



The infinite hall of mirrors leading to Gloria Vanderbilt's bedroom in her Manhattan house, 2011.

HIGHLIGHT

Huntsville Picture Show

Jonathan Becker's glamorous portraits of Gloria Vanderbilt complement her paintings in a sprawling display at Alabama's Huntsville Museum of Art

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Once Wernher von Braun spearheaded the American rocket program after World War II in Huntsville, Alabama, the sleepy southern town theretofore known as the “Watercress Capital of the World” was endowed with a modern calling and a vast new source of wealth. In 1975, the Huntsville Museum of Art was born along with the Von Braun Civic Center. From pictures, the very fancy museum galleries might as well have been those of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

I first became aware of Huntsville at the age of 19, when I was house painting for John Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas. We’d met at Elaine’s. I needed work, and John had rented a tiny, run-down Stanford White town house on 77th off Madison—the one with a back-service passage into the Carlyle often used to advantage by Jack Kennedy. There, in 1974, preparations were well underway for the ill-fated Broadway musical *Man on the Moon*. (George Lucas had been solicited as a producer for the show by John’s daughter, Mackenzie Phillips, an actress in Lucas’s *American Graffiti*. Lucas ended up passing, and Andy Warhol wound up producing the musical. But it’s been often presumed that somewhere in all this was the genesis of *Star Wars*. John thought so, anyway.) The musical would recount von Braun’s post-W.W. II work in Huntsville that led to the development of the Saturn V rocket, instrumental in achieving Kennedy’s goal of sending men to the moon.

Nearly 50 years later, the Huntsville Museum's director, Christopher Madkour, asked whether I would loan my portraits of Gloria Vanderbilt to supplement a retrospective of her fascinatingly dark paintings.

I photographed Gloria for the first time in 1996, for *Vogue*. A Condé Nast messenger left all the original color chromes on the subway, never to be found again, but the black and whites were wonderful and useful, and Gloria loved them. In the years following there were more assignments to photograph Gloria for *Vogue* and for *Town & Country*, and Gloria herself hired me for portraits aplenty. So of course I said yes to the museum's request for what would be Gloria's first museum exhibition and first retrospective. "Gloria Vanderbilt: An Artful Life" will also be complemented by a show of my own photographs, "Jonathan Becker: Social Work," comprising portraits of the Duchess of Alba, Eudora Welty, Venus Williams, André Leon Talley, Al Sharpton, the Prince of Wales, and so on. Both exhibitions open on October 29.

I had the idea to trek down to Huntsville in an R.V. On hearing this, the museum staff didn't miss a beat, so very unconditionally saying that such a large terrestrial craft was not welcome in their parking lot. We'll see. Learning to drive an R.V. now.

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In the boudoir, Gloria's negligée hangs next to *Pictures on a Bedroom Wall*, a family scene reflective of her own, which she painted in 1975.



The centerpiece of *Faraway*, a triptych painted by Gloria in 1972. Gloria's husband Wyatt Cooper and her sons Christopher and Stan Stokowski cross the Mianus River, with the artist leading the way; her old Connecticut house is depicted in the background.



In Gloria's boudoir, framed works include one of her earliest collages, *Silver Elizabeth*, from her prolific "Elizabethan" series.



A dollhouse in Gloria's art studio. She scribbled narrative and poetry on its little walls, including "I am still living in a doll's house."



Gloria at home in Manhattan in a Fortuny gown from her collection, 2011. Behind her hangs a life-size portrait of her mother, Gloria Morgan Vanderbilt, painted in Paris by Dana Pond in 1923. Above the mantel is a 1950s still life by Gloria, later purchased by her good friend Richard Avedon; after Avedon died, Gloria's son Anderson Cooper purchased back the piece for her at auction.



Gloria outside her house on Beekman Place, in Manhattan, 1997.



Yes, a sculpture from Gloria's otherworldly "Dream Boxes" series, from the early 2000s. She scoured flea markets for found objects, especially Kewpie dolls such as this one.



Original Vanderbilt monogrammed china and silverware, set for dinner. Gloria entertained on the real stuff.



Gloria at home in Manhattan, 1998. Behind her is a life-size portrait of herself in Fortuny, painted in 1982 by Aaron Shikler.



Gloria on Beekman Place, 1996.



In *Father and Son*, painted in 1965 by Gloria, Wyatt reads to their son Carter.



Vignettes of Gloria's house include a silver toilette and slipper from the family silver collection and a Chinese tea caddy and ivory figurine.



Above her jade-glass collection hangs a portrait of Gloria.



More from the family silver collection: a trio of fish rests on a lacquered papier-mâché sofa table.



Gloria on a 19th-century Ottoman silk-and-silver bedcover in her boudoir, a Russian icon on the headboard behind her. Included among her own works on the wall is the large *Celebra on*, 1968.