

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

For Immediate Release

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EXHIBITION REDISCOVERS RADICAL IMAGES FROM EARLY 20TH-CENTURY FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHER

Anne Brigman: A Visionary in Modern Photography

On view at New York University's Grey Art Gallery
April 21–July 11, 2020



The Breeze, 1909/printed 1915
Gelatin silver print, 9 5/8 x 7
3/8 in. Wilson Centre for
Photography

The photographer, poet, and mountaineer Anne Brigman (1869–1950) is best known for her iconic landscape images from the early 1900s, which depict herself and other female nudes outdoors in the Sierra Nevada. *Anne Brigman: A Visionary in Modern Photography*, presented at the **Grey Art Gallery at New York University**, rediscovers and celebrates the work of this pioneering and radical American artist. Although the term “feminist art” was not coined until nearly seventy years after Brigman made her first photographs, she was, through her work, able to redefine her place as a woman in society and establish her role as an important forerunner in the field. The first major retrospective of the work of Anne Brigman, *A Visionary in Modern Photography* occupies a prominent position among recent exhibitions championing forgotten female artists that deserve greater attention. Organized by the Nevada Museum of Art, where it was originally on view in fall 2018 and was curated by Ann M. Wolfe, Andrea and John C. Deane Family Senior Curator and Deputy Director, the presentation at the

Grey Art Gallery will showcase some 115 photographs alongside related ephemera. The exhibition will be on view from **April 21 through July 11, 2020**.

Exhibition

Driven by nature as her source of personal liberation and spiritual exploration, Anne Brigman created distinct and daring photographs that established the female nude body in the landscape as the dominant subject. Brigman’s photographs express highly personal, emotionally charged, and mystical scenes. They are also beholden to pictorialism and Photo-Secession, as well as other fine-art photography groups that formed in the early 1900s in reaction to the popularity of the Kodak camera and amateur photography. “The time is right to rediscover the work of Anne Brigman,” notes curator Ann M. Wolfe. “The idea of a woman making nude self-portraits of herself in the early 1900s was radical, but to do so in the rugged wilderness of the Sierra Nevada was revolutionary.” Lynn Gumpert, Director of the Grey Art Gallery, adds, “The Grey Art Gallery is thrilled to present the work of this artist who so courageously crafted her own

independent voice and identity as a modern, liberated woman. Over a century ago, Brigman was making photographs that predate the work of many women artists in the late 1960s and '70s that aimed to further women's rights and assert a place for women artists in art history."

Born into a family of influential American missionaries on December 3, 1869, Anne Wardrope Nott (known as "Annie") grew up in Nu'uuanu Pali, a lush area north of Honolulu on the island of Oahu. Her childhood was shaped by the social customs of her upper-middle class, Victorian-era upbringing, in particular the expectation that women would remain in the domestic sphere. At the age of sixteen, she moved with her family to Los Gatos, California, and, at twenty-five, she married Martin Brigman, a Danish sea captain twenty years her senior. The couple eventually made their home in nearby Oakland. Excited by the opportunity to see the world, Anne often joined her husband's voyages in the South Seas. Oakland and the nearby city of Berkeley—part of the San Francisco Bay Area—provided Brigman with a vital creative community of writers, poets, painters, photographers, architects, and educators. When an accident on one of her husband's trips resulted in the loss of a breast, and the couple's relationship grew increasingly distant, Brigman embraced independence and immersed herself in the bohemian and progressive artistic milieu of the Bay Area. Here, as in the rest of California at the turn of the century, the Arts and Crafts movement flourished, advocating self-expression and living a simple life in harmony with art close to nature.

Brigman began making photographs in 1901, at the age of thirty-two. She joined the California Camera Club, the largest photography club in the country at the time, and soon befriended many Bay Area photographers including Laura Adams Armer, Francis Bruguière, Arnold Genthe, Adelaide Hanscom, and Oscar Maurer, among others. Brigman's earliest photographs were mostly portraits of family members and quiet atmospheric landscapes. She soon came to know the work of East Coast and European photographers via the seminal quarterly publication *Camera Work*, overseen by New York-based photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz heralded the Photo-Secession movement that promoted photography as fine art, and in 1903, he published Brigman's work in the periodical and granted her membership to the Photo-Secession group, a significant accomplishment for an artist so early in her career. In the years following, Brigman's images were included in several member exhibitions that Stieglitz organized for the Photo-Secession group in Washington, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Paris, London, and Hamburg. In 1906, Brigman was elected a Fellow of the Photo-Secession, the only West Coast-based photographer to receive the honor. Brigman maintained an ongoing written correspondence with Stieglitz until 1944, exchanging nearly 100 letters during this time, discussing their shared personal quest for artistic expression and freedom and advising on professional matters.

By the middle of the twentieth century's first decade, Brigman was traveling by stagecoach to Sacramento and setting out on foot, hiking and photographing in the unmapped terrain that had barely been explored by the nascent Sierra Club. Brigman never hired professional models, and instead photographed herself or female family members and friends as her subjects. She carried copies of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy* on her treks, inspired by their poetry and prose discussing the beauty and freedom of the human body and a return to a simple life in harmony with nature. To Brigman, too, nature was the foundation of her strength, personal liberation, and spiritual exploration—



Via Dolorosa, circa 1911/printed c. 1912
Gelatin silver print, 9 1/2 x 7 3/4 in.
The Michael G. and C. Jane Wilson 2007
Trust

she made many of her most powerful images at high elevation in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, where she felt closest to her true self. In one such self-portrait, *Via Dolorosa* (c. 1911), Brigman's nude body writhes alongside that of a severely tangled tree (common in the difficult topography of the Sierra Nevada), communicating a metaphor for human struggle and suffering. Her images of nude women in and around calm, reflective bodies of water imply a transcendent experience for the subjects. Brigman also photographed herself as a mountaineer, powerfully posed in her hiking costume. Though these images deviate somewhat from the spiritual and mystical themes of her photography, they reveal a different facet of female liberation. Due to the high elevation, harsh sunlight and shadow, and unexpected inclement weather that faced Brigman during her hiking excursions, her photographs were often underexposed and difficult to print. She extensively altered her negatives, often using etching tools to scrape and abrade the emulsion, and applying graphite and opaque tones to add or eliminate roots, tree branches, or details of clothing worn by her subjects. She also inserted clouds and other elements into her images by printing from additional plates of thin-frosted glass marked with graphite. Proponents of straight photography were critical of these techniques.

In 1910, Brigman made a brief trip to New York to visit Stieglitz and his Gallery 291, where her own photographs and those of other Photo-Secessionist photographers were exhibited. By this time, Stieglitz had embraced an exhibition program that focused almost exclusively on depictions of the female nude. Among the male artists she interacted with at Gallery 291, Brigman witnessed a rampant sexual liberalism she found disrespectful and at odds with her personal philosophies about the human body and nature. As the lone woman of the group, she suffered while the men delighted in looking together at erotica and other images of the female body. She later described her life-changing experiences in New York as the "wonderful terrible," alluding to her personal belief that suffering and struggle would aid and enable her personal and professional growth.



Sand Erosion, 1931
Gelatin silver print, 7 5/8 x 9 3/4 in.
The Michael G. and C. Jane Wilson
2007 Trust

After Brigman's sojourn to New York, her artmaking remained firmly situated in California, where she lived an increasingly independent and liberated life separated from her husband. She continued to make photographs that, as she described, told the narrative of "the passionate struggle of the evolving consciousness—the fight for clean, strong freedom of body and soul—which are one." In 1929, Brigman moved from Oakland to Long Beach in Southern California, signaling a turning point in her life and work. She turned her camera towards the beaches of the Pacific Ocean that she frequented, close to where her elderly mother and sisters lived. She took particular notice of sand erosions on these beaches, as seen in *Sand Erosion* (1931), which bore repeated abstract shapes and gradations of light and shadow that reflected the recurring movement of ocean

waves along the shore. The expansive skies and shoreline, ocean waves, and patterns of eroded sand continued to inspire Brigman, as can be seen in her photographs and poetry for the next 20 years, until her death in 1950.

Book

Anne Brigman: A Visionary in Modern Photography is accompanied by the first comprehensive book devoted to Anne Brigman, published by the Nevada Museum of Art and Rizzoli Electa in New York. The special deluxe packaging for this publication includes a box containing two volumes: a 400-page book devoted to Brigman's photographic career, and a re-published volume of Brigman's 1949 book of poetry, *Songs of a Pagan*. A special archive component of

the publication includes transcriptions of Brigman's writings, correspondence with Alfred Stieglitz, early works, linoleum-block prints, and Brigman's never-before-seen negatives that were recently digitized. The book received the Frances Smyth Ravenel Prize by the American Alliance of Museums. The book is written and edited by **Ann M. Wolfe**, Andrea and John C. Deane Family Senior Curator and Deputy Director, Nevada Museum of Art, with contributions from **Susan Ehrens**, art historian and independent curator; **Alexander Nemerov**, Department Chair and Carl & Marilyn Thoma Provostial Professor in the Arts and Humanities, Stanford University; **Kathleen Pyne**, Professor emerita of Art History, University of Notre Dame; and **Heather Waldroup**, Associate Director of the Honors College and Professor of Art History, Appalachian State University.

Sponsorship

Anne Brigman: A Visionary in Modern Photography is organized by the Nevada Museum of Art and is curated by Ann M. Wolfe, Andrea and John C. Deane Family Senior Curator and Deputy Director. Support for the presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is provided by the Ruth Ivor Foundation; the Charina Endowment Fund; The Michael G. and C. Jane Wilson 2007 Trust; the Abby Weed Grey Trust; and the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends.

The exhibition was originally supported by Lead Sponsor Wayne and Miriam Prim; Major Sponsors: The Bretzlaff Foundation, Carol Franc Buck Foundation, the Satre Family Fund at the Community Foundation of Western Nevada, and the Louise A. Tarble Foundation; Sponsors: Carole K. Anderson, Barbara and Tad Danz, Nancy and Harvey Fennell | Dickson Realty, Nancy and Brian Kennedy, Mercedes-Benz of Reno, an AutoNation Company, and Whittier Trust, Investment & Wealth Management; Supporting Sponsors: Brigid S. Barton, Denise Cashman, the Chica Charitable Gift Fund, Mimi Ellis-Hogan, Jan and David Hardie, the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, Keith and Sheila McWilliams, Eleanor and Robert Preger, Jenny and Garrett Sutton | Corporate Direct, Inc., and Lash and Gigi Turville; and Additional Support: Kathie Bartlett and John C. Deane.

About the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on studying art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

About the Nevada Museum of Art

The Nevada Museum of Art is the only art museum in Nevada accredited by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). A private, nonprofit organization founded in 1931, the Reno-based institution is supported by its membership as well as sponsorships, gifts, and grants. Through its permanent collections, original exhibitions and programming, and E.L. Cord Museum School, the Nevada Museum of Art provides meaningful opportunities for people to engage with a range of art and education experiences. The Museum's Center for Art +

Environment is an internationally-recognized research center dedicated to supporting the practice, study, and awareness of creative interactions between people and their environments. The Center houses unique archive materials from more than 1,000 artists working on all seven continents, including Cape Farewell, Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria, Lita Albuquerque, Burning Man, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Ugo Rondinone's *Seven Magic Mountains*, and Trevor Paglen's *Orbital Reflector*.

General Information

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Hours

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Closed Sunday, Monday, and major holidays

Admission

Suggested donation: \$5; free of charge to NYU students, faculty, and staff