



■ *Prime of Life: a striking study by Melanie Friend of menopausal women assessing their experience and potential, called Fortysomethings.*

Coming face to face with reality

Images of women too often follow accepted stereotypes, ignoring uncomfortable issues. Sue Unterhalter looks round an exhibition that seeks to redress the balance.

WOMEN'S faces and bodies look out at you from the cool white walls of Leeds Polytechnic Gallery: menopausal women; a woman and baby; women who are ill.

But while so often the photographs of women portrayed in our society seem to divorce them from reality, these do not. These are images that speak to you, relate to you. They make up a fascinating exhibition, Silent Health: Women Health and Representation, part of a celebration at the polytechnic for International Women's Week.

The issues they address are wide ranging, from how women perceive their own bodies and health or illness, to how others portray them. The styles vary from the intensely personal to the media type image, from the intimate portrait to the family snapshot. Accompanying texts and catalogue enhance the ideas.

Claire Slattery, the gallery's development officer, has welded together two exhibitions. One is from Camerawork, a community dark-

room and exhibitions base in London, which commissioned four women photographers to look at areas of women's health which had not been covered by exhibitions so far. Claire also invited two other photographers to contribute.

One of these is Sarah Edge, based in Todmorden, whose work is about the premature birth of her child Rory, and the feelings this engendered in her.

"It was about a rather traumatic birth, rather than the one everyone hopes they're going to have — lovely, bouncing babies delivered after half an hour of labour. It's about a child born very underweight, very ill, who went immediately into intensive care, and it's really about Sarah's feelings when it wasn't that perfect birth."

Contrasted with this are enlargements from her own mother's album of baby snapshots.

Powerful work on the menopause by photographer Melanie Friend, looks at the issues of older women and health. There are several individual portraits with taped interviews of such post-menopausal 'names' as Barbara Cartland and Anna Rae-

burn. The largest piece of the project, called Fortysomethings (a play on the American TV serial *Thirty-something*), is a strong collection of portraits of older women.

"Women seem to be valued for their youth and beauty and their reproductive capacity at the expense of so much else of their experience and potential, with society making some of us feel redundant or invisible once we're past 40. But the menopause can be seen positively," says photographer Melanie Friend.

"We don't get to see or hear the experience of older women very often in galleries — it's very striking," says Claire Slattery.

Kate Musselwhite has drawn her inspiration from the public health anti-AIDS campaigns, using the same sort of stark imagery as the early adverts.

"She explicitly uses sexualised language on the poster imagery, and in this kind of fanzine format she uses both the medical and more personal language that real people use to talk about sex." She also looks at how cervical cancer was used to moralise about sexual practices.

Two of the other photographers, Claire Collison and Jo Spence, explore ideas to do with their own experiences of illness — one with ME and the other with cancer — to examine attitudes to and about health, and to make public some of the taboos surrounding personal struggles.

Janice Howard's installations are colour photographs mounted on wood, and she looks at the traditions of women and health; how they were the main health care practitioners until the 19th century, and how later they were discredited in the hierarchy of the medical profession.

● The exhibition starts today and runs until March 28. As part of the celebration, Yorkshire Women Theatre will perform *Don't Call Me Brave*, a gritty, humorous study of the implications of breast cancer, tomorrow at 12.30pm. On Friday at 12.30pm there will be a buffet lunch (bookable in advance on 0532-832600 ext 3411 or 3016), followed by a short talk at 1.00pm by Nancy McKeith, who works in women's health issues in Leeds.

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IF MEN

THEN SO SHOULD YOU

FASHION PLEASURE TASTE TEASE TOUCH
LUST DESIRE KISS LICK FANTASY
CONDOM LATEXSQUARE MASTURBATE SAFE

FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH MY BODY

