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TIME PASSAGES

Photos, poems and sound mix in a surprisingly sharp-edged show at the Weisman about women aging.

Author: Mary Abbe Martin; Staff Writer

The question of age is a dicey one for gals.

Even in these post-liberation times, many women blanch when asked how old they are. In youth-obsessed America, women's looks are deemed to have peaked somewhere between 16 and 26. Once that blush is off, they have nothing to go on but wit and workouts, brains, moxie, resumes and little white lies. And so, even if sinewy necks and veiny hands give them away, many a woman will dodge the age question, knowing that older is definitely not better.

Take heart, girls. Three of your sisters have taken time - three years, in fact - to map another way. At the Weisman Art Museum, an elegantly minimal installation of photos by Laura Crosby, text by Marisha Chamberlain and sound-score by Libby Larsen offers a meditation on time's passage that suggests it is possible to live for a century gracefully and wear your inevitable wrinkles with unself-conscious pride. After all, you earned them.

On view through April 7, "Time Take" features a grid of portraits of 25 females, head and hands only. Ranging in age from newborn to 100, they are arrayed in five tight rows of five prints each. Each row represents two decades - newborn to age 20; 20 to 40 and so on. The last woman in the last row is 100-year-old Marguerite, wizened and laughing uproariously, the nails on her arthritic hands gleaming with bright polish. Her gleeful expression is, curiously, the happy mirror to that of 2-week-old Sophie crying lustily in the first shot.

"I wanted to see how time moves through women, for it to be a collage across time," said Crosby, whose photos were the starting point.

She and her collaborators began meeting informally about three years ago, looking for common ground. They soon fixed on time and its impact. Figuring out how to visualize that concept took longer. At one point, they even imagined an installation on a boat with music and images that visitors would somehow walk through. That proved too ambitious, however, and they soon decided that a museum or gallery was a more likely venue.

"The blush is off the rose for women in our culture far earlier than in some societies," said Weisman curator Patricia McDonnell, who welcomed the show to the museum. Rather than harp on society's ageism and other shortcomings, she said, the installation "seems consciously focused on maturity. It's really more about the deepening and enriching of life; it's more constructive than critical."

It also is unusually honest about who women are, how they look, what they think and how they sound. Chamberlain contributed a spare, poetic text printed on the wall around the photos. It arranges familiar, everyday phrases into subtly rhythmic stanzas whose quiet undercurrents have a surprisingly sharp edge.

Chamberlain didn't interview the women photographed because the project wasn't intended to be a documentary.

"I wanted to capture, vividly, thoughts of myself and others at various ages," she said. "I worked

on them in the sort of blurts that we have on the run - when time is sort of rushing by and all of a sudden you're much older than you thought you'd ever be."

Larsen also worked up a collage of sounds and voices including a toy accordion, some jazz songs (including Alberta Hunter singing "I've Had Enough"), a Creek Indian lullaby, a shaman's chant and Chamberlain's poetry read by various people.

The challenge, Larsen said, was to contribute something that would "help hold the participant - not as a `viewer' or `auditor' - but hold them as a participant and suspend them in time."

Projected from small, carefully placed speakers, her sounds flutter in the air like murmurings at a cocktail party where snatches of music or conversation catch the ear, then give way to other bits. As for the photos, there is not a professional model among the 25 faces. Two of Crosby's granddaughters are included, along with a couple of friends prominent in Twin Cities art circles. The majority, however, are "ordinary" women - plump, plain, worried, tired, pretty, wistful, elegant, handsome, playful - whose looks are conventional rather than extraordinary.

Crosby said she found her subjects by putting word out among friends and colleagues and "the old-girl network." Blacks, Asians, Hispanics and Indians mingle with the predominantly European-American faces to mirror the racial and ethnic makeup of Minnesota. The "bald" woman in the 20-to-40-year-old row also was a conscious choice. She was undergoing cancer treatment, and Crosby sought her because cancer is an omnipresent threat to contemporary American women.

"I did not want to have anything sensationalistic here," Crosby said. "I think this is a balance between what is real and what is a vision. When you're dealing with the beauty industry, that is not real. . . . It was fascinating to see the natural beauty that came forth from the women who have lived full lives. Wisdom starts to show - and acceptance. Those are the basics."