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Lydia Goldblatt

Text:

Christiane Monarchi

Interview

Photomonitor

Tell us about your new exhibition?

The images on show are from 'All Flesh Is', a series I have been making with my parents, focusing on my elderly father's mortality. The work stems from a desire to address the inevitable changes wrought by his approaching death, and to render the taste and touch of experience, mapped loosely in vision.

How did you decide to explore such a personal subject matter in your work?

Photographing, for me, has always been a means of inhabiting and interpreting the world in which I exist. I have been drawn to subjects that trace the fleeting shadow of personal existence onto more enduring human narratives, and in trying to give expression to both the internal and external processes that shape our experience of life. In the ever-evolving process of understanding my own artistic concerns, I have begun to realize that there is a constant slippage and connection between personal and universal, and in making the work about my parents I am beginning to explore this position more explicitly and freely. It was inevitable, I suppose, that I would photograph my father, as my limited knowledge and understanding of mortality has always been bound up in his figure. That I am only beginning to do so now is a strange collision of life situation and artistic development. I could not have begun this earlier, nor could I have waited any longer. I would add that although this work explores a personal subject matter, these subjects and relationships are also fundamental to anyone's life, such that perhaps they are never simply personal, but provide important elements of recognition between us.

Does this series have a temporal progression, or are each of the images meant to be viewed independently of a timeline?

The accuracy of a timeline is unimportant, indeed the human instinct to move forwards is, in the case of age, a self-defeating process. Rather, I am interested in the collapsing and suspension of time that occurs in the realization of our short span within it. I am not trying to be the author of a life, or even a death, but rather to explore the way in which time can speed up, rush towards conclusions, yet equally stop, languid and glittering with stillness. I am also drawing on the threads of connection that appear in the world, irrespective of time, related perhaps to memory, lived experience and a kind of unconscious recognition of being. Certainly, there are many motifs of passing time in the work, and of passing seasons and light, but they hold a kind of weightlessness that refuses a defined trajectory.

In two of your earlier series of works, 'And the Word Was God' as well as 'Faith's Repertoire', you explore the interpretation of a work given the understanding and authenticity of performance. Is there an interest in performance in your present works?

Actually, that is something that I have thought far less about in this work, though you could argue that there is an element of performance in any kind of representation. Ultimately, however, I have been trying to work in a much more intuitive way with this series, letting go of the performative controls that have sometimes coloured other work.

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I feel that this series is not so much a performance as a meditation, in which profound familiarity is made strange with silence.

An image of a curled-up, dead bee with its glorious pelt hang alongside close-up investigations of your father's eyelids and brows, as well as your mother's hands, knees and shoulders, as if marvelling at the magnificent details of our bodies as well as creating a lasting memorial to their fleeting beauty. How have your family members responded to being included in your work, especially described by the camera in such detail?

One of the interesting things that transpired for me in making this work is the realization that my different relationship with each parent is evident in the ways that I photograph them differently. There is, I think, a greater memorializing intensity with the photographs of my father, which is a kind of intensity of looking that struggles to understand some essence of humanity. Particularly in the details of his bodily surfaces and edges, his face, hair, mouth and eyes, I am exploring the physical and psychological thresholds that mark out individual existence, and the fragility of our physical form. I am also, of course, photographing in acute detail the parts of his body through which he most fully communicates and understands, and through which we, in turn, understand and communicate with him. His involvement in this process varies from an active conversation and often loving exchange, to a passive acceptance that echoes his increasingly internalized actuality.

With my mother, these themes are very much part of our exchange, but there is more light and shade to the emotional terrain, and a greater sense of play between us. There is also an acceptance of my photographing that comes both from her familiarity with it and, I think, from the trust that exists between us. She has her own creative impulse, and understands mine, and I am very grateful for the trust she places in me in allowing me to photograph her. That being said, I am not always sure that she approves of the result!

When making works in your present 'Flesh and Blood' series, where would you place yourself on the spectrum between observation and construction in the making of an image; or does it vary throughout the series?

I have never been interested in simply representing what I can observe (or what exists) outside of me. In making photographs I wish to engage with the equally substantial internal landscape that colours and enriches visible terrain. Inevitably therefore, construction is always a part of my image making – indeed of any image making. That said, there is a duality in this series in which the oscillation between observation and construction reflects the dual concerns of contextual and philosophical narrative.

The contextual and central narrative – my family – lends itself to an intuitive, observational mode of photographing, in which construction plays a minimal role. However, both the extended timeframe and my deep familiarity with the space and people within it means that any form of observation almost pre-exists internally, so that when I photograph, I recognize even a photographic 'moment' as something that has already been in existence.

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The philosophical thread of my exploration tends towards a more interpretive and, if you like, constructed mode of photographing, such as in certain portraits of my mother, the raindrops diptych, the details of my father's body and skin, and more explicitly, in the construction of the tissue images, only two of which are shown here. These images utilize the debris and detritus of illness, and are made by staining the fabric of tissues with medicines and bodily fluids, and then photographing them under the penetrating light of the sun. They become metaphorical landscapes that represent the primal cycle and preservation of life, and explore the transformative possibilities inherent in letting go.

In a previous series of photographs 'Keeping Time' you focus on teenage ice-skaters, with autobiographical interest in the precarious transitional phase between childhood and adulthood in the creation of one's identity. The concern with transitional phases of life seems also to appear in 'Flesh and Blood', perhaps in an even more universally accessible way as all adults search to shape their identity with the decades in relationship to their parents. How has it felt creating these works which are so intertwined with your own life?

Each series of work I have made, whether my authorial presence is implicit or explicit, has had personal experience as its catalyst, as much as the desire to explore something of more universal interest. I am privileged to be able to work in this way, as the act of creating, or simply the act of extended looking, itself creates the possibility of greater understanding and connection. I have sometimes struggled a little with the notion of placing myself in my work, but in this recent series, I have tried to let go of that controlling impulse, and work in a more intuitive way. In fact, I didn't know I was making 'work' when I began this, but was just unwilling to let time pass without some sort of mediation. It has certainly given me a means to acknowledge, explore and, to some extent, confront the acrid substance of my father's mortality; it has also helped me to recognise the fundamental beauty and love that lies within this.

The serene and pensive ambience created by the shadow, sunlight and stillness in your images is surprisingly punctuated by the direct gaze of your mother and father in their portraits, full of personality and wit. 'Flesh and Blood' finishes as a celebration of our human existence. As this is a work in progress, may we expect to see more in future?

I have not actually made any new photographs while the exhibition process has been ongoing, however in the fullness of time I think I will continue to make work with both my parents, if that is possible. In the future, I would like to make a distinct series that focuses more fully on my mother, in which some of the images from this series might reappear, acting as a bridge and connection between the two works.

Have you been inspired in the creation of your work by any literary work or artist?

All of my work is fundamentally inspired by the urge to understand human experience, and as such I am fascinated and inspired by many forms of work that explore facets of this. Recently, I have been thinking about the connections between poetry and photography, and their ability to evoke worlds through allusive fragments, such as in the poems of William Carlos Williams, William Blake, and the contemporary poets

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Fiona Sampson and Katherine Towers. I have always been inspired by the work and use of light in the paintings of Rembrandt and Caravaggio, in which physical representation is paired with allegorical significance. And in making this series I have been particularly moved by Sally Mann's exquisitely intimate, yet also forensic work with her husband, and by Alan Bennett's writing on his family.

Are you also working on any future series?

The work with my mother will, I think, continue to become something distinct, with its own voice, in the future, and I am sure I will continue to revisit the ideas I am exploring in 'All Flesh Is'. However, having made a number of works that focus either on early or final life transitions, I would like to make new work that addresses itself more to the ongoing moment of living, and specifically to the fecundity of life. There are several ideas floating around somewhere in my imagination, but they have yet to transform themselves into any kind of reality! I would also like to explore the possibility of translating my current series into book form, and making a companion book at a later date with the work focussing on my mother.