



Biren, Joan Elizabeth (JEB) (b. 1944)

by Tee A. Corinne

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During the 1970s and 1980s, the photographs of Joan Elizabeth Biren, better known as JEB, defined and set the standard for lesbian feminist image making in the United States. They are broadly inclusive, showing women of various ages, different racial and ethnic groups, able-bodied and differently-abled, mothers and children, bearded women, country and city dykes, and those involved in traditional and innovative spiritual practices.

The eldest daughter of civil servants, JEB was born and raised in Washington, D. C. Given her background, it is not surprising that she considered a career in politics or the law. After receiving a B. A. from Mount Holyoke College in 1966, she studied political science and sociology at Oxford University. Upon returning to Washington in 1969, she became active in the women's liberation movement and came out publicly.

JEB co-founded (along with others, including Rita Mae Brown and Charlotte Bunch) The Furies, a shortlived but influential lesbian separatist collective that flourished in 1971 and 1972. She published many of her early images in the collective's newspaper, *The Furies*.

At a time of intense activism in the United States--during the period of anti-Vietnam War protests, Black Power, feminism, and the gay and lesbian liberation movements--JEB chose photography as a way to make lesbians more visible. She took a correspondence course in photography and worked in a camera store, in the audio-visual division of a large trade association, and on a small-town weekly newspaper in order to develop her talent and technique.

Between 1971 and 1991, JEB concentrated on making photographs of lesbians. Her images reached a national--and sometimes international--audience through periodicals such as *off our backs*, *The Washington Blade*, and Boston's *Gay Community News*. Many of her photographs were used on book covers and in books and films. She produced record album images for Meg Christian, Maxine Feldman, Margie Adam, Casse Culver, and Willie Tyson.

At Moonforce Media, which she co-founded, JEB also helped organize a national women's film circuit and the first feminist film festivals in Washington, D.C. In the midst of her political and photographic activism, she completed an M. A. in Communication at American University in 1974.

JEB self-published two calendars illustrated with photographs of known lesbians--such as Rita Mae Brown--and images of women together (1974 and 1976). The publications were followed by books of photographic images, *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* (1979) and *Making A Way: Lesbians Out Front* (1987). During the 1980s, she criss-crossed the United States giving slide lectures and photography workshops.

Since the early 1990s, JEB has created videos. Her work in this medium includes *For Love and For Life* (1990), about the 1987 March on Washington; several videos about lesbian health issues; and *No Secret Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon* (2002). She was video producer for the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation and produced the event's official

video, *A Simple Matter of Justice* (1993).

In Cheatham and Powell's *This Way Daybreak Comes* (1986), JEB is quoted as follows: "Lesbians are not just women who are like everybody else, only we do something else in bed. We are different. We are women figuring out how to be 'other than' in a society that has no tolerance for deviance. Therefore if we can see what we look like, have a visual image of lesbians, we can more easily be ourselves." In so justifying her work, JEB makes clear that her art is linked with her activism.

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About the Author

Tee A. Corinne was a photographer and writer. Her articles about lesbian art and artists appeared in numerous journals and encyclopedias. Her books include *The Cunt Coloring Book*, *Yantras of Womanlove*, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*, *Courting Pleasure*, and *Intimacies*. She was the editor of *FABB: The Feminist Art Books Bulletin*, co-editor of the *Queer Caucus for Art Newsletter*, and member of the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.