Legacy

Jessica Harper

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
Legacy

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

By
Jessica Todd Harper

Fall 2001

Thesis Board Committee:
Angela Kelly, Thesis Committee Chair, Associate Professor of Photography

Timothy Engström, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Martin Czamanske, WilliamMartin Gallery
Legacy

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

By
Jessica Todd Harper

Fall 2001

I hereby grant permission to the Rochester Institute of Technology to copy all or any part of this written thesis.

Jessica Harper
Printed Name

11/21/01
Date

Signature

11/21/01
Date
Making pictures is sometimes like keeping a diary. A diary is based on facts, but more often than not its chief aim is to string into sense one’s experiences. My graduate thesis work is such a project. It tells the stories of the youngest generation of women in my family: my sister Becky, my cousin Sybil and me. In putting together images of the three of us, I have been describing and naming a legacy which we have inherited from our culture, our relationships and our family traditions. This legacy is not an explicit thing, but nevertheless shapes who we are as young women, as daughters, as partners and as human beings. The act of writing down, or, in my specific case, of making pictures, cathartically orders the process of living into smaller narratives about relationships, identity, and the self.

The images in their final form are large (32” by 40”) color Epson prints, and when viewed together, each story is meant to contribute to the greater narrative surrounding inherited constructions of femininity and the importance of the female figure in the domestic sphere. Becky, Sybil and I are always central to the story, with other characters moving in and out of the spaces around us. The central theme of all the images is an examination of the self through naming it in imagery.

Becky, Sybil, and I have been my favorite protagonists since I started making pictures eleven years ago. I usually cast us in stories about family, transience and the type of quotidian romance one often sees in the work of Julia Margaret Cameron and Sally Mann. The influence of Mary Cassatt, Renoir, and John Singer Sargent was also there, due to the hours I had spent copying the works of these artists. My mother
used to take my sister and me to The Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown to draw. She brought crayons, pastels and charcoal, covering the spectrum of abilities between my seven-years-younger sister, me, and the variety of exchange students and friends who might be brought along. Both museums have a very good impressionist and Romantic British art collection. I particularly liked some of the mother and baby compositions of Cassatt, where most of the canvas was face, arm or infant. Closely cropped compositions were important to me in order to get as intimate as possible. At the same time, I was very interested in romanticism. Not the kind of exciting love story romance from the French romans, but the nineteenth century British kind, associated with an emotional appeal to the imagination. I could not get enough of the Pre-Raphaelites, Beardsley, and William Blake. When I started making silver prints of my family, it is not a surprise that I put them in romantic and intimate settings.

I attended the Maine Photographic workshops when I was in high school and it was there that I discovered Joyce Tenneson. I bought a signed poster of one of her prints and hung it in my room for years. The austere grace and mysterious timelessness in her imagery appealed to my sense of romance, and I worked hard to incorporate her style into my work with Becky and Sybil. I photographed them with infra-red film in such a way that each one’s features played off the other in an ethereal world where, like in Cameron’s or Mann’s images, children did not smile or move, but, like a seventeenth century vanitas painting, expressed both innocence and gravity at the same time. All the Pre-Raphaelites had this element of seriousness and beauty in their imagery, and I worked very hard to emulate it.
Romance becomes clichéd if it is not coupled with honesty. If the image is too contrived, it looses its artistic merit. What I liked so much about Cassatt’s, Cameron’s and Mann’s domestic spaces was the intimacy with which they were able to portray their subjects. The truthfulness of their imagery rests in the aptness of their metaphors. In the simplest of portraits all three artists were capable of pulling in the grander themes of quotidian beauty without overplaying their hands. The children of these compositions became metaphors for such large concepts as Human Frailty, Time, Hope in a Fallen World, and Grace. The artists’ success had to do with their lack of pretense, their confidence in their capacity to name grand truths, and their abilities to get close to their subjects.

I honed in on this last quality when I was still in high school. I photographed everyone close to me but I also photographed everyone I wanted to get close to. I would spot interesting looking people in malls and theaters, follow them around discreetly, and then, with a bit of flattery, make an appointment to photograph them. I knocked on strangers’ doors because I noticed swings in the backyard or children playing and I asked if I could observe their family. Wanting to venture into the exotic, I approached drug addicts in the street, severe looking men in crowds, elderly women exiting a restaurant, popular girls with whom I wanted to be friends. I believed everyone would let me get close to him, and having a camera to protect me, I was able to explore anyone. Oddly enough, no one ever said no. I was able to conquer my fears through getting up close and making pictures of strangers—people who sometimes frightened me at some level. If I could name the subject by putting
his or her form into art, than I could put it into a narrative and move on. This is how stories form the cadres of our lives.

I made pictures about personal things that attracted and scared me, but most of the time, I never printed them. These pictures, which usually had Becky, Sybil and/or me in them, were for private consumption. It was not for years that I learned to trust the part of me that wanted to take them in the first place, and use it for making art.

The summer before I started college, I took a class with Arnold Newman, and with him, I started to pay attention for the first time to space. He is known for his “environmental portraiture” and often told us that a good photograph was “1% inspiration and 99% moving furniture” Most of the work I had made to that point was close-up; I wanted to make intimate pictures. Working with him, I began to realize that the environmental description of a person’s character could lend itself to that intimacy. He worked very hard to create an environment that buttressed his interpretation of a personality. As often seems to be the case, the seeds of what I learned in that workshop matured much later. It was not for a couple years that I began to back up and include the surroundings.

I went to Bryn Mawr, a small liberal arts college known for its art history department. Early on, I took a class in Northern European art, because I did not get into my first choice class, which had to do with the history of the self-portrait. I had known very little about the Northern aesthetic, and was surprised to be so taken in by it. It was in studying this art that I understood the true value of backing up from those who did so long before Newman. In Holland they backed up so much, they went across the river to paint the whole city. The Northern Renaissance was overlooked
for years by the Italian-centered art establishment. And I too, I am ashamed to admit, found it boring until I had spent some time with it. Svetlana Alpers’ book, *The Art of Describing* was a whole new way of thinking for me. How could art be entirely about describing? What kind of nonsense was that, when one might do something with narrative? But slowly I began to understand the value of not only detail, but also the implicit narrative in descriptions of the quotidian. “Genre painting”, an appellation that seemed to immediately betray the namers inability to fit this group into an existing catagory of art, was surprisingly powerful. I was particularly drawn to the work of Vermeer.

Vermeer makes images about the present. He is not interested in depicting mythology, but in highlighting the magic of daily living. As one reviewer of his work writes:

...for Vermeer the ideal painter is not concerned with poses but with flashes of consciousness; he is not interested in the past or future, but in the evanescent all-too human moment. This is also Vermeer's project: an almost metaphysical quest for the precariously poised instant, an ideal we would now consider photographic.¹

The genius of Vermeer’s work is in the way all the minor elements of his paintings are strung together to form something greater than the sum of their parts. In *The Music Lesson*, for example, we see a young woman at a pianoforte, with her teacher standing next to her. The student’s face can be seen in the reflection of a mirror above her on the wall. Signature Vermeer light streams in from the left. Nothing is
happening by Italian standards. This is not Socrates, or Julius Caesar, or Mary, or Moses. It is not even an emotional depiction of common poverty, or a nostalgic ode to Arcadia. It is the quotidian, calm, upper-middle class interior of a Delft home. It is the recording of a uniquely transient human experience.

My junior year in college, I lived in Paris as the only American at one of the French *Grands Ecoles* for Art. As fate would have it, I fell down the metro stairs my second month there and tore the ligaments in my ankle. It was determined by the physician who set the cast that I was not to get out of bed for at least a month. I lived in a studio apartment, knew very few people and had deadlines to meet for my photography classes. It was in this situation that I began to explore the self-portrait. Up until that moment, I had made self-portraits as one makes diaries: not for public consumption, but for private analysis. In Paris, I had no choice; it was photograph myself for public critique or fail the class. Reluctantly, I began to photograph myself in my limited surroundings. I had made some horribly awkward self-portraits for assignments in the past, and I was not convinced that I made good subject matter. I much preferred to be behind the camera, where I could control the space more effectively. In front of the camera, one cannot help but be aware of one's own self-consciousness. It is one thing if someone else fashions your form into art; in this case you as the subject are free from responsibility. But if you are making your own form into art, than you are entirely responsible. It took practice before I was able to let go of my desire to control the image, and my fear of being responsible for looking

---

1 Rothstein, Edward. “Connections: Hidden in the Light of Vermeer’s Window”, *The New York Times*, April 7,
uninteresting. I discovered that the most appealing self-portraits were above all honest. I made self-portraits about being alone, in a cast, in Paris because that is what I knew best and that was the environment in which I was living.

The self-portraits were well received in France and when I returned for my senior year at Bryn Mawr, I decided to take a class called “Visual Diary” taught by Becky Young who had spent much of her career making art from her own experiences and those of her twin sister. I began to piece together a series of self-portraits, both from the present and resurrected from the past. It was the first time I printed self-portraits from my teenage years. It was also the first time I printed many images of Becky and Sybil. All of a sudden, the images which I had taken for my own records became interesting to me as art. The resulting senior show, entitled A Visual Diary incorporated images of my family and myself from the past six years. None of the pictures had made it past the contact sheet before that exhibit. I had always taken pictures for diaristic purposes, but they were never part of my public projects.

I was concerned when I hung A Visual Diary that people might think it was a megalomaniacal work with little relevance to their own lives. I learned that the opposite was true. Dozens of strangers approached me on campus expressing how much the show touched them. It may have been because I was at a women’s college that the show was so particularly well received. In any case, it broke the school’s records for attendance, and I developed some confidence.
The interplay of beauty and gravity is something which had intrigued me since I began making pictures, but I started to understand it better during the Visual Diary class. One of the images I dug out from my past was *Mom and Dad with Becky* from 1992. The beauty is in the tenderness of casual intimacy played out by my parents in the way they turn to each other while my young sister skips about ahead of them. The characters are also in the beautiful setting of an English moor which is timeless and vast, but which also happens to be brooding and dark that day. That tension between the eternity of the landscape and the specificity of that moment, the ominous sky and the carefree child, is what appealed to me. I also liked seeing the space in which my family was moving. The environment served a very important supportive role. The lessons I had learned from Arnold Newman and from Dutch landscape came into play when I was making editorial choices for the show. Images showing large spaces which had never appealed to me before became print worthy from my new perspective.

One of my very first self-portraits, which I printed for the show, was taken when I was seventeen with my extended family. It too included an ample descriptive environment, this time in the living room of an old cottage, which my family rented during the summers. I had arranged the chairs and the composition, directed individuals to their places and then walked in before the camera finished counting down to its automatic release. I told everyone to sit where they were placed and look at the camera. I asked them not to smile. They had been packing all morning and, anxious to leave, were nonplussed at best. The stoicism in the resulting pose is complemented by the presence of my smiling young cousin who peers at us, the
viewer, through a large children’s magnifying glass as he sits on the lap of my father.
The beauty of the diaphanous curtains and glowing light from behind us, the oddity of casually dressed modern people sitting in an antiquated living room, both work to create a tension based on grace, narrative and time.

Time’s role in an image became very appealing to me. It was as an Art History student again that I first learned of Roland Barthes and his writings in Camera Lucida. Barthes describes with elegance the punctum of a photograph based on personal experience that poignantly “wounds” or “pricks” the viewer.² This concept I could understand very well, having been caught breathless before many photographs I admired. Time, also, Barthes explains, can be a punctum. When one examines a photograph, one has an uncommon and eerie experience of prescience, knowing all at once that this will be and this has been. All photographs come from the past and they carry within them an ocular veracity that no other medium has. So even though photographs are selected moments, they appear hauntingly and uniquely true. This quality lends itself to a tone of seriousness within the beauty of a photograph which is well demonstrated in the work of Cameron and Mann as well as others like Andrea Modica or Emmett Gowen. I have admired these artists’ work for the stiff and frozen and sometimes painfully repressed passion that seemed to be living below the surface and for the eerie role Time plays in their narratives. When one is documenting one’s own life, the punctum seems all the more poignant because the artist is acutely aware that the self she is photographing will disappear, and that you, the viewer, will one

day be looking at it. The viewer also has this knowledge once they identify the image as a past self-portrait. The strange and supernatural relationship that is thus created between the disappeared individual and the real time viewer is striking. This "wound" seemed especially intriguing.

Self-portraits are particularly difficult for many who are assigned them. I made horribly awkward self-portraits as a teenager, unable to achieve the same degree of intimacy with myself as I did with others. I was too concerned with how well I matched up to various feminine archetypes to explore what was really there, how I could describe my existence to a viewer. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) made the first known self-portraits, which he produced throughout his life. His earliest was completed when he was thirteen years old. The portrait says: "I have copied this of myself in a mirror." I made many self-portraits in mirrors learning to draw, and Dürer probably did too; but why save that one as an official work? What does it mean to make a self-portrait?

When Dürer's first self-portrait was only fifty years old, a young Italian named Sofonisba Anguissola began chronicling a rare feminine self history. From her first painting of herself as a young teenager, to her last as an old woman, she radiates an uncommon self-composure and feminine strength. She is beautifully strong and elegant in her self-portraits, gazing at the viewer with all the confidence and calm of Dürer, or later on of Velázquez or Steichen—except that she is a woman. Some of Anguissola's paintings depict the artist in her surroundings. *Self-Portrait*, 1561 is one
of two images where she is at a clavichord with an older female companion seated next to her. In this way, she identifies herself as a musician in addition to a painter.\(^4\). Anguissola’s gaze in all her self-portraits is hard to forget. I know that the portraits were often made for the purpose of gifting them to far away admirers, but it still seems to me that she were describing the world and her place in it for the specific purpose of understanding her existence and identity within it. It is as if the act of painting were an act of naming, or comprehending what she was as a mortal in a material world. Even though they are not photographs, when they are presented all together, they are powerful today for their *punctum*, their *momento mori* quality. In her series, like in Dürer’s, one can see the variously aged versions of herself disappear as each is replaced by an updated version. Each time, she examines herself anew and fixes onto canvas what cannot be fixed onto the earth: a self.

Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) shocked the French art world of the nineteenth century not because she was a prostitute (there were a lot of those painted before her) but because of the way she looked at the viewer. That look embarrassed. Manet achieved a similar success with his young woman in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881) who also confronts the viewer with her gaze, but it is not confident like Olympia’s. Olympia seems to know something. She is a sexual object with


\(^4\) Ferino Pagden, Sylvia. *Sofonisba Anguissola: A Renaissance Woman*. The National Museum for Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.: 1995. p.27 Her native Cremona had a long tradition of both secular and religious music from the 13th century onward. Music was also encouraged in Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il cortegiano* from 1528. Such texts described the appropriate accouterments for courtiers. Sofonisba’s father, Amilcare Anguissola, was part of a rare circle of aristocrats who believed in educating daughters in the Renaissance tradition, and he may have done so with the hope that they would eventually bring income to the family. When Sofonisba became a Spanish courtier, she was awarded 200 scudi per annum from Madrid.
something extra. She has a self-awareness similar to Sofonisba's. She knows you are looking at her.

Cindy Sherman has made a reputation and a career on that knowledge. Because Sherman has photographed herself in re-created intentionally objectified poses, we know that she knows we are part of a constructed exploitative situation. The effect is a subtle but powerful question of the viewer's privilege to look at her in the first place. She might as well have Barbara Kruger's "Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face" emblazoned on all her film still series.

The gaze in my work is not about confrontation, however, as much as it is about examination. Just as Sofonisba looks at you today with a mysterious declaration within her space, I want Becky, Sybil and I to appear in our environments. The most beautiful part of any self-portrait is the vanitas of it. None of us lasts, but we can record and examine the process. I can look at Dürer as he was at thirteen years old even though he has been dead for almost half of a millennium.

The passage of time was particularly striking for me during my graduate work at R.I.T. Becky, Sybil and I were in threshold moments. During my two years in grad school, my sister and cousin (both the same age) graduated from high school, went to college, and fell in love for the first time. In that same period, I moved to the city of all four of my grandparents, and had the opportunity to experience first hand their perspectives on life as they watched their friends dying, their spouses deteriorating, and their grandchildren struggle with the same problems they had tackled fifty years earlier. Also at this time, I met my future husband and married him. My grandparents were intimately involved in the details of all of our lives. Because I was
so close to my grandparents during the transitions taking place in Becky’s, Sybil’s and my lives, I viewed it all the more from a long-term perspective. It seemed so clear that we were repeating things they had already done. This juxtaposition was focused for me in the making of *Family Portrait (Marcelle, Marcelle, Marcelle and Becky)*. My grandmother Marcelle Sybil, my cousin Marcelle Sybil, and my great-grandmother Marcelle Ogden appear in this image, all at different moments in their lives, with my sister Becky smiling at them coyly from the left of the frame. My grandmother, who has severe Alzheimer’s disease, is looking at the camera from her blurred position at the right margin of the image, suggesting her immanent departure. My cousin focuses on the viewer in an unusually intense and direct gaze. My great-grandmother, the long deceased mother of my demented grandmother, presides at the head of this visual triangle, still a young women in the painting that was made for her engagement to my great-grandfather. She is idealized youth and beauty, and yet she is dead.

When I became engaged to my husband in my first year of grad school, the self-portrait took on a new importance to me. I could not map out with words the description I needed in order to understand what was happening in my life. I wondered if being a wife would mean that I would be like all the other wives in my family before me, and I began to examine the ways in which inherited examples of feminine behavior influenced my conception of wife-hood. I started making self-portraits with Christopher, both alone and in groups, with the purpose of comprehending, or naming what was happening as I made this huge transition. The images are about me more than they are about us. Christopher usually looks at me, a
book, a newspaper; I usually look at the viewer. My outward gaze suggests a third party in what are for the most part intimate scenes. Viewers are struck and sometimes embarrassed by the intimacy even though nothing illicit or outwardly sexual is happening. It is as if you had walked in on a private scene. Most say they are beautiful, but I also hear that they are “erotic” and “unsettling”. Not like Jock Sturges but like Vermeer. The detail of the surroundings invites the viewer to explore the titles of books lying on the coffee table, the people depicted in other pieces of art within the photograph, the exact way in which the subjects are seated against each other. And while the viewer takes pleasure in exploring the color, the light, the relationship, the details, I am forever witnessing their looking. Here is the evidence of a self. And like Sofonisba, I recorded these selves as they passed from existence.

I learned to draw by observing my family in addition to copying paintings. The most ready subject (and most willing to sit still) however, is usually oneself. I drew my hands and feet and face countless times, trying to learn the lines and proportions. To my bewilderment, I instinctively drew other people to look like me even when I was not trying to. In my thesis work, the figures of Becky, Sybil and myself all function interchangeably as both self-portraits and universal portraits. Everyone confuses Becky, Sybil and me in my pictures, so that self-portrait or not, at the thesis show, most viewers at least thought that the pictures of Becky were pictures of me. This confusion has less to do with our physical similarity (which our family does not see at all) as it does with the poses in which I photographed both girls. The
gaze with which they study the viewer is so much like a self-portrait, and their ways of moving are so similar to mine, that it becomes almost useless to tease us apart.

The three of us function as one character based on the narratives of my family, but not limited to them. There are some clues about our “real” lives in the pictures since they are made in the domestic spaces in which we live, but in the end, the images are not about the three of us as individual personalities. This is perhaps best argued by the fact that we are never seen doing anything. There is no documentation of three individual lives. In *Becky and the Mountain*, my sister is not actively involved with anyone or anything else. A discarded book suggests a former interaction, but so much stronger is the confrontation of her presence in the space. In *Sybil in the Dining Room*, the protagonist presides over her space. Her highly decorative environment does little to describe what her life might be like, but it says a lot about the force and beauty of her presence. Even when there are other characters in the image, as there are in *Self Portrait with Christopher* (2001) in the living room or *Becky and Mom* (2000), Becky and I do not interact with our companions; we interact with the viewer. Both of us examine the viewer in a way that invites him/her to examine us. It is as if we are saying, ‘here we are. This is me right now. This is where I am and no more.’ So despite the intimacy of the surroundings, and the internal nature of the content, one is left with more questions than answers.

Sofonisba’s self-portraits, which are so powerful and intimate, are also very mysterious. Even when there are other people in her paintings, they are not directly involved with her; they function more like the clavichord or the table: domestic details, but tertiary to the meaning of the work.
Female artists have dealt with the self-portrait in a variety of ways. Today, a woman cannot make a self-portrait innocently. Her formal heritage is so corrupted that a female's self-portrait can rarely be discussed in terms of an introspective reflection on the self. The inherent 'objecthood' of the feminine figure gets in the way. Women rarely enjoy the luxury of a gaze untinted by sexual evaluation. One woman who knew the truth of these words best, was Mme Vigée-Lebrun. Vigée-Lebrun's self-portraits might fit perfectly as illustrations in Fire with Fire, Naomi Wolfe's follow-up to The Beauty Myth. After examining the many ways in which women are limited and manipulated by the beauty and fashion industry, Wolfe explores how contemporary feminists sometimes use their sexual appeal to their advantage. The eighteenth century Vigée-Lebrun knew all about that. She was a talented artist—yes, but also a woman. Women could rarely enjoy the privilege of having their gender forgotten. There were many obstacles to her sex in the art world of eighteenth century France. Women were not allowed to participate in the nude drawing classes of the Académie. They were seen as sources of inspiration, not creators of it. But Vigée-Lebrun used the objecthood of her attractive physical appearance to her advantage. In her chatty and confident memoir, she recalls being present at a meeting of the French Academy.

La Harpe read his discourse on the talents of women. When

---

5 I am borrowing 'objecthood' from Michael Fried, who uses it in his essay "Art and Objecthood" reprinted in Artforum, June, 1967. Though he is not concerned with the feminist dimension with which I apply the word, he lays out an implicit theatricality in art with a beholder, as subject, and the work, as object. I am extending this metaphor to the world and women.

he arrived at certain lines of exaggerated praise, which I was
hearing for the first time, and in which he extolled my art and
likened my smile to that of Venus, the author of ‘Warwick’ threw
a glance at me. At once, the whole assembly, without excepting
the Duchess de Châtres and the King of Sweden- who both
were witnessing the ceremonies-rose up, turned in my
direction, and applauded with such enthusiasm that I almost
fainted from confusion.  

Interestingly, Vigée-Lebrun describes these scenes of physical and artistic
praise as if they were unsolicited surprises, when in truth she was a very ambitious
player of the game. Her feminine persona, which aimed toward modesty and
domesticity, was carefully advertised. In the specific passage recounted above, she is
quick to add:

But these pleasures of gratified vanity were far from
comparable with the joy I experienced in looking forward to
motherhood.

Rather than viewing her gender as an encumbrance to her artistic freedom, she
capitalized on its charms. The (male) establishment liked a pretty, feminine woman-
one who in this case “had the smile of Venus” and “looked forward to motherhood”.
It was no great leap to admire the prettiness of the art after admiring the prettiness of
the artist standing next to it. And Mme Vigée-Lebrun’s fresh, smiling and feminine self-portraits emphasize the relationship between the two. In her clever and unthreatening approach toward the male power structure, she was able to participate in it very successfully. She described (or named) herself in terms corresponding to the male symbolic language of the day.

In my experience as an artist, I have often felt the tension between being the maker of an image as well as the traditional subject of an image. When I was sixteen, taking my first class at the Maine Photographic Workshops, my teacher Steve Bliss wrote a poem about his students, which included this section:

....Let’s go on to Jessica,

so mild and charming.

Who would have thought

she’d make pictures alarming.

But no one was safe

when she held camera to face

although herself was so proper and calming...

Mild and charming. Proper and calming. I imagine for Vigée-Lebrun the pressure to be extra soft, sweet, and maternal was especially great, to make up for the oddity of being artistically gifted. Even my instructor (who was an extremely talented teacher) expressed surprise that a good girl, a mild, charming, proper girl, could be such a striking artist. The girl is supposed to be in the picture, not behind it. Even when

1 Vigée-Lebrun, Louise-Elizabeth, Memoirs of Madame Vigée-Lebrun/ translated by Lionel Strachey:
Arnold Newman introduced me to Joyce Tenneson, it was because I “looked like a Tenneson model” in addition to making some decent work.

A strong feminine presence that looks like Anguissola, as opposed to Lilith or Wonder Woman, or Liberty leading the French army stands out for its distinct personhood within its surroundings. It is not a fantasy, or an archetype; it is the description, the recording of a human being. The gaze alone asks and confirms at once. It is not an invitation like Ingrès’ *Grand Odalisque* (1814), or a warning, like Jean Dubuffet’s *Le Métamorphèse (Corps de Dames)* (1950), both of whom gaze at the viewer. Nor is it like Manet’s *Olympia* who invites and warns all at once. It is more like Parmigianino’s *Self-Portrait* in a convex mirror (1524). It is describing and exploring the existence of oneself in his (her) world.

There is great intimacy and power in naming one’s surroundings. When Adam named the animals of the garden, he created an intimate relationship between himself and the rest of animal life while establishing a hierarchy that separated him from them. His names identified them for the first time in human and subjective systems, rather than eternal or divine ones, and they allowed Adam (the interpreter) to relate to the animals (the interpreted) on his terms. Making pictures is a way of naming the eternal world, and allows the artist to understand it in his or her subjective terms.

Women have historically been named by men. Artistic descriptions of the feminine rarely escape the male gaze. Art history shows us plenty of seductresses, both available (Gauguin’s Tahitian natives, the raped Sabbine women of Nicolas

Poussin, Käsebier’s Evelyn Nesbit) and unavailable (Botticelli’s Venus, Delacroix’s Liberty leading the French into battle, Klimt’s geometrically caged-in aristocrats and heroines). There are countless virginal and innocent mothers (Michelangelo’s Holy Family, Vigée-Lebrun’s self portraits, Thayer’s Virgin). And, of course, there are all those Judiths, Eves, Liliths, Delilahs, Sirens and Salomes— all deadly or damaging to men, all enticingly erotic.

My very first self-portrait, created at age 3, depicted a large head with eyes and two dangling legs. Ten years later, my self-portraits (made with the aid of my uncritical 4-year-old sister and a camera) depicted a series of seductive, yet pure, yet distant, feminine personas. It was as if I were trying to merge the Virgin mother with a Siren combined with the inapproachability of Klimt’s Judith. The role models of my youth may not have been these women, in particular, but their essences had not escaped my imagination. My favorite inaccessible yet beautiful woman, for example, was that man-less Amazon, Wonder Woman. She was a strong woman who guarded her chastity, wore skimpy clothes and had a physique to stop any male foe in his tracks. Other favorites were Charlie’s Angels and the Bionic Woman. The Bionic Man, in contrast, did not interest me. He didn’t wear fun clothes. He didn’t have long flowing hair to fly in the wind while he attempted to stop a runaway car. His delicate shoe wasn’t worn through completely when it was used as an emergency break. The women I enjoyed watching on TV were fashionable and pretty, yet strong. And too busy saving the world to entertain any of the dozens of male propositions offered to them. They had the power of desirability and yet the strength of independence. This somewhat ironic combination allowed them both the validation
of an approving patriarchal (male) gaze while remaining free from the subordination that would inevitably ensue if they were to team up with a man.

Naming oneself in a world where eroticism and female identity are inherently linked is an awkward process. In *Self Portrait with Christopher and my Future In Laws*, that very process is part of the plot. I am clearly not at ease in my space, and the way I constructed the image implies that I am on display. The display is two fold: first before my future in-laws, and second before the viewer. Because this is a self-portrait, that enhanced responsibility adds to the awkwardness. I know that I am photographing myself; I know that I am in a revealing dress; I know that the viewer will evaluate my appearance in a qualitative fashion. The fabricated story about meeting my future in-laws serves to call attention to the specific difficulty of a woman making a self-portrait, in addition to illustrating a personal narrative. The moment depicted did not in any objective sense really “happen”, but it nevertheless functions as a diaristic description of what I felt like when I first met my future husbands’ parents.

All my thesis pictures function in this dichotomous fashion. They are constructed within the domestic spaces of my family, and based on three main characters, but at the same time, they serve as explorations of how we, as women, and as people, fit into our environments.

At my thesis defense, two graduate students had problems with the environments I chose. They challenged me to legitimate my work in light of its “distracting” and “exclusive” socio-economic context, which they worried could only
be relevant to other young white women like myself who apparently came from upper-middle class backgrounds. Interestingly, they identified themselves as part of this subculture, but nevertheless, their socialist conscience had trouble with my imagery.

Middle to upper class interiors in art have a history that is heavily influenced by the desire to reinforce hegemonic codes. Marxist theory teaches us that the selective imaging of these spaces celebrates their place in a mythology of capitalistic and patriarchal aspirations. Contemporary advertising uses this history to its advantage. One recent essay by Amelia Jones labels advertising in which white women are depicted in beautiful domestic spaces as part of a postfeminist paradigm. “The economic stakes and class implications subtending postfeminist ideologies are evident in these advertisements,” she writes. “It is clearly the independently wealthy, stay-at-home postfeminist who makes the better consumer than the working feminist.” 8 This might be true, and certainly financially secure women have frequently been portrayed in art history as objects on par with the beautiful things that surround them. Domestic bourgeois interiors inhabited by beautiful passive women are regularly employed by companies like Ralph Lauren, J. Crew, and Victoria’s Secret to sell consumers pieces of a mythologized old-money lifestyle to which most have little access in real life.

The interiors of my family’s homes is an important component to my imagery. Though the ideas behind my work may be universal human concepts, the narratives in which they are played out are described with a specificity that is not incidental. In
Vermeer’s paintings, the sum of the quotidian details is what makes the universal element in his work so clearly described. In my photographs, I want the details to serve as descriptions for my thesis title. I decided on Legacy as an homage to the inherited qualities that make up our identities. Becky, Sybil and I are the newest members in a long line of women who I know partly from life and partly from family history. The spaces that we inhabit in the photographs serve to intimately address this self-conscious history and to name it in material terms. But they also provide a voyeuristic pleasure/repulsion for the viewer, to which I believe the graduate students were responding. The domestic interiors have an other-worldly aura, much like the pictures we see in National Geographic from exotic foreign places, except that instead of the photographer having traveled far distances to capture a foreign culture, she has only let you into the world she knows best. Viewers are let into scenes that are charged with all the tension of intimate moments and yet littered with signs of bourgeois domesticity. Curious or repelled by two aspects with which they may not have an affinity, they are at the same time drawn in by a voyeuristic desire to explore foreign relationships and spaces. It is not so much the material space that is exotic, however, as the intimate and personal way in which it is described. Real life does not look like my photographs. I am not a photojournalist. My subjects are not the Other. They are, on the contrary, disturbingly close. When something is described with precision, sometimes the specificity of that object is the best way to name the universal elements. In this fashion, whether you are Vermeer describing a map on a wall behind a girl, or e.e. cummings describing the blond hairs on your lover’s arms,

8 Jones, Amelia. “Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and the Embodied Theories of Art”, from New Feminist
your detail lets me in even if I have never been to Holland or in love with a blond haired person.

The legacy that Becky, Sybil and I inherit is multi-layered, coming not only from family sources, but also from our common visual culture. As in the self-portrait with my in-laws, the entire Legacy series addresses the objectified nature of females in visual media and how that relates to both how a woman is looked at in her space and how she is portrayed in visual representation. In Self Portrait with Christopher (Rochester) 2000, the viewer sees a clothed man (Christopher) lying on a bed looking at a standing nude woman (me), who’s back is turned toward the viewer. My nudity is echoed in a black and white nude portrait of a woman which hangs above the bed. The contraposto of my stance suggests other nude women that have been available to gaze at in classical painting, just as Christopher (and the viewer) gazes at me. The photograph on the wall reminds the viewer of the long tradition of women being admired for their sexual beauty. I am moving slightly and appear to be engaged in some activity unrelated to my husband. His look is ambiguous, and it is unclear what he may be thinking. I have heard various opinions from viewers who suggest everything from longing to loving to lust to indifference.

On one level, this is an intimate image about a specific couple, but on another level, it is an exploration into how women are looked at, especially naked women. The ambiguity in Christopher’s gaze and the multiplicity of interpretations around it draw attention to how much we bring outside cultural information to deconstructing

images. Because she is naked, we reason, he must be thinking "x". This thought process has little to do with the actual couple, and yet hovers in their space. This inherited way of interpreting—this "legacy"—was something I was trying to identify through making self-portraits. Like my photographs of distant men and popular girls in high school, my self-portraits allowed me to have authority over things with which I was not comfortable.

*Self Portrait with Christopher (Rochester) 2000,* like the self-portrait with my in-laws, and almost all my images, never “happened”. In reality, Christopher was reading a magazine, while I, brought in from a separate negative, was talking on the phone. I took the magazine out in Photoshop and pieced together this narrative about the complexity of relationships. Someone asked me at my thesis defense if the fact that my pictures were so fictitious somehow defeated their veracity and in turn, their intimacy. I replied that the intimacy is what made them so "fictitious" in the first place. I brought in an example from my family. My grandfather and great-uncle grew up in the same household with the same parents. According to my grandfather, these parents were loving, affectionate, and tender and he illustrates these qualities with many highly detailed stories. My great uncle, however, describes the same parents as reserved, domineering and unaffectionate. Who is wrong? We all know examples like this one, and the truth is that no one is “wrong”, only highly biased. The more intimate a story, the more biased and fictitious it is likely to be. The self-portrait in the bedroom was about me unraveling the novelty of being someone’s wife and sexual focus. That self-portrait, like the others, addressed how I fit into that specific space.
In closing, I would like to cite an entirely different form of art as a comparison. The scientist and writer, George Johnson was walking among the ruins of the Anasazi, lost ancestors of the Pueblo Indians, when he spotted a broken piece of pottery deliberately painted with precise black lines on a white background. Little is known about their ancient culture, but one is tempted to extrapolate about their lives from the remains of what they created. He writes:

*Turning it over with my fingers, I marvel at the pleasing geometric pattern. What made the potter decide to use this particular design? ...staring at the potsherd you immediately feel a sense of kinship, a connection across the centuries with a mind at play- the existence long ago of a contemplative individual. A self.*

In this respect, the Anasazi pottery is much like a Sofonisba self-portrait. Writing down, recording, visually processing our feelings about being conscious selves within the universe is as old as humankind and when we read the remains of this processing, we recognize the idiosyncratic human stamp. This is true in sixteenth century European self-portraits or in ancient pottery. It is always tempting to look into someone else’s life. All of us can appreciate the mystery of the self. All of us wonder, at some time or another, about the meaning of our own consciousness.

My photographs fit into a long tradition of contemplative work. Because I am sensitive to certain dimensions of the human experience, it is focused more heavily than another’s might be on the feminine journey at this moment in history. Becky, Sybil and I are forms from a specific language and digital photography is a specific syntax, but the underlying essence of the work is universal and old. What determines

---

if I am using the language and syntax well is that wound of which Roland Barthes speaks so eloquently. On some level, the pictures should prick at a truthful essence. You, the viewer, should be able to come across one of my images and think, “ah, here is a sense of kinship, the existence of a contemplative individual. A self.”
Bibliography


Family Portrait (Marcelle, Marcelle, Marcelle and Becky) 2000
Self Portrait with Christopher and my Future In-Laws 2000
Self Portrait with Christopher (Allentown) 2000
Self Portrait with Christopher (Rochester) 2000
Self Portrait with Christopher (Rochester) 2001
Self Portrait with Christopher (Rochester) 2001
Self Portrait with Christopher (Paris) 2000
Grandmother Jean with Becky 2000
Becky and the Mountain 2001
Becky with Christopher 2001
Sybil in the Dining Room 2000
Mom, Dad, and Becky (1999)
Sybil (Rochester) 2000
Becky with Bella 2001
Becky with Mom 2000
Becky with Dad 2000
Family Dinner 2001
Easter 2000
Becky 2001
Colophon

My thesis committee has contributed not only to the development of my exhibit and paper, but also to my entire Rochester experience. I would like to thank them for their guidance and challenge with this thesis work, for their insights into the world of art and for the ways in which they have enriched my community.

I also thank my family for their intelligence, support, and unending patience in front of the camera. I am especially grateful to my sister Becky and cousin Sybil for having worked with me so long and so cooperatively. And I cannot forget my husband Christopher, who is particularly outstanding for assuming his new and unexpected life as a model so graciously and lovingly.