

Double

Marisa Angell Brown /
Laurie Simmons

Take

Marisa Angell Brown: There are actually three people in this photograph—well, four, if you count Georgia O’Keeffe. There is Eleanor, of course, the subject, Harry Callahan’s wife, model, and collaborator. She was also his patron, if you consider the many years when she supported them both through her work as an executive secretary, or the later years, after he had achieved a certain level of fame, when she funneled her salary into his artistic practice. Here, she stands naked in the calm waters of Lake Michigan with her eyes closed, her thick black hair drifting around her shoulders like seaweed. Callahan’s prints were always small, and this one is no exception: it’s eight by ten inches. But there is something about Eleanor that calls to mind the iconic paintings of women from the history of art.

Harry must have been standing in the water too when this photograph was taken, just a few feet from Eleanor. Was he wearing a bathing suit? Did he bring his camera bag into the lake, straining to keep it dry? If Eleanor wore a bathing suit to enter the water, did he drape it over his shoulder or around his neck while he worked? There must have been more photographs taken before and after this moment, but this is the one that stuck, that helped to establish his career. Nineteen forty-nine: three years after he began teaching photography at the Institute of Design in Chicago, one year before their only child, Barbara, was born, and eleven years before Callahan moved to Providence to establish the Photography Department at Rhode Island School of Design. He was just getting started.

Two others are in this photograph as well, even if they are not visible: Alfred Stieglitz and his wife, model, and collaborator, Georgia O’Keeffe. Callahan said that it was Stieglitz’s notorious nude photographs of O’Keeffe that inspired him to photograph Eleanor in this way. Over twenty-odd years, he photographed Eleanor hundreds of times.

As he worked on this image, Harry would have been giving Eleanor direction. “I never initiated any poses myself,” she said in 2006. “Everything, photographically, was purely from Harry.” In interviews, he was always shy and a little bit inarticulate; he talked about his own work speculatively, as though it were someone else’s. He was asked frequently about working with Eleanor—there was always an interest in whether she was “willing,” as one interviewer put it in 1981. Eleanor herself chose language that reinforced this sexually submissive subtext, saying in 2008, “He knew that I never said no. . . . Harry could do whatever he wanted with me and my body.”

So this photograph is not only a portrait of a woman, it’s a portrait of a marriage. Eleanor paid the bills, but then she gave her husband complete control of her body, which he used to make his work and his name. But look at her in this photograph: it would be impossible to say that she has no agency. She’s like a goddess of the ancient world, alit in Lake Michigan—but of course sprung from the artist’s mind and hand.



Harry Callahan
Eleanor, Chicago, 1949
25.4 × 20.3 cm. (10 × 8 in.)
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Laurie Simmons: I've always loved looking at Harry Callahan's *Eleanor, Chicago* (which I think of privately as *woman's head / water*, much more the way I would title my photographs). I look at the picture often for inspiration and research, and I think the fact that it was created just a few months before I was born makes it even more significant to me.

When looking at art I typically respond to what I see, but in the *Eleanor* picture I respond to how it makes me feel—a cascade of emotions, including the exhilaration of floating alone in a vast body of water and the terror of not knowing how far I'd have to sink for toes to touch bottom (or would I actually want to touch bottom). Adrift in a lake, as *Eleanor* was, or in the sea, there are two possibilities: one can face the shore and stay tethered to a sense of security, reality, and a glimpse of civilization or face the horizon and feel that powerful urge to swim towards it that probably wouldn't end well. The picture summons in me the feeling of being left so alone, adrift, and so pleasantly unmoored that no one knows where you are except you.

In 1997 I made my own version of *Eleanor, Chicago*, partly as an homage to Callahan but also that I might describe and record my own version of floating. In my picture, *Midlake*, *Eleanor* is a puppet-maker's sculptural model of my own head, fastened to a stick. I shot the photo at Twin Lakes in Salisbury, Connecticut, where I'd been renting a house and studio for several years. I'd recently learned that Paul Strand had photographed some abstract

pictures on the porch of a house at Twin Lakes in 1916 and I was fairly sure the photos were taken on our front porch. Although I rarely think of myself as a photographer, more as an artist who uses a camera, I was surprisingly excited to be part of a local photo legacy.

I asked my photo assistant to swim out into the lake and hold the stick underwater so only the head would show above the surface. My assistant was close to shore, but we shot the picture in a way that made the lake look endless, the reflections obscuring both the underwater human and the stick. I've never really been happy with the puppet doll's features, and the picture was made in the almost predigital age without any of the tools at my fingertips that could've helped me make the image I wanted. I almost see *Midlake* now as a template or model for another picture I've yet to make.

On a formal level, the Callahan photo has everything I love: as few elements as possible and a composition with almost childlike symmetry. *Eleanor* is drifting slightly to the left but nearly smack-dab in the center of the picture plane. With her closed eyes and vague hint of a smile, it's easy to imagine her imagining the places she could float away to and disappear. I'm certain she never imagined how many people would share this private moment long after she and Harry were gone.

