

# A MASSIVE REUNION

## DIRADO'S LEGACY ON DISPLAY IN FITCHBURG

How do you begin to engage with an exhibition of someone whose work you've followed for nearly 40 years, a period during which he documented many of your friends and, over time, as a reporter, had the honor of working with? In "Stephen DiRado, Better Together: Four Decades of Photographs," on view through June 1 at the Fitchburg Art Museum (FAM), everyone seems to have been a friend of the Worcester-based photographer and Clark University professor. It's one of those rare exhibitions that on any day, you'll probably find one of the people captured on the walls standing next to you.

Many of DiRado's students were on hand for the show's opening reception on February 8, searching for themselves in "The Classroom Series" that DiRado started in 2008 and continues today, documenting each new group of students; they weren't alone. "So many people came to see it from my past, fans from afar flying and driving in to shake my hand," DiRado recalled. "Like a proud parent, you were all my children, coming off the walls in the real world to be part of a massive reunion."

DiRado has immersed himself into the lives and settings of the people that he's photographed for an extended period of time,

whether they be mall rats or mall shoppers, sun bathers or students, friends or strangers soon to be friends, only leaving when he feels that he's taken every shot that needs to be taken.

"One of the great things about Stephen's work is that it already appeals to people," said Fitchburg Art Museum Director Nick Capasso. "These are photographs about individuals, lovers, friends, communities, family and their relationships to each other and two places: Worcester and Martha's Vineyard. The photos are also overtly beautiful, and approachable, but never sentimental. Visitors feel it; visitors get it. And these images are valued even more deeply during this terrible time in American history, marked by politics that are distinctly cruel and inhuman. Everybody could use a little Stephen DiRado right about now."

DiRado is, perhaps, best known for his "Mall" Series, shot over three years from spring 1984 through summer 1986, during which time he took approximately 4,200 images at the now demolished Worcester Center Galleria. Because of its unique capturing of a time period holding

great nostalgia for many, it's been the focus of recurring national and international attention, with DiRado finding himself unexpectedly back in the spotlight several times, including a January 2024 feature, "A Begrudgingly Affectionate Portrait of the American Mall" by Margaret Talbot in *The New Yorker*, and a huge totally unexpected spread in *The Daily Mail* of London in 2014. The work was first shown at the Worcester Art Museum in 1986.

Museum visitors are welcomed into DiRado's world through "Worcester, Massachusetts," a past and present introduction to the neighborhood in which he's lived since 1985. His first series, "Bell Pond, Summer 1983," was shot over a six-month period at a local swimming hole about a half mile from his current home. It's where he learned to approach and make his subjects comfortable about having their photos taken.

One of the people he photographed was Andrea Binn, who surprised DiRado by attending the opening reception. While she wasn't included in the show, he said he knew exactly who she was and what pictures he had taken of her the moment he saw her. Binn recalled the first

### FEATURED EXHIBITION

**STEPHEN DIRADO,  
BETTER TOGETHER:  
FOUR DECADES OF  
PHOTOGRAPHS**

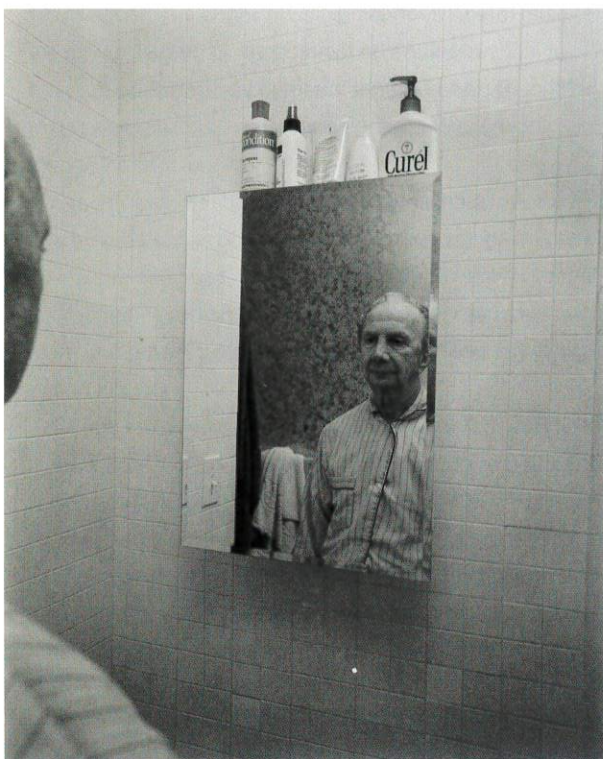
**FITCHBURG ART  
MUSEUM**

185 ELM STREET  
FITCHBURG,  
MASSACHUSETTS

**THROUGH JUNE 1**

LEFT: Stephen DiRado, *With Dad Series: Stranger in the Mirror*, Marlborough, MA, November 2, 2003, silver gelatin print, printed 2014.

BOTTOM: Stephen DiRado, *JUMP Series: Edgartown*, MA, July 30, 2006, archival pigment print, printed 2024.





time she saw DiRado show up at Bell Pond with his huge 4' x 5' monorail view format camera that he set up on a tripod. "I was thinking who is this guy with the camera. And what does he think he's going to do with those pictures?" The people at the beach began calling him, "The Picture Man." The "Bell Pond" series was exhibited at the Grove Street Gallery in Worcester in 1984.

Perhaps DiRado's most powerful work was created for "With Dad," for which he documented his father, Gene, as Alzheimer's Disease slowly took over, taking thousands of images over a five-year period at the nursing home that he had been moved into. One morning, I was able to join him as he brought his full camera setup to document his visit that day. "I've done this many times," he told me.

As we entered the room, DiRado introduced me to his father, who opened his eyes, reading my face before closing them again. Stephen would talk to him; when he connected, his dad

would respond with his little glimmer smile of the eyes or laugh that our elders give us — that moment that means everything.

DiRado wouldn't use a flash to enhance an image, instead depending on the day's sunlight and that in the room. As he focused on his father's hair, the raindrops on the window behind Gene looked like Indian beadwork. For another shot, DiRado brought the artistry of Gene's wheelchair into focus for a half-second exposure combining the silver of the steel and the blackness of its wheels with the cut-up long socks protecting his arms.

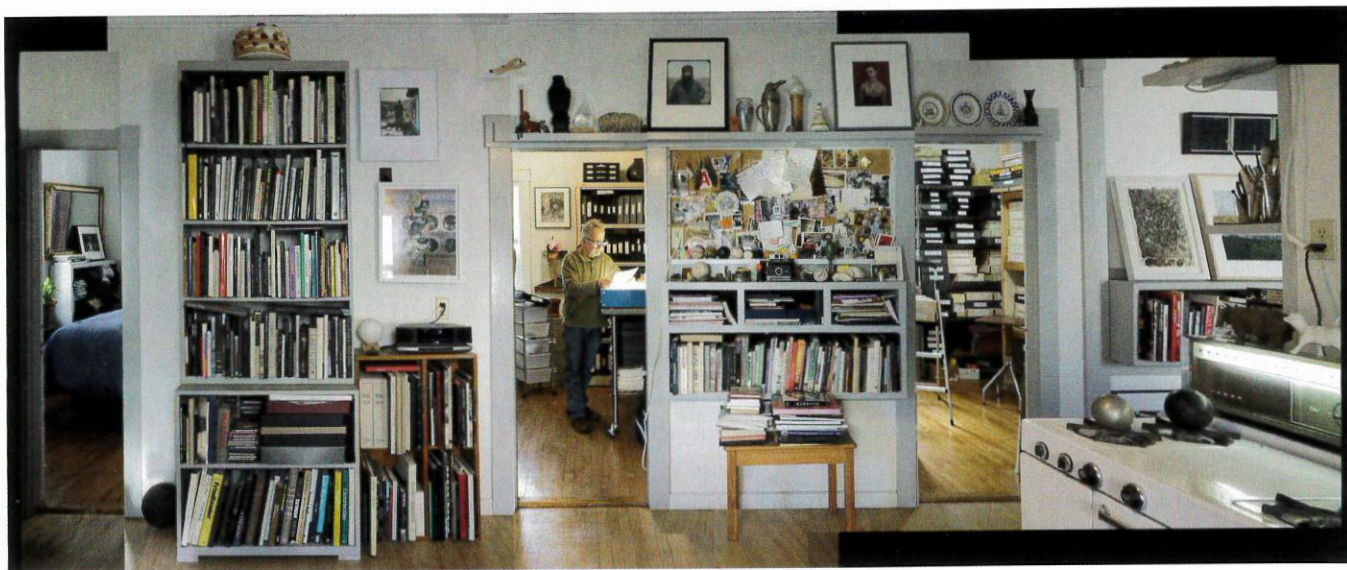
To me, it seemed, DiRado was searching for something — perhaps a glimpse of his dad's warmth and soul. I surmised that the reason he devoted so much time to photographing his father — and perhaps all his subjects — was he was aiming to capture the definitive image to capsulize him for eternity. With years to reflect, introducing the series on the FAM wall, DiRado wrote that the thousands of images he had taken of his dad's decline allowed him to hold onto him for as long as possible. "The act of photographing became my way to cope with an intolerable situation. The resulting photographs lay witness for me to comprehend the unbearable deterioration of his mind and body."

Gene DiRado passed in 2009. In 2019, "With Dad" was released by Worcester's Davis Publications, inspiring Boston's WGBH-TV and PBS stations nationwide to air a short 20-minute film of the same name documenting Gene DiRado's 20-year decline which included interviews with DiRado and digital video footage by Stephen's brother, and Gene's son, Chris.

That extended painful time was made slightly easier through his "Dinner Series," in which DiRado documented almost every dinner he shared with others, be it at his Worcester home or with family and friends in local restaurants and those on Martha's Vineyard, where he spent many summers creating several more series of work. They include "JUMP," compiled from thousands of images taken between noon and 2 p.m., at high sun, "every nice summer's weather day," between 2000 and 2006 of people leaping off the American Legion

TOP: Stephen DiRado, *Martha's Vineyard, Beach People: Claudia, Justino and Friends, Gay Head, MA, August 10, 1990*, silver gelatin contact print, printed 2001.

BOTTOM: Stephen DiRado, *Studio Composite, 2025*. Courtesy of the artist.



Memorial Bridge, also known as the Jaws Bridge, between Oaks Bluff and Edgartown; and “Beach People,” featuring images taken every summer between 1988 and 2019 on the nude beach of Aquinnah (previous known as Gay Head, till 1997), which earned DiRado a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 2012.

The introduction to “Beach People” notes that it “represents his first complete integration of life and work, and the culmination of his aesthetic and social skills,” making his subjects comfortable being shot in the nude through the sharing of photobooks of past work, explaining why he was photographing them and why he was there — “a liminal almost spiritual space where earth, sea and sky meet” — and what he was aiming for in his images. “His sheer physical commitment to the project helped him earn the trust of naked and near-naked strangers, many of whom were eager to be photographed, and eventually became dear friends,” it concluded.

Greater insight to his work on Martha’s Vineyard and work ethic can be seen in “Summer Spent,” a 40-minute self-made film being shown in a miniature theater setting (along with the PBS “With Dad” documentary). It shows DiRado preparing his subjects to be shot, showing them in the best possible light, then, later that night, reviewing negatives — which are spectacular in their own right — from the past day’s work.

During the opening, the biggest crowd gathered in the partial darkness of the huge gallery space that houses “Across the Table,” a collection of 1001 images taken from 2013 to the present at “breakfasts, lunches, dinners, coffee and drinks” that pair DiRado with those he’s with that day, creating a view from both sides of the table. Several of the places and people captured in the images, most recently taken with a Sony RX1r digital camera, are no longer with us.

“‘Across the Table’ was intended to be projected and HUGE, so we would be overwhelmed by each gathering, with the same feeling one gets watching a movie in a cinema theater,” DiRado explained. “We are special, and enjoy our time together, all the while reminded, image by image with time slipping by us, that restaurants go away, and people die.”

Since the show opened on February 1, Capasso has enjoyed observing the museum visitors’ reaction to the collection. “People love it. Even those who do not know Stephen, or the recurring cast of Central Mass. characters, become drawn in. Some have described it as hypnotic. Many cry. ‘Across the Table’ combines photography with cinema to create an almost four-hour narrative which is simultaneously the artist’s autobiography, a portrait of a community of artists, and a profound meditation on the passage of time.”

Other sections of the exhibition include “Celestial,” perhaps his most commercially successful series featuring “one-in-a-lifetime” comets, and “Jacob’s House,” which documents the late found object collector Jacob Knight, who would turn his finds — “tools, toys, antique photographs, junk and sheer garbage” — into extraordinary one-of-a-kind collages with his East Brookfield, Massachusetts home and yard being an extension of that.

If you go to see the exhibition, and aren’t familiar with DiRado’s work, make sure to stop in the small exhibition area that overlooks the museum courtyard that contains a timeline of his career, some of the equipment he’s worked with and images of his workspaces and archival area. It’s a show not to be missed. “With the recent passing of John O’Reilly,” Capasso said, “Stephen DiRado is now the most significant contemporary artist and fine art photographer in Central Massachusetts, and one of the greatest photographers of his generation, both in New England and nationally.”



Stephen DiRado,  
*Dinner Series: Monday  
Night Salon with Pedro  
Abascal, Worcester,  
MA, September 24,  
2000, pigment print,  
printed 2024.*