

# Merry Alpern & Jo Ann Callis

## *Huis clos*

4 September – 1 November 2025



Galerie Miranda's autumn 2025 programme will propose a new dialogue between two bodies of photographic work previously exhibited at the gallery as solo shows: *Dirty Windows*, black and white documentary series by **Merry Alpern** from 1994; and *Early Color* by **Jo Ann Callis**, staged photographs from 1974-75. Two women artists whose photographs explore the grey zones of sex and power; fiction and reality; freedom, desire and constraint.

### *Huis clos*, definition:

- In law, a trial taking place behind closed doors, with no public audience
- In art: a work of fiction (film, novel, play) in which the action is set in an enclosed space
- In literature: a writer's device to create dramatic tension from the action being set in an enclosed space that the actors cannot escape

In 1970s Los Angeles, Jo Ann Callis was juggling the care of two young children, numerous home moves, night school and a pending divorce. Despite these obstacles, she worked constantly to produce her seminal series *Early Color*. Influenced notably by Paul Outerbridge but also Hans Bellmer and Pierre Molinier, her cinematographic scenes capture the tensions and anxiety of a claustrophobic domestic *huis clos* where freedom, pleasure and curiosity are bridled. Hitchcockian by their meticulous composition, Callis created all the decors for the series, that she photographed for the most part in her converted Los Angeles garage, with friends as models and the domestic objects at hand as props - string, tape, sheets, lamps, sand, honey and her household chairs, tables and plants. Considered subversive at the time, Jo Ann Callis's crafted images are "enigmatic visual metaphors of power and play, dominance and submission, desire and intimacy, drawing from the challenges she faced as a divorced mother of two in her mid-30s reentering the world on her own terms"<sup>1</sup>.

Twenty years later in New York, documentary photographer Merry Alpern, looking through a friend's Wall Street apartment window, discovered the sexual activities taking place in an illegal lap dance club on the floor below, seen through its bathroom window. Alpern decided to take pictures of this *huis clos* and, over the next eight months, photographed besuited stockbrokers and near-naked young women taking drugs, exchanging dollar bills, bargaining for and having sex. Exhibited in a New York gallery in 1995, the series provoked an outcry in

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<sup>1</sup> Miss Rosen, *AnOther Magazine*, 2022

the press which considered the photographs to be in violation of the private sphere, despite almost no faces being visible in the images. The scandal was such that the National Endowment for the Arts cancelled a grant that had just been awarded to Alpern. Cinematographic and in dramatic, grainy black & white, the series shot to fame and was acquired by major museums; it is today considered a 20<sup>th</sup> century classic on the themes of prostitution, censorship, power, surveillance.

Callis made this early work at the peak of the feminist art movement when artists such as Cindy Sherman, Judy Chicago, Hannah Wilke and Ana Mendieta were exploring gender, power and politics through images of the female body. Callis' first exhibition was at the Womens' Building in downtown Los Angeles, a feminist art centre. However, it's not a label that Callis adopted readily, saying "I was always tied to the home. I was not out marching or burning bras but I was watching those things on TV at the time and feeling all these feelings. That's where I went in my work." Fifty years later, her work still resonates and Callis continues to inspire contemporary photographers and film directors— notably, Sofia Coppola, who cited in her book [Archive](#) Callis' image "Blue Bow" as a photograph she kept returning to in the making of her 2017 film *The Beguiled*: "(Blue Bow) fits the feeling in *The Beguiled* of frustration and being trapped in ultra-femininity."

In 1995, the *Dirty Windows* media hype focused on the 'illicit' nature of the photos and the way they were taken but there was no serious discussion about what was in the pictures. A [New York Times](#) article from 1995 considered the work as a pop culture phenomenon that contributes to the commodification of sexuality. There was no critique about what it meant that these rare, taboo images of male power and female objectification were photographed by a woman artist trained in sociology. In one interview, Alpern was asked how she felt photographing these scenes, as a woman photographer, and she answered that "Although the notion of the "female gaze" has never really interested me, as a woman I could project some of my own experiences onto the pantomime in the window... On the flip side was the anthropological experience of viewing scenes that are quite ordinary in a man's world. It was a revelation to watch the bathroom habits of the opposite sex." By 'flipping the gaze' this way, Alpern finds herself in the company of other feminist artists who documented mechanisms of male domination, such as Laurie Anderson's 1973 series *Fully Automated Nikon (Object/Objection/Objectivity)* and Annette Messager's 1972 series *Les Approches*. It is perhaps also worth recalling the political context of the time - Alpern exhibited *Dirty Windows* in 1995, six months after the election of conservative Rudy Giuliani as Mayor, with his famous promise to 'clean up' New York - from crime, drugs and urban decay. From this perspective, one can re-read the violent reaction to Merry Alpern's photographs as the attempt by an angry male establishment to punish her for exposing its hypocrisy.

For its autumn 2025 exhibition, Galerie Miranda thus invites us to reconsider these two *huis clos* from the perspective of women's status today: the hyper sexualisation of women's bodies on social media is being accompanied in many countries by the return of a conservative vision of sexual politics, and the overturning of hitherto enshrined rights such as those established by Roe vs Wade. Through this contemporary prism, these two photographic *huis clos*, made in 1975 and 1995, remain deeply relevant by the way the artists created their images and by the fundamental subjects they address. Working from very different positions, documentary and fiction, these two women artists develop their central subject, of trapped women, with a similar visual construction: cinematographic, fragmented, constrained and faceless bodies that provoke our imagination and continue to question visual paradigms of power and sexuality. As Callis commented recently, the fact that her images have stayed so relevant, shows "that things haven't changed enough"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [CNN, 2023](#)

Artist biographies:

**Merry ALPERN (b. 1955, USA)**

Merry Alpern is a contemporary American photographer known for her controversial oeuvre and utilization of surveillance photography. Born on March 15, 1955 in New York, NY, Alpern studied sociology at Grinnell College in Iowa but returned to New York before graduating in order to pursue photography. Her first solo exhibition, in 1989 at the Camera Club of New York, documented the struggle of a homeless, crack-addicted couple and their desperation to survive. The series was widely published and received numerous national awards and grants. In 1999, following the *Dirty Windows* series, Merry Alpern produced the series *Shopping* whereby, equipped with a tiny surveillance camera and a video camcorder hidden in her discreetly perforated purse, Alpern wandered through department stores, malls, and fitting rooms, seeking to capture and understand the obsessive quest – by both herself and by other women shoppers - for the ultimate purchase. Today, her works are in key American and European collections including: Baltimore Museum of Art; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Houston Museum of Fine Arts, TX; International Center of Photography, NY; Museum of Modern Art, NY; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; New Orleans Museum of Fine Art, LA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY; and in Europe, the FC Gundlach Collection, Hamburg, Germany; Foundation Cartier Pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris, France; Koerfer Collection, Zurich, Switzerland; Wilson Centre for Photography, London, UK. Merry Alpern currently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

**JO ANN CALLIS (b. 1940, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA)**

Jo Ann Callis is a photographer based in Los Angeles. After graduating from UCLA she began teaching at CalArts in 1976 and is still a faculty member of the School of Art's Program in Photography and Media. The subject of over 40 personal exhibitions, her work has been acquired by major private and public collections and exhibited internationally including at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Hammer Museum; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In 2009, the J. Paul Getty Museum presented a retrospective of her work in Los Angeles titled *Woman Twirling*. Callis has received three NEA Fellowships and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

**Galerie Miranda**

Resident in Paris since 1995, in 2018 Franco-Australian Miranda Salt founded her photography gallery in the heart of the 10th arrondissement of Paris, a bustling beacon of contemporary Parisian cultural life. Galerie Miranda represents photographic works and artists recognized in their countries but little known in France/Europe: often but not exclusively women. Inaugurated on March 8, 2018, International Women's Day, the gallery quickly established itself on the Parisian landscape with a strong program of exhibitions including artists Merry Alpern, Jo Ann Callis, Ellen Carey, John Chiara, Chuck Kelton, Chloe Sells, Arne Svenson, Nancy Wilson-Pajic. The gallery today represents over twenty contemporary artists as well as selected historical works such as Dave Heath, André Kertész, Charles Jones, managed in collaboration with leading international galleries. Participating in fairs, Galerie Miranda is also a bookstore and offers a curated selection of books on photography. For several years and in parallel with the activity of her gallery and bookstore, Miranda Salt has developed roaming projects (pop-ups, collaborations) in France and abroad.

For more information:

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VISUALS AND CAPTIONS AVAILABLE FOR FOR PRESS PUBLICATION

MERRY ALPERN

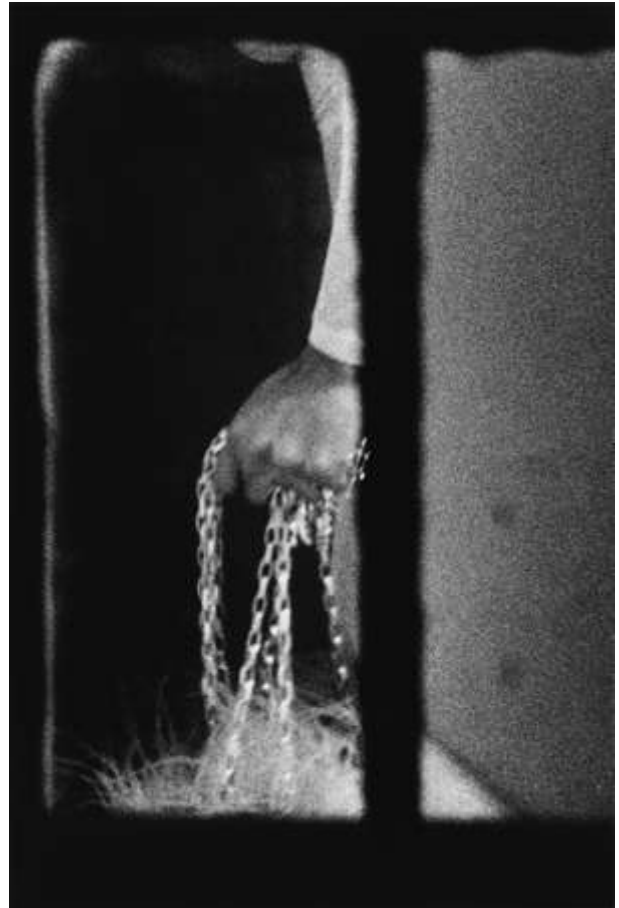
*Dirty Windows, 1994-95*

Vintage silver gelatin print

Signed and dated on verso by the artist

© Merry Alpern courtesy Galerie Miranda









JO ANN CALLIS  
*Early Color*, c. 1975  
Archival pigment print  
Signed and dated on verso by the artist  
© Jo Ann Callis courtesy Galerie Miranda









