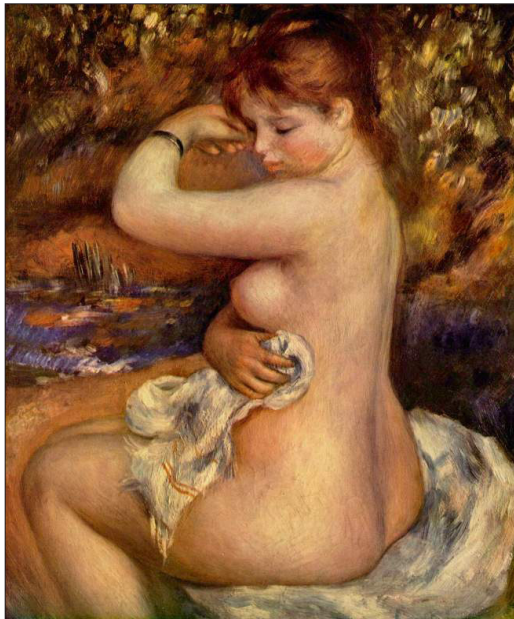
Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*
(MOMA, New York)



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*
(Louvre, Paris)



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque and Slave* (Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts)



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *After the Bath*
(Private Collection)



Titian, *The Venus of Urbino* (Uffizi, Florence)



Giorgione, *The Sleeping Venus* (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden)

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