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SHE WAS A FILM STAR BEFORE SHE WAS MY MOTHER

GUY BEN-NER, LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER, SIMON FUJIWARA, ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ,
SALLY MANN, MARILYN MINTER, RONA YEFMAN, AND BRYAN ZANISNIK

Curated by Sonel Breslav

May 4 – July 13, 2014

Opening reception: Sunday, May 4, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

“To a great extent then, the inexpensive home-camera my have invented an important part of what we’ve come to mean in America in the twentieth century by family and by all the tangled feelings evoked in the echoes of that most loaded of human nouns.”

— Reynolds Price, *For the Family*, afterword in Sally Mann, *Immediate Family*, 1992

As with many of her images, it is the ambiguity of **Sally Mann’s** *Fallen Child*, 1989, from her seminal series, *Immediate Family*, which gives the sense that something sinister has just occurred. With skin covered in grass, eyes closed, and an expression hidden under a cornucopia of curls, the child in this photograph is both a real and mythical creature, floating in infinite darkness. A childlike capacity for pleasure, idealism, and creativity is a manner of expression for many of the artists in *She Was A Film Star Before She Was My Mother*. Through a hyper-focus lens, these artists continuously engage the principal questions of origin and contemporary life in works of photography, video, performance, and installation. Inherently collaborative, their fascination with destabilizing the constructed narrative of family reflects on their



Sally Mann *Fallen Child*, 1989



Rona Yefman *I Was Born in Heaven* (video still), 1999/2010

individual political and social motivations. Over time, memories and dreams become illusive, exposing the fragility of relationships amongst siblings, parents, spouses, and children. By inviting us into this immediate and vulnerable space where gender, identity, power, and the absurd are unanchored, each artist allows for the potential for something new.

The poster in **Rona Yefman’s** installation reads ‘FAMILY The grey zone. something between gross and beauty’. Approaching the camera as a tool of invention rather than documentation, Yefman spent over 15 years collecting and producing photographs, videos, and objects that illustrate the intimate and complex relationship between the artist and her sibling. In My

Brother and I, 1996-2009, the protagonists are polysemous characters performing in-between socially and culturally constructed binaries. A grey zone, a collaborative imaginary space—playful, absurd, seemingly without reservation, yet absolutely exposed—contains the ideal conditions for testing the boundaries of gender and identity.

Marilyn Minter's early photographs of her recluse mother illustrate the artist's first attempt at depicting the symbiotic relationship between glamour and the grotesque. Standing in front of the mirror in her negligee, carefully applying makeup, and later, turning all of her attention towards the camera, Honora Elizabeth Laskey Minter stoically poses for her daughter. *Coral Ridge Towers*, 1969, is a narrative of consumption in relation to social conceptions of femininity and beauty expressed through a daughter's investigation of her own identity. Throughout the photographic series whose protagonist and title are reminiscent of the infamous Edith Beale of *Grey Gardens*, both mother and daughter unabashedly gaze at her own reflection.

LaToya Ruby Frazier was sixteen years old when she first started taking pictures of the inhabitants of her home in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Shot in black and white, the images of a working-class family living in a city in great economic and environmental degradation are evocative of the social documentary photography stemming from the Great Depression. Yet here, it is Frazier, who appears at the center many of these images, facing the camera to suggest a complex sense of urgency. By implicating herself alongside her family in the conditions of their deteriorating environment she clearly states: *This is not just another family in crisis; this is my family in crisis. This is personal.*

The photographic mechanism has its own very important role within Frazier's cohesive visual narrative of three generations, as she frequently includes the camera within the frame and at times it is even unclear whether she or her mother has taken the photograph. Other artists in the exhibition approach their shared experience with self-reflective questions of origin—*Where do we come from? Who are we?*



Marilyn Minter *Coral Ridge Towers (Mom in Negligee)*, 1969/1995



Bryan Zanisnik *Remembrance of Things Past* (video still), 2006

Where are we going?—Frazier seems to directly address the participatory viewer with: *What is the future? Is this it? What are the possible conditions for change?*

A simple object, photograph or memory is often the starting point for **Simon Fujiwara's** analytical approach to personal history. In *Studio Pietà* (King Kong Komplex), 2013, the artist attempts to reconstruct a lost photograph that he recalls from his childhood. The image is of a British cabaret dancer held in the arms of a former Lebanese boyfriend on a beach in Beirut. The young woman is Fujiwara's mother. It seems unimportant to Fujiwara what is fact; rather, we are quickly swept up in an elaborate story in which the truth remains a great enigma. His quasi-anthropological methodology is undermined by the contractions of the multiple roles that he himself performs—the son, the investigator, the narrator—resulting in larger sociopolitical questions about race, exoticism, and sexual identity.

The evocative star of both *Remembrance of Things Past*, 2006, and *Family Reunion*, 2006, is Bryan Zanisnik's grandmother. Supporting roles, in these war and gangster shorts, are played by the artist's mother and father. Originally shot when he was thirteen years old, Zanisnik has continued to collaborate with his parents through performance, photography, and installation. The narratives that he creates are an exaggerated reportage of suburban familial life in America. The basement, a place where time seems to stand still, boasts the trophies of childhood's achievements, baby's first dishware, scattered collectibles, and the head of mom and dad. It's a family affair, collectively re-imagining history, masculinity, and the power dynamics between parent



LaToya Ruby Frazier *Mom Making An Image Of Me*, 2008



Guy Ben-Ner *Soundtrack* (video still), 2013

and child.

Considering the inherent connections between private and public space, **Guy Ben-Ner** is known for his low-tech “home movies” starring his immediate family and friends. In his most recent video, *Soundtrack*, 2013, chaos ensues in Ben-Ner's Tel Aviv apartment on what seems to be a typical day with his children. The outrageous sequence of events is intensified through an appropriated sound clip from Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*, starring Tom Cruise. The opening

scene marks an emphasis on authenticity, sound, and reproduction, as where the artist and his team set up a Foley studio—a sound stage for reproducing of everyday sounds that help create a sense of reality within a recorded scene.

Although the video remains lighthearted throughout, by inserting fragmented footage from Israel-Lebanon and Palestinian conflicts, Ben-Ner presents his own domestic space as a stage for contemporary political conditions.

A strong and influential partner throughout his life, Elizabeth Kertész was rarely the subject of her husband's work. Soon

after her passing, a reclusive **André Kertész** began obsessively photographing a small glass bust. “I was very touched...” he wrote, “The neck and shoulder...it was Elizabeth.”¹ Such complex relationships between photography and memory have been discussed extensively throughout the discourse on photography. In his book, *Forget Me Not*, Geoffrey Batchen writes: “Memory is selective, fuzzy in outline, intensively subjective, often incoherent, and

invariably changes over time—a conveniently malleable form of fiction.”² Rather than an homage to his beloved, Kertész re-envisioned Elizabeth as his portal to the outside world. By photographing through the bust onto a blurry and flipped Manhattan skyline, Kertész abstracts the threshold of interior and exterior space and identifies Elizabeth as a posthumous collaborator.

A family's collective memories accumulate and are manipulated by time. By questioning their roles within their individual family structures, and their own place of origin, the artists in *She Was A Film Star Before She Was My Mother* explore the complexities of what is

truth. Recovered from the depths of the artists' psyche, the resulting photographs and videos are demonstrations of what is psychologically, socially, and culturally possible when aspirations and disappointments are made manifest and fantasies are embraced. ■

— Sonel Breslav
New York, 2014



André Kertész *October 6, 1979*

NOTES

1. Gurbo, R. *André Kertész, The Polaroids*. W.W. Norton: New York and London, 2007. pp. 17.
2. Batchen, G. *Forget Me Not*, New York and Amsterdam: Princeton Architectural Press and Van Gogh Museum, 2004. pp. 15-16.

BIOGRAPHY

Sonel Breslav is an independent curator and the founder of Blonde Art Books, a Brooklyn-based organization dedicated to promoting self-published art books through exhibitions, book fairs, talks, and online exposure. Breslav has organized exhibitions and events at venues including Present Company, Brooklyn, NY; MoMa|P.S.1, Queens, NY; ICA, Philadelphia, PA; Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH; Hyde Park Center, Chicago, IL; Schema Projects, Brooklyn, NY; and The Silent Barn, Brooklyn, NY. The first book under the Blonde Art Books imprint, *Kitsch Encyclopedia* by Sara Cwynar, was published in April 2014. Breslav received her MA from UCL, London in 2010 and her BFA from the University of Buffalo (SUNY) in 2005. She currently works at Murray Guy, New York.

CHECKLIST

GUY BEN-NER

SOUNDTRACK, 2013

Single channel video

11 min

Courtesy of the artist and Aspect/
Ratio, Chicago

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

GRANDMA RUBY AND ME, 2005

Gelatin silver print

24 x 28 inches

HUXTABLES, MOM AND ME,
2008

Gelatin silver print

20 x 24 inches

MOM MAKING AN IMAGE OF ME,
2008

Gelatin silver print

24 x 28 inches

MOM RELAXING MY HAIR, 2005

Gelatin silver print

24 x 28 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie
Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels

SIMON FUJIWARA

STUDIO PIETÀ, 2013

Video

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Commissioned by the Sharjah Art
Foundation-SB11, 2013

ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ

NOVEMBER 15, 1979

Cibachrome print

10 x 8 inches

Signed, titled, dated and annotated
on verso

OCTOBER 6, 1979

SX-70 Polaroid

4.25 x 3.5 inches

Courtesy of Bruce Silverstein
Gallery, New York

SALLY MANN

FALLEN CHILD, From the
Immediate Family series 1989

Gelatin silver contact print

8 x 10 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Edwynn
Houk Gallery, New York

MARILYN MINTER

*CORAL RIDGE TOWERS (MOM
DYEING EYEBROWS)*, 1969/1995

Black and white photograph

30 x 40 inches

*CORAL RIDGE TOWERS (MOM IN
NEGLIGEE)*, 1969/1995

Black and white photograph

30 x 40 inches

*CORAL RIDGE TOWERS (MOM
MAKING UP)*, 1969/1995

Black and white photograph

30 x 40 inches

*CORAL RIDGE TOWERS (MOM
SMOKING)*, 1969/1995

Black and white photograph

30 x 40 inches

*CORAL RIDGE TOWERS (MOM
SMOKING EXTRA LONG)*,
1969/1995

Black and white photograph

30 x 40 inches

Courtesy of the artist, Regen
Projects, Los Angeles, and Salon
94, New York

RONA YEFMAN

LET IT BLEED, 2010

In collaboration with Gil Yefman

4 videos, c-print photographs,

inkjet poster, red bulb, metal

cabinet, car door, silk-screened

t-shirt, taxidermied cat

Courtesy of the artist and Sommer

Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

BRYAN ZANISNIK

FAMILY REUNION, 2006

Video

6:21 min

*REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS
PAST*, 2006

Video

7:06 min

*THE BOUGH THAT FALLS WITH
ALL ITS TROPHIES HUNG*, 2009

Photograph

35 x 83 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Aspect/
Ratio, Chicago

Cover: **Simon Fujiwara** *Studio Pietà* (video still), 2013

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