Si Dios quiere ...

Katrina Marcelle D'Autremont

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SI DIOS QUIERE...

By

KATRINA MARCELLE d'AUTREMONT

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

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February 26, 2008
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This body of work is dedicated to my *Abuelo*, Horacio Genaro Bellizzi, a wonderful crazy man.
Acknowledgements

I want to thank my thesis committee for all of the time and effort that they put into helping me complete this paper and the thesis process. Each member was inspirational in his or her own way. I would like to thank Angela Kelly whose wonderful knowledge of the Family Album as a genre helped me to look beyond the traditional view. I am grateful to Jessica Lieberman whose overall excitement and support kept me motivated throughout the entire process. As well as, Clarence Sheffield whose knowledge about art makes me envious and motivated to learn even half of what he knows. Also thanks to Patti Ambrogi who from the beginning pushed me beyond the boundaries of what I new and loved about photography.

I would also like to thank all of the friends who have supported me.

And last but not least, I am very grateful to my family, some of whom sat in front of the camera patiently, and others who supported me from the sidelines, especially my parents. Without them there would never have been any photographs.
Si Dios Quiere...

By

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B.F.A., American Literature, University of Arizona- 2003
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Abstract

This thesis explores issues of closeness and distance within families. By looking at how aspects of cultural identity further complicate this dynamic as well as how photography is used as a way of mapping a family character, this thesis encompasses topics ranging from Argentine artists to early daguerreotype photography. Using her own Argentine-American heritage as a subject for the photographs, the artist focuses on her grandfather’s apartment in Argentina, which acts as a stage, and character in her family story. Traditional modes of photographic posing are borrowed and explored in this work, not only to reference the old photographs that occupy the apartment in Argentina but also to portray a kind of photographic genealogy, connecting one family member to another by similarities in pose and style. The work as a whole acts as a new chapter in a continuing family album. It deals with the mapping of genealogy as compared to the mapping of a place like a city or the apartment. An intimate space of memory and nostalgia, the apartment has a foreign quality that dislocates viewers spatially and temporally.
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Las Cosas

El bastón, las monedas, el llavero,
La dócil cerradura, las tardías
Notas que no leerán los pocos días
Que me quedan, los naipes y el tablero,
Un libro y en sus páginas la ajada
Violeta, monumento de una tarde
Sin duda inolvidable y ya olvidada,
El rojo espejo occidental en que arde
Una ilusoria aurora. ¡Cuántas cosas,
Limas, umbrales, atlas, copas, clavos,
Nos sirven como tácitos esclavos,
Ciegas y extrañamente sigilosas!
Durarán más allá de nuestro olvido;
No sabrán nunca que nos hemos ido.

- Jorge Luis Borges

Things

My cane, my pocket change, this ring of keys,
The obedient lock, the belated notes
The few days left to me will not find time
To read, the deck of cards, the tabletop,
A book and crushed in its pages the withered
Violet, monument to an afternoon
Undoubtedly unforgettable, now forgotten,
The mirror in the west where a red sunrise
Blazes its illusion. How many things,
Files, doorsills, atlases, wine glasses, nails,
Serve us like slaves who never say a word,
Blind and so mysteriously reserved.
They will endure beyond our vanishing;
And they will never know that we have gone.

- Jorge Luis Borges
I. Introduction

This thesis explores issues of intimacy and distance within my mother’s family. Both the house where she grew up and the people who are part of that life serve as characters in my photographs. The environment becomes a set for the photographic staging of the images. It reveals how a place can influence and form us. The word “Family” connects us, but the extent of our connection depends on several factors. Families can be separated by physical distance, but often the separation is complicated by more than distance, and the relationships themselves form walls and separations. Closer proximity to the people we love can be just as complex as distance. Within the family structure, specific roles are developed over time. We idealize these roles and the people who fill them, as well as the places we inhabit.

In the work, there are individuals sitting or standing, often in formal poses. They look directly at the camera or intentionally away. Inside the room they look perfectly in place, like the photographs on the walls, they seem hung there. In other frames there is an absence of people, instead we see the details of human existence, the coffee cup that is left behind or the slightly opened window. We see the wear and tear of time upon the house. There is a certain silence in all of the images, an absence of direct chaos. All except perhaps one, the family dinner in La Mesa [Fig. 1]. It is frozen chaos, but even then it has a certain stillness, a certain kind of pose. It is also the only frame that holds more than two characters. Each of the others has a singularity, the defining of smaller relationships that are only mapped out against the whole when we see the body of work all together.
There is nothing, in particular, that says that this group of people is part of one family, no real way to know; yet, somehow we all know. It is something in the familiarity, the ease of the stare, or perhaps the details of the informal dress. Individuals are placed within the frame of the photographs, but somehow they seem to be part of a greater context, a context with which we are all familiar, the familial relationship.

As viewers we enter the scene reluctantly. Maybe we do this because we know that we are only allowed in so far. The house is an engaging space, but the people seem frozen, cold, and dynamic all in one. They are not welcoming you, but they will tolerate your presence. We feel intrusive, but cannot turn away, we want too much to see the details on the plates or feel the velvet of the chairs. So we shift to images without direct human presence, we look closely at the threadbare curtains, the pattern of the sheets, and think… I can almost feel it.

I am attempting to hold the nostalgia I feel when looking at these images. One's personal nostalgia is a hard thing to explain to someone else because it grows out of one individual's past or ideas of the past. It is a bittersweet feeling, somehow connecting us to what we were once lucky enough to have but no longer possess. Nostalgia is a feeling everyone relates to, but perhaps no one feels in the same way. These photographs are part of my nostalgia and an attempt to preserve something that will one day be part of my past. Since I initially took these pictures, things have already begun to change. The gray carpet has been replaced by gold carpet. The curtains are brand new and are no longer falling down. Everyone is one year older. But this was never about stopping one particular moment in time; it was about holding the whole idea of the past in a few intense images. The root of the word "nostalgia" is from the Greek words nostos, which
means "return home" and *algos*, which means, "pain."¹ It is a word that is more closely related to homesickness, but its connotations spread much further than just pain to return home. I think we feel nostalgia in the same way we feel homesick. It is the feeling of physically being unable to get somewhere or be with someone. I want to transport a place and time, make it something that I can carry with me. Pictures are a way to access memory, and I use them to invent a sense of intimacy. People carry pictures of their family in their wallets to remember them by, but I want to carry my whole apartment from Argentina with everyone in it so that I will never have to miss them.

The title *Si Dios quiere...* (If God Wants…) comes from a joke that my grandfather used to tell my mother when she was a little girl. In the joke, an Argentine horse-cart driver from the mountainous region of Cordoba buys an Englishman's horse to pull a group of tourists up into the mountains. Because the horse belonged to an Englishman, it only understands English commands. The cart driver is told that he has to say the words "Stop" and "Go" to command the horse. The next day he is with the tourists rounding a particularly dangerous bend in the Andes, and he forgets the English words. He turns to the tourists and asks them if anyone in the group speaks English. There is an overwhelming cry of "¡NO!" and one tourist yells out while crossing herself..."Don't worry we'll be fine. If-that-is-what-GOD-wants..." The driver turns back around and says, "Yeah, because if God doesn't want…then we are all going to Hell!!"

Needless to say it is funnier in Spanish when my grandfather tells it. Every night my mother would come say goodnight to her father, with a little girl's lisp, and say "Nos vemos manana, si Dios quiere...." (We'll see each other tomorrow, if God wants...) and my grandfather would reply, "Si, porque si no, nos vamos todos a la puta que te parrio" Which translates to the equivalent of because "Yes, because if he doesn't want...then we are all going to go hell."

So the joke may be lost in translation, but the idea isn't. If God wants... it we will be. For my work I think of it as the idea that we do not choose our family, and if we are lucky we like them. I think family is mostly about the fact that we don't choose; for the most part we just have to accept. We have to work to stick together and overcome our views of each other. As well, we have to make time to be together or in this scenario we have to travel to be together, not only making time but finding a space to unite. For now that is my grandfather's apartment, and God still wants our family not to go to hell.

**II. Background and Evolution of the Work**

This series is part of a process of recognition. I spent many years traveling in search of the perfect thing to photograph, without seeing that the easiest place to start would have been my own life. Over time I grew indifferent to what can be termed "travel photography." I knew something was missing from my work, but could not quite establish what it was. It was hard for me to see photographs as a body of work rather than just individual images. When I returned to Argentina in the summer of 2006, I was not thinking of starting any particular photographic body of work, I was just playing with
my camera and spending time with my family. It wasn't until I returned to the United States after my trip that I saw the intrigue in these photographs.

I had spent the year before working on my series "When I turn off the lights…I am alone" which dealt with trying to bring the past into the present and how we use the photograph as a stand-in for memory. The images consist of me in my apartment with pictures from my mother's childhood and my childhood projected onto the walls. Both of these bodies of work contain the theme of home and family.

When I was nineteen, my Abuela Chiquita passed away. It was one of those distant sad events that mind and body do not connect. I rarely saw her, at most once every two years, but her existence was a given in my life. My mother's family was like a presence that was located somewhere to the South, and suddenly there was one less of them. I had this desire to be Argentine, and to live where I thought I came from. So I moved there in some fatal, beautiful attempt to take care of my Abuelo Horacio. I was a twenty-year-old girl moving in with an eighty-year-old man. I thought he needed the company, the addition to his life, when in truth all he needed was someone to help in the kitchen. I had taken time off from college and went with the intention of interning at a magazine to continue working on my photography. It was the year 2000. The Argentine economy crashed in 2001. People worked on average thirteen-hour days. You could see the exhaustion and depression clearly on people’s faces. You could walk through parks filled with businessmen sleeping under trees, their briefcases resting next to them. It was a difficult time to ask favors from anyone.

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2 "Grandmother" in Spanish.
3 "Grandfather" in Spanish.
I assumed that when I moved there my family would watch over me. My cousins, Martín and Esteban, seemed like much older brothers that had always taken me under their wings, but now they had families of their own and were busy with their lives. Sofia, my younger cousin, was hitting her teenage years with a vengeance, and I did not see much of her at all. My aunt Rosa Julia tried to connect me with people she knew, but the scenario was always the same. Everyone was struggling and extremely busy.

It is not to say that my family did not care, but one thing is to be a visitor, the other is to be a live-in guest. I was a stranger to them in many ways. The whole place was a stranger to me. I didn’t really know the codes of the country, even though I had been there so many times before. When my brothers and I were children my mother chaperoned us around, and now I was learning that it was very different to be on my own. I spent hours and hours in my grandparent's apartment waiting. I would wait for magazines to call or for new friends to take me out. I would wait the same way we did as kids for my mother to come back. We would sit for hours watching Woody Woodpecker cartoons that had been translated into Spanish, not understanding a word, while our Abuela, who didn’t speak any English, brought us candy and Coca-Cola. The apartment for me became a place of waiting and isolation.

After four months of waiting in 2000, I left Argentina to come back to the United States and finish college. Even now, I look back at the photographs taken during that time in Argentina, and they all speak of loneliness and confusion, but more importantly I see the roots of where this current project began. It was a time when I was old enough to understand the difference between loneliness and solitude and old enough to try and establish a role of my own within the family. These thesis images are portraits of a
particular family, my family, but they are also about the distances that exist in relationships between those people who are supposed to be closest to one another; people who share the same blood, history, and culture.

The apartment known as Callao\(^4\) is where my mother, Elena, and my aunt, Rosa Julia, lived when they were young. It is where Abuelo Horacio still lives today, and where we as a family still reunite. It is the house where our familial nostalgia resides. We have all lived there, at least temporarily at one point or another. We have each spent time searching the drawers and closets for mementos of the past. This is a house that has seen generations of stories, and over time it has not changed much. The antiquity of the apartment has a permanence that resonates of nostalgia. It is not a place that lets go of the past easily. It acts as a stage for the family drama, but also as a frame that has held us together. It is not unlike the word “family.” The word becomes an overarching idea that has many nuances, hidden corners, and meanings, but overall, it is a word that we all fit into together.

III. The Photographs

A. Photography, Intimacy, and the Family

When Abuela Chiquita passed away Abuelo replaced their bed with a single bed, but most things have been left the same, in part to remind him of times when she was still alive. Every night he goes to the table where a portrait of a young Chiquita sits, and he places a kiss upon the glass. It is a nightly ritual to a small shrine, a shrine that is a part of a larger one, the apartment. The idea of nostalgia exemplified in Chiquita’s portrait

\(^4\) It is named after the street where it is located in Buenos Aires.
and the nightly ritual is explored in my photographs of the house. In "Time Exposure and the Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox"\(^5\) Thierry de Duve the Belgian art theorist describes how the photograph creates a new kind of time. He quotes what Roland Barthes the French philosopher describes as the "illogical conjunction of the here and the formerly" in photographs. The "here," the "formerly," the "now," and the "there" are all spaces in time that are conflicting within the photograph. An example is how it is confusing to separate the spaces of the now of the photographs and the now of the viewing. It is the feeling of wanting to feel a part of the past, remembering how it felt, but not being able to arrive at the "there" of the place.

The distance from the photographic past and place is exaggerated by the remoteness of the overall setting, Argentina. It became a central aspect of the project for me to travel to Argentina, and that desire to return itself became important. For both my brothers and me going back is tied to identity. Our father is American and our mother is Argentine, but the three of us were born and raised in the United States. We traveled back to visit family almost every two years. I once added up all the months of visits there, and it added up to over three years. Three years scattered across twenty-seven. It is a place that both looks and feels familiar, but it is not our home. At times it feels as though we have an ingrained memory of a place that does not exist. By photographing the space of the apartment, I am attempting to make the memory and the connection more permanent. This is similar to another idea of Thierry de Duve. He discusses how using the technique of blur or "out-of-focus" as he calls it, "allows the viewer to travel through

the image, choosing to stop here and there, and in so doing, to amplify the monumentality of a detail, or to part from it...This particular surface temporality of photography is congenial with the ebb and flow of memory.6 This analogy fits well with the images of the house because the viewers are not only wandering through the image, but they are being allowed to wander through the house as well, and in so doing following my "ebb and flow of memory" and hopefully, their own as well.

The feeling of distance in the images is created not only by the actual foreignness of the objects but also, by what Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian Formalist critic, says is the sensation of how the objects are perceived. In "Art as Technique" he argues:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.7

The objects are part of the quality of distance, but it is also in relation to how we as viewers remember what our own objects look like. The "not-from-here" feeling does not place the viewer in Argentina particularly, and perhaps, it is not important which country it is exactly, just that it is not North America.

B. Argentine Artists

Argentina determined several aspects of the project. Approaching this project I looked at many Argentine artists from the visual arts to literature and music. The lyrics of tango music are always telling part of someone's story, and I wanted to photograph in

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the same narrative way. The mood that is conveyed is more important than the plot. Argentina is a mood, and to capture that is a difficult task. So I looked at some of the people who had done it so well, such as, the author Jorge Luis Borges and the painters Guillermo Kuitca and Antonio Berni.

There are two themes in my work that can be shown by looking at the work of Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. These ideas are the idea of duality or doubles and the idea that the place can be a character and a unifying characteristic at the same time. In one of his short stories, "The Other," Borges is the first person narrator of the story. He discovers that he is sitting on a park bench in Boston with a man who is humming a milonga. He has not heard the milonga since his early childhood in Buenos Aires, while asking the man where he is from Borges discovers that the man's childhood address is the same as where he himself lived as a child. He soon realizes that he is sitting next to a younger version of himself. The other man does not want to believe that they are the same person. The story is intriguing because of the details, like the milonga and the address of a childhood home, details that are signifiers of Argentina. The characters are connected through their Argentinidad which is a term used to describe anything that culturally describes Argentines or the country Argentina. So Argentina is a character and a catalyst to the story just as it is in my photographs.

The other characters in the story are two people who are actually the same person. In part the theme is about confronting oneself or the different people that we are at different times. The idea of the doppelganger is prevalent in my work because it ties in

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9 A kind of tango song.
with my feeling as though I am a different person in the United States and Argentina. My family's presence affects whom I am in a very similar way to how my presence affects how they are in front of the camera. Another way that duality plays a part in the images is when different generations are placed next to each other. In the image Sofi y Rosa Julia [fig. 2], the two women are dressed in white next to red velvet chairs, and Sofi sits while Rosa Julia stands. There is enough similarity in their faces to hint that they are related. In reality they are mother and daughter, but the photograph can suggest that they are the same person forty years apart. In another photograph, Martín y Sofía [fig. 3], my cousin sits in the same chairs next to her two-year-old son, Martín. They look at each other as if to study their own lineage. Both of them look so young that they could be mistaken for brother and sister. These images inspire questions of identity and genealogy.

Another aspect that is important in my photographs is the use of color; the muted yet vibrant color palette is one that in my memory only exists in Argentina. One example in my photographs is the color of the wall and sheets in the picture of the bedroom, La Cama [fig. 4]. They are not just the colors of Argentina but also the colors of age. They are colors that make things looked dated or located within a past time period. The painter Antonio Berni (1905-1981) also uses this relationship between color and place. Berni's use of color somehow removes people from reality and places them in a world that is just theirs, the figures are matched to their environment, and it is not our environment.

He painted his figures in moments of reverie, often there are several people in one frame, and yet none of them seem aware of one another, which is similar to how my family members relate in my images. Berni's figures often share close proximity within the
frame, but their focus is elsewhere. In Primeros Pasos (1973) [fig. 5] we see a young girl dancing while a woman pauses on her sewing machine. She does not seem to be looking at the girl at all. There is a disconnect occurring. Even in the more crowded paintings like Orquesta Tipica (1935-1979) [fig. 6] there is a whole band of musicians sharing a stage, but each person is engaged in their own frozen playing. I see this as similar to my photograph La Mesa [fig. 1] where everyone is at the table, eating their food and sharing a space, but distracted from each other's presence. Sometimes we share the same space as our family so much that at times we forget their existence.

Another painter whose work was influential was Guillermo Kuitca (1961-) because of the idea of mapping. I think of my images as a private map, I know how they connect, and I can see the path through the doorways and behind the people, but I cannot reasonably expect anyone else to know how to locate themselves in the images. Kuitca has a painting of the city of Buenos Aires from above, Untitled (1993) [fig. 7]. and all that is shown are lines that are meant to be streets in the city, but the streets are mislabeled. They are actual street names like Callao, Guido, and Santa Fe, but they are not placed in their real locations on a map. There is something beautifully false about this, he is creating a new map of a place he knows, and only a viewer who has been there will know that the streets are misplaced. Like my photographs it deals with intimate knowledge.

One other painting of Kuitca's that I would like to mention is People on Fire (1993) [fig. 8]. It is a painting similar to the map in Untitled (1993) [fig. 7], but the lines are not streets, they are connections between people's names. This is a visual representation of the web that exists between people. It is a simple fact that each time we meet someone we form a connection to that person, however simple, and through that
person, we then are connected to each person that they know. Each of us stands at the center of our own web, and it branches out around us. But how do we create an image of that? I think I am starting to collect my web photographically, an impossible project, but Kuitca has simplified it. We do not know to whom the names belong, but we recognize the idea as something similar to a family tree but instead of only including family it includes everyone we have ever met.

C. The Apartment and the Desire to Preserve

The mapping of people is like the idea of a blueprint of the apartment. They both show spatial relationships as well as interconnectivity. The apartment plays two roles; it is a stage for the photographs and a character with its own personality. Gaston Bachelard's book the Poetics of Space and Mitch Epstein's series Family Business (2000-2003) both reveal how a space and its objects can influence the people around them. I am looking at the way that my family forms a topography, as well as the way our house is a sort of map representing the family. Webs are created partially by time and circumstance. We each stand at the center of our own web as everything moves out around us. We often look to our past for roots, and we imagine that past to be located in a place, like a country or a house. Gaston Bachelard in The Poetics of Space, describes us as having a memory of a period of time not as something located in fixed dates, but rather as something situated in a particular place.10 An example of this is that as a child you lived in a particular house, and your childhood memories are linked to that place

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rather than the specific years you lived there. He describes his study of intimate spaces as *topoanalysis*, which he says is:

> ...the auxiliary of psychoanalysis. Topoanalysis, then, would be the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives.¹¹

I apply this idea of study to the site of my family's "intimate life" which I consider to be the apartment. It allowed me to look at both the physical and emotional topographies that exist within my family's structure.

There is an almost unapproachable nature to the environment of the pictures. Bachelard quotes Charles Baudelaire: “in a palace there is no place for intimacy.”¹² There is no place for intimacy because it becomes like a museum. In an attempt to preserve, the apartment is left alone; it becomes a shrine, a memorial to the people who are gone. All of the objects become so deeply ingrained with memory that the past is ascribed to them, and it becomes as though the apartment is the protector of this past. The apartment becomes so deeply rooted in a foregone elegance that the living have no place in which to sit, relax, and be “intimate.” This idea ties in as well with Bachelard's description that a house can become too beautiful or even painful even to touch:

> And at this point the house turns out to be so beautiful, so deeply beautiful, that it would be a sacrilege eve to dream of living in it.¹³

There are aspects of the apartment, of the stage, that show the untouchable nature of it as a space. One visual signifier is the repetition of the chandelier in several frames. There is a richness of detail and beauty, but it is not the kind of realistic lighting that most people still live with now. It both fascinates and rejects the viewer. The couches and

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¹² Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 29.
chairs are velvet, but they are covered with cotton fabric so that their elegance cannot be worn away. For me it is not their preservation that makes them beautiful, instead it is that they have become witnesses of how times passes.

The elegance of the setting is similar to the setting in the photographs of Tina Barney (1945-) in series such as The Theater of Manners (1997). Her subjects are her family and friends within their home environments. The houses are extremely ornate, and often the people, no matter how dressed up, look out of place in that setting. The houses seem to overshadow the subjects. One way I believe that this shifts in my work are when the people are absent from the photographs. We are left to look at the details of the house. The house itself becomes more inviting, the close up details give a sense of intimacy and understanding. We are familiar with the objects for what they are. We recognize a glass as a glass even if we have not held this particular one in our hands. In this space we are left alone to ponder; Bachelard ascribes this sort of reverie and seclusion to corners. Each photograph, in its square, becomes a corner, un rincon, where the viewer can stop a moment and become lost in his or her own thoughts.14

In part my photographs map a space, but they are also used to preserve a place that may not always exist. The French philosopher Roland Barthes says:

The Photograph does not call up the past...The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed.15


I can use the photograph in an attempt to preserve my memories of the apartment in Argentina as well as how I view my family. Mitch Epstein (1952-), in his series *Family Business* (2000-2003), shows how a disappearing place can be memorialized through the photograph. When his parent's furniture store was liquidated do to tragic circumstances Epstein went home to capture his father's life with a 4x5 camera, a video camera, and a journal. In photographs like *Warehouse* (2000) [fig.9] and *Mom II* (2001) [fig.10] objects and people look awkward in their environment. The desire to preserve one's personal history is a universal endeavor. My photographs speak of an intimate dialogue between the house and myself as I try to reconcile its fleeting nature.

The older generation in my photographs is also attempting a form of preservation. They dress elegantly just as they have for years. Their bodies are changing to the point that they no longer recognize themselves. Their clothes are from an earlier time period and by wearing them it situates them in that time. They remember the stories of their youth, and they think of the moments when their houses held entire families. Now they each live alone, and if they are lucky the family visits (which they both adore and view as an intrusion). Their personal appearance becomes a kind of stability. They can uphold their own ideal. It is a graceful way to live among ghosts in a country and time of great instability. It is apparent in photographs like the one of *Maria Esther* [fig. 11], she looks striking and classic. She sits straight upon the kitchen stool, and her clothes are decisive, as if to say that it was always her choice to age and time had little to do with it.

I understand this desire to preserve, but I want to use photography to preserve a general sense of things instead of events, things like the smell of the apartment, something that is elusive and hard to describe. These photographs are an attempt to
capture those things and save them away. I do not know what will happen to this apartment when Abuelo dies, but regardless it will not be the same. The seat of my Argentine memories will become empty without his presence, and all of the beautiful things will turn from objects of memory to mere objects.

**D. Intimacy and the Family**

In a traditional photographic relationship, the act of photographing both separates and unites the photographer and the subject. They are united because they both need to be present for the photograph to exist, and yet the exclusive frame of the picture separates them and the camera acts as a barrier between them. It belongs to one side as a form of dominance and to the other side it potentially is a loss of control. This power struggle is not unfelt in family photography. In retrospect we idealize pictures for the moments we believe they held, but often being photographed is an uncomfortable experience. It can be a false moment, one covered up by the mask of smiles we often wear. Yet we cling to these images because we see them as documents of our histories; we want to know that we have a past because in our past we feel safe.

Family is connected to ideas of rootedness. Genealogy carries the past of our blood. We do not always want to be part of our families, but it not something our body can reject or accept so easily. Our heritage links us to an overall culture, but our lineage is a more direct connection to our family, and metaphorically our family’s photographs can be seen as our visual lineage. Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* speaks about the idea of lineage:

*Lineage reveals an identity stronger, more interesting than legal status---- more reassuring as well, for the thought of origins soothes us, whereas that of the*
future disturbs us, agonizes us; but this discovery disappoints us because even while it asserts a permanence (which is the truth of the race, not my own), it bares the mysterious differences of beings issuing from one and the same family....

I would agree that it can soothe us, but it can also unsettle us. It is a fait accompli, and because of that, not unlike the future, it feels as though we have had no choice in it.

Family can be more reassuring when it is in a far distant past because we do not see all the details clearly. We have nostalgia for the past, and visually this is linked to old photographs. They are reminiscent of something we never experienced, but there is something about the photograph that allows us to feel closer to those experiences. If seeing is believing, then our mind begins to believe that we share those memories. The idea of shared memories is what Marianne Hirsch in her book Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory terms postmemory. It is the idea that we feel as though we have experienced someone else's memories just by having been told about them. The repetitive telling of a story or looking at a photograph allows us to experience our own version.

In part, family is idealized because it is something we can all associate with, for better or worse. This is one reason I think family photographs are so enticing; we see our own families in the idealization. Also we look for the hidden anomalies we know exist even in the most perfect family. In my photographs I am trying to work away from the

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16 Barthes, Camera Lucida, p.105.
18 Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory….but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory. Barthes Camera Lucida p.91
19 The Representation of the family as an autonomous emotional unit cuts across class and power relations to imply that we all share the same experience. Judith Williamson, Consuming Passions: the Dynamics of Popular Culture (London ; New York : M. Boyars,1986), p. 116.
classic idealization of the family. I am more interested in the idea of trying to represent the off moments, to somehow represent the fights and the discomfort that happens in a family setting, but without showing them overtly. The photographer Tracy Moffat (1960-) in her series Scarred for Life (1994) captures these off moments in a very graphic way. She uses a magazine style of photography with captions that explain to the viewer what has happened around the photograph. One caption reads, "Her father's nickname for her was 'useless'." [fig.12] Without the captions, that mention some terrible family judgment the images would be still be as scarring. They look like they are from the seedy version of a family album. They are from a dysfunctional family album (though some would argue there is no such thing as a functional family).  

The use of the family album as been employed by many photographers over the years to show the constructs created around the idea of a family. One such example is Ralph Eugene Meatyard's (1925-1972) The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater (1974). He uses his family members as models for his photographs, but he transforms each of them into the same character, Lucybelle Crater. He deletes their faces by using a plastic mask, thereby creating anonymity. At the same time the characters gain individuality in their pose and demeanor. Their bodies act as stand-ins for the body of any similar person. The child can be any child or the couple any couple. The repetitious character of albums has created a visual language within snapshot photography, and we recognize the family as family even without their faces. The mask can also be seen as the way we disguise ourselves in pictures, smiling or posing.

20 See also Christian Boltanski’s San Souci (1991).
The pose became a way to photographically exemplify the idea of relationships. I use the position of the subjects as a metaphor for what the real interactions between them might be. Sometimes I place the subjects in doll-like positions; they are told to sit still, and at other moments they adopt a pose that is a persona of themselves. In the work I adopt a classical approach in which long exposures exemplify seriousness or a perceived judgment. The pose is borrowed from early daguerreotypes and is meant to be austere and frozen. In Naomi Rosenblum’s *A World History of Photography*, she describes how an early daguerreotype portrait studio was set up and how the sitter was placed in a neck brace to keep his or her head steady during the long exposure. They were also meant to grip the arm of the chair so their fingers did not blur.

*In all, the posing process was nerve wracking and lengthy, and if the sitter wished to have more than one portrait made the operator had to repeat the entire procedure.... No wonder so many of the sitters in daguerreotype portraits seem inordinately solemn and unbending.*

My portraits are not quiet as formal or painful, but there is a similar quality. Often I used long exposure due to the ambient light of the setting. It was like asking someone to hold their breathe for a long time. It was not pleasant and it made my subjects even more uncomfortable in front of the camera. Already I was asking them not to smile, and since we have been trained that the smile is a photographic impulse, they were set on edge and it created this austere pose. The pose is attached to a shift in persona. Roland Barthes speaks about being photographed in *Camera Lucida*. He says:

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...I have been photographed and knew it. Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing." I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform in advance into an image.²²

The pose also acts as a way to place people in the role of a character. They are no longer just themselves unaware of the moment being captured; they are waiting for the moment while playing a part.

Another aspect of the pose is that it transfers the balance of control within the family dynamic. The subjugation of the person posing is an intense aspect of the photograph. The act of making takes only a few moments, as Barthes says, "What founds the nature of Photography is the pose. The physical duration of this pose is of little consequence..."²³ but the subject understands the fundamental aspect of permanence once the photograph is taken. Partially that meant that I was confronting a fear, no one wants to look bad for eternity. So each click made them more nervous, more petrified by the certainty that there was a chance that the preservation of their image was not how they would have wanted it, not something that they could decide. By allowing me to photograph them they gave me control of this idea of permanence. My subjects, my family, were posing as my idea of them, not as who they actually are.

My presence as the photographer affected them as characters as well. They were as aware of me behind the camera as I was of them in front of it. I was not an anonymous photographer; I was their granddaughter, cousin, or niece. When talking about his series “Family Pictures”, Robin Grierson said:

‘Photography always reveals truth about relationship between the photographer and the person being photographed... That is evident even in most amateur

²² Barthes, Camera Lucida, p.10.
²³ Barthes, Camera Lucida, p.78.
family pictures. The problem is, if you’re a professional photographer, you can mess up that purity by trying to dramatize reality in some enterprising way, by exaggerating aesthetically, or manipulating technically the essential truths standing there in front of you. 24

This is part of the complication with my series. I am not sure when the line is crossed between family and stranger. I make them into characters, and they become anonymous to the viewer, but to me they are all well known. I run the risk of taking advantage of them, of making them into “the other” or a foreign distant image.

E. Painting’s Influence on the Photograph

In Robert Hirsch’s book Seizing the Light he describes what he calls the “Photographic Language” of the mid-19th century. In mid-19th century photography it became common practice for photographers to try and represent a more painterly style, Realism was important during this time period and painting was trying to take on a photographic attention to detail. The manipulation involved in trying to create painterly effects influenced what methods of shooting were used. Wet plate processes and Calotypes were both in use at the time. Wet plate needed a certain amount of set up and work before the final outcome, but the plates could be reused if unsuccessful. Where as a calotype had less detail but was faster to set up, so it was used more often by amateurs. Calotypes were also seen as a way of enhancing that painterly style that was so prized at the time. Calotype negatives were collected and kept regardless of their success; unlike the plates, they could not be scraped off and reused so there was no need to destroy them.

24 Robin Grierson, "Family Pictures" Granta Magazine vo. 91 Wish you were here: including Simon Gray on the life and death of Alan Bates (London: Granta, 2005).
Even though the process is different now, this idea of collection is still important in my work because I often shoot fast and without a direct result in mind, and during the editing process the work comes together. If I had to throw away each negative to reuse the film, I would not have a body of work at all.

These early calotypes also allowed amateur photographers an easier way to approach photography. They were able to work more informally and work within their homes. They began working with their family in ways that imitated the studio style. This style has a more informal or at home aspect to it. Hirsch describe a homemade portrait album from the 1850’s, where the posing styles of professional calotype studios were engaged he says, “mixed in with the formalistic concerns of composition and light is an unmistakable snapshot impulse.”

Lady Clementina Hawarden (1822-1865) is an example of this style of amateur photographer. She used her family, her daughters in particular, as the subjects of her photographs. She cleared a room in her home and used it as a studio, which adds to the intimacy of the portraits. The space that was used was devoid of objects except for a few prized objects [fig. 13, 14, 16], which were often used in interactions with the subjects. In many of the pictures the girls are dressed in costumes, they are part of a familiar charade and their poses show their consciousness of the camera. One reason they are so intimate is that there is a game played between the sisters in costume, but at other times they are solitary standing in their undergarments and barefoot by windows or mirrors [fig. 14]. They are unselfconscious because they are standing in front of their mother who is

behind the camera. These portraits were never intended for the public, they were pasted in private albums, and later they were moved into public collections. Remnants of this recontextualization can still be seen because of the corners missing from where they where once pasted into the family albums. I associate with these games of role-play, even if in my pictures it is less obvious since the roles I am asking my family to fill are their own. I think there is a similarity in the use of an intimate home space. In several pictures, like Esteban [fig. 15], people’s shoes have been kicked off. The removed shoes are a sign of comfort with the surroundings.

Another similarity is that Hawarden never appears directly in her work. There is one image in particular where her daughter Clementina is standing beside a mirror and the reflection of the camera can be seen in the mirror [fig. 16] 26. This is similar to the reflection that is seen of me between Abuelo and Maria Esther [fig. 17] as they sit on the couch. It adds one more layer to the image because it acknowledges the photographic presence. The use of mirrors also deals with the idea of doubles that was discussed earlier. Except in the image of the daughters it is the duality of the subjects and less the duality of the photographer, and once again we are dealing with generations, perhaps her daughters can be seen as a kind of double of the mother.

There are two ways to look at how painting influenced my photography, one as we have seen is how it affected photography during its early development, and another is the similarity in my photographs to particular styles of painting. One visual influence is the use of chiaroscuro. It is a term that is used to describe light and dark in the visual

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arts. My photographs have this same obscured lighting like in classical painting. The subjects often emerge from the darkness, and the direction of the light source feeds into the drama of the pictures. This is an important aspect because it describes an unconscious backdrop of the photographs. There is a sense that behind each image is an untold story or something buried in the past. The objects in each frame, as well as the backdrop, speak to this implied psychological state. The photograph of *Sofia y La Mariposa* [fig. 18] is one obvious example of the technique of chiaroscuro, but also it hints at the unconscious because of the painting of the butterfly behind her. It is in the shadow, and yet it is a strong aspect of the photograph. It can be a metaphor for metamorphosis or a reference to the frame of the past standing behind her. Another example of the use of light and dark is in the picture of *Maria Esther* [fig. 11]. She is posed elegantly against a backdrop of swirling tiles. She is illuminated from a window we do not see, and she looks towards it while the darkness moves in towards her.

Another aspect in the background is religion. In Latin America, Catholicism is the prevalent religion, and even when it is not being spoken about there are symbols of its presence everywhere: crosses hanging on chains around people's necks, symbols of the Virgin Mary in bedrooms. Religion is a presence. It parallels the ghostlike feeling the people, and situates it self neatly into the photographs. In the picture of *Maria Esther y Dorita* on the beds, there is a cross hanging between them on the wall [fig. 19]. These markers of religion add to the narration of the story we cannot hear. One photograph where religion plays a part but there are no icons in the background is *La Mesa* [fig. 1], where everyone is situated around the father figure at the end of the table. This photograph resembles Leonardo Da Vinci's (1452-1519) *Last Supper* (1498) [fig. 20].
Everyone at the table is engaged in their own moment and interaction, and although my grandfather is unaware and looking down, he is still the center of everything.

IV. The Final Show and Conclusion

The final presentation of the show was important in many ways. The editing of the work provided an interesting challenge. Especially in trying to juxtapose the house pictures with the family portraits. I did not want it to be a diptych structure because I am not directly comparing the apartment to its inhabitants; I am showing coexistence. Sometimes they feel like very separate series, but I think when they are seen all together there is a unity. The unity comes from the colors and textures but also from the silence that pervades the images.

The walls of the gallery are a grey shade of green and at the end of the long room there are large windows hung with elegant maroon curtains (not unlike the curtains in the images) [fig. 21]. All of these aspects are meant to suggest the idea of a parlor or home. I do this for two reasons. One is to reference back to the early salon style of exhibitions, as seen in the drawing from A World History of Photography\footnote{Rosenblum, A World History of Photography, p. 51.} of one of the first daguerreotype galleries. It was not uncommon for art to be displayed this way, and although it does not allow for each piece to have a distinctly individual space, it does build a relationship between them. The second reason is a simple one: in houses people tend to place things in a variety of frames of different sizes. Not everything is hung in one neat row, not everything is placed on the walls at the same time. Our family photo

\footnote{Rosenblum, A World History of Photography, p. 51.}
collections grow slowly, and I wanted to replicate the way it is in the apartment in Buenos Aires.

Another obvious decision was the use of elegant frames. The pictures are framed in replica ornate frames. It raises the photographs away from the museum walls and re-contextualizes them hinting at a time period in the past. I want my memories of Argentina to be located further in the past than they actually are. I wish I could see, feel, and smell my mother’s childhood, but all I really have are handed down stories and old pictures. Originally I consider that I was making a contemporary set of old photographs, so I employed a more classical style of portraiture, a style connected to long exposure time. The photographs around the Callao of great grandparents, visabuelos, and the entire set of children or grandchildren are the original inspiration [fig. 23], but I do not think that my photographs match these exactly. They mimic the seriousness of early classical work and function as a catalogue or archive of the family. By collecting all of the family around the grandparents, earlier photographers display a bloodline, showing the hope for it would continue into the future, adding another chapter in the family album.

Somehow now it seems less and less likely we can gather everyone together for this sort of portrait. My figures are much more solitary as they inhabit their own frames. They also seem less dated, more misplaced in time. I want the work to have a feeling that is contemporary, but not specific. This work is not about a specific trip to Argentina; it is about revealing a more generalized place and idea. Color is used to separate these photographs conceptually from the older black and white portraiture, but it still contains a similar idea of setting and posture from the originals. My photographs are the next set in
the missing album. It is important that the dates are missing because I do not want to place them within a particular time. Instead, I want the past and present to share a confusing boundary just as they do within the space of the apartment.

In this scenario where I am both a family member and an archivist, I am like the tourist on the mountain. I am both part of the experience and outside of it. In some ways I am waiting for someone to turn around and ask me if I know how to stop the cart from going over the edge, someone to ask me if I know some way for my family to be frozen like they are now, no changes. I would like to say that I do, that I do speak English, that I know the magic words that can stop us from falling apart. But in truth I know that there are no magic words, there are no amount of photographs that can freeze time. I cannot stop change from occurring I can only try and memorize how it all is.
Figures

Figure 1

La Mesa (2006)

Figure 2

Sofi y Rosa Julia (2006)
Figure 3

Martín y Sofía (2006)

Figure 4

La Cama (2006)
Figure 5

*Primeros Pasos* (1973), Antonio Berni

Figure 6

*Orquesta Tipica* (1935-1979), Antonio Berni

Figure 7

*Untitled* (1993), Guillermo Kuitca
Figure 8

People on Fire (1993), Guillermo Kuitca

Figure 9

Figure 10

Mom II (2001) Mitch Epstein

Figure 11

Maria Esther (2006)
Figure 12

Useless, 1974
Tracy Moffat

Useless (1974) Tracy Moffat

Figure 13

Untitled Lady Clementina Hawarden
Figure 14

*Untitled* Lady Clementina Hawarden

Figure 15

*Esteban* (2006)
Figure 16

*Untitled* Lady Clementina Hawarden

Figure 17

*Abuelo y Maria Esther* (2006)
Figure 18

*Sofía y La Mariposa* (2006)

Figure 19

*Maria Esther y Dorita* (2006)
Figure 20

The Last Supper (1498), Leonardo Da Vinci

Figure 21

Show Installation View (November 2007)
Figure 22

Early Photography Gallery

Figure 23

My mother, all of her cousins, and their grandparents.
Bibliography


