

## Somewhere In Between

From social document to decisive moment to casual snapshot, photography remains a vessel for the storage and retrieval of memory. Flipping through family albums or loose photos allows us to glimpse back into a past inhabited by family, bygone places and those who have passed away. As children, our inability to reconcile the youthful faces of our mothers and fathers gazing back at us as complete strangers gives these images a poignant resonance. Sara Angelucci explores this subtle disconnect and finds it to be both reassuring and discomfiting. It is this recognition of the familiar alongside the unknown which motivates her investigations.

Angelucci's practice bridges the transition from chemical to digital processing, using the technical possibilities of both to recapture these ephemeral moments. Each provides a means of revisiting her family history and the unique experiences that shaped it. She adopts her family's inherited photographic ephemera as part of an unwritten cultural legacy and responds by reframing select images as discrete parts of a conceptual travelogue that slips gingerly from past to present. She uses these family records as an atlas, paralleling the journey that her parents undertook crossing the ocean from Italy to Pier 21 in Halifax, before settling in Hamilton, Ontario.

Looking at vintage photographs, regardless of their compositional merit, is an extremely satisfying pursuit. Old photos are no different than antiques or other vintage items in this respect; they attract us because they are conduits into the past and as such they encourage our empathy. Angelucci critically positions her own use of vintage photos by conceptually reframing them. They retain their subjectivity as vessels of a specific history and experience, but they are recast as visual metaphors. She edits these intimate and incidental moments into a formal framework that directs our response intellectually as well as emotionally. Her work proposes a metaphoric journey, a passage based on reconciliation and grounded in a post-war immigrant experience.

A sense of displacement informs her work. There is the initial displacement of looking at the past. There is the displacement of the immigrant, one who has been both physically and culturally transplanted from old world to new. Then there is the displacement of the unfamiliar; ancestors, customs and language that the artist is seeking to reconnect with. Finally, there is the displacement of death itself, the punctum marking the work.

In "Camera Lucida", Roland Barthes writes with affection about the Winter Garden Photograph; a photo of his mother taken when she was a child, an image we are never shown but one that the author speaks of longingly. [1] The intervention of this poignant memento within the author's analysis of images by the likes of luminaries from Alfred Stieglitz to Robert Mapplethorpe, not only grounds his discourse, but offers up an insight into the emotional function of the photograph as a familial rite of passage. Barthes defines the photographic punctum as an "accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)". [2] Ultimately, he refuses to reveal the image of his mother on the basis that its punctum, the psychological wound marking it, is meaningful only to him. He admits his attachment as

unscientific, and as such is forced to dismiss the photo as ordinary. For Angelucci it is the reclamation of this ordinariness that defines her practice.

“Al Rivero”, translating literally as “in reverse,” features a series of family photographs from Italy with handwriting on the back. Each image was re-shot on a light table with the text side up. In *Plants and Pompilia*, the figures from the front of each photo merge with the date, signature and personal notations found on the back. The result is a subtle compression of background and foreground, a discrete intervention that reconciles signature and image into a single unifying gesture.

“Stillness” attempts another type of reconciliation. In this case each image is completed by a pairing of past and present, time and place. On the left, a series of cropped black and white images culled from the family archive, on the right, candid colour snapshots of flora from Venice to Naples. Subtitled by genus, the images are neatly juxtaposed; a couple’s arms clasped tightly adjacent to the entwined branches of a fig tree, a group of round faced smiling schoolchildren flank bundles of oranges. Each fleeting glance suggests a way of life that is inevitably passing.

“Questions She’ll Never Answer” addresses the absence of the artist’s mother evocatively. A pair of intimate video projections bookend a framed black and white photo of Angelucci’s mother posing on the deck of the *Conte Biancamano* during her immigration to Canada. This is a photograph the artist uses again and again in her work, an image depicting her mother in a suspended state between the land she is leaving and the land she is going to – literally, somewhere in between. To the left, the ocean passes by serene and seemingly endless. On the right, the hem of a linen skirt flutters in the wind, mimicking the folds of the skirt in the photo. Handwritten questions are superimposed over the moving image: What colour was your dress? How long before you saw her again? How did you feel with only sea around you?

“She Crossed the Sea” is another paean to this journey. Multiple exposures capture the same picture held aloft against a blue sky. There is no horizon in sight as the photo is flipped over and over. We empathize with the symbolism of this gesture as a further attempt at reconciliation. Angelucci honours her mother and her heritage by trying to make sense of the unknowable.

The longing in Angelucci’s work is palpable, but it never panders. The artist deliberately channels her grief through an investigative process, choosing to face the past in an attempt to come to some resolution with it. She mines the state of suspension between history, culture and language to examine the role that family photos play in the definition of self. She reveals her wound without short-changing the intellectual rigour of her project.

There remains a vast store of undiscovered archives hidden away in dresser drawers and attics, piled into shoeboxes or sealed beneath yellowing plastic in bulky albums. Amateur and professional alike are moved when looking at anonymous faces from the past. We understand photographs, however truncated or faded, as discrete testaments. We look back at these aspects captured in light and feel kinship. It is their very ordinariness that makes the images compelling. We can only guess at their stories and yet we are compelled to ask questions in an attempt, however futile, to reconcile what we know with what we do not. Angelucci makes this emotional connection without depreciating it. She places her own family under the archival spotlight and in doing so reminds us of the importance of remembering.

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1. Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, p. 67-73

2. Ibid. p. 27