

All About My Mother: Archives, Art, and Memory

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One afternoon when we were in high school, my brother and I came home from school to find the living room full of coconuts. These were not your typical tropical fruit advertised in commercials for resort vacations, cracked open to reveal a creamy white rim, a vessel for drink with a paper parasol and straw. Instead, they were unseemly, large hairy brown misshapen bowling balls that covered the floor of my mother's studio (which was also, and always had been, our living room). These alien blobs made it impossible to enter into the space. They rolled against each other on the uneven wood, at times emanating noise, like a hiss or a sigh. In retrospect, although this seemed odd to us, it was not exactly unusual. Having an artist as a mother, or a mother who was an artist (not always clear which came first, as these roles were inextricably linked) often meant surprises. We grew up sitting on the floors of galleries and enormous raw loft spaces in SoHo when the neighborhood consisted of abandoned buildings and warehouses. We spent hours drifting through openings, performances, and happenings, surrounded by art made of unconventional materials: dirt, wood, clay, porcelain, wall paper, aluminum, trash, netting, yarn, fabric, and thread. In the 1970s when my mother began to formally exhibit her work, she re-imagined her classical training (she studied with Ad Reinhardt at Brooklyn College and later went on to Yale University) to incorporate non-traditional materials, particularly those associated with women and domestic practices. She made abstract paintings out of thread and gesso, sculptural fractals out of layered organdy; she juxtaposed photographs of famous buildings and ethnographic photographs with a visual map of their knitted silhouettes. Later on, she embroidered paintings. The coconuts were part of an installation about Western appropriation of the tropics in art, popular culture, and tourism. They accompanied large photo collage pieces (made to look like movie posters) that paired images designed to highlight fantasies, desires, and false assumptions surrounding the lure of "uncultivated" places.

In an effort to include herself as the artist/producer of knowledge, who was also complicit in her own cultural production, my mother decided to embed a photograph of our family in one of the compositions (see figs. 1 and 2). We are at the famous restaurant Trader Vic's located in the Plaza Hotel in New York City. It is 1985, and I am a junior in high school. My



Figure 1, Elaine Reichek, *Gauguin at the Harmonium in His Underwear*, 1987, oil on collaged gelatin silver prints, 66 x 47" (167.6 x 119.4 cm), Vera List Center for Art and Politics, The New School, New York. Photographed by Daniel Terna.



Figure 2, detail of Reichek, *Gauguin at the Harmonium in His Underwear*.
Photographed by Daniel Terna.

brother is a freshman. I am wearing an oversized Betsy Johnson sweater emblazoned with a tropical fish over leggings, an outfit that I remember thinking was very chic. My mother insisted that my brother wear a Hawaiian short-sleeve shirt for the photo, black with pink flowers, a hand-me-down from a trip she and my father had taken to the Caribbean a few years before. He still has his braces, and he smiles awkwardly at the camera. My mother wears a silk shirt; her hair is very short and spiky (an Annie Lennox look), and her expression is strained. She looks as though someone asked her to smile, and she complied, just to save face for the picture. My father, who is forty-four in the photo, is also trying to smile, but weakly. He looks unwell. His hair is beginning to thin, his body showing signs of the cancer that he would die from the following year. I do not know this in the photograph. I only know that I am posing for the camera, something I like to do. I am the only one with a real smile on my face.

Today I have a copy of this photograph on the mantle in my living room, and it looks just like a vacation snap shot, a memory of a time spent with family. Yet I can see now that what is invisible in the picture of my family at Trader Vic's is my parents' knowledge of the severity of my father's illness. Looking closely, I understand that their composed expressions convey their brave effort to keep this secret from us, their teenage children. As a work of art, my mother's piece hangs in a hallway at the New School in New York City. Hundreds of students and faculty must pass by it every day. Hard to know what they might be thinking when they look at it, if they notice it at all amongst the other pictures. For the outside observer, the photo is part of a larger constellation of images. For me, though, the photo provides access to a personal, emotional archive. This is the last picture I have of my father and of our family together.

My mother's most recent work is about invisibility—a large body of extraordinary embroidered pieces pairing quotes from famous authors from Samuel Morse to Margaret Atwood on the subject of presence, absence, loss, recovery, traces, preservation, technology, writing, transmission of knowledge, embodied labor, and the processes of memory. My mother's work is about archives, and it is itself a vast archive, which reflects more than just her own development and identity as an artist. For me, as her audience, the images are an uncanny link to periods of my life that I have struggled to block out and compartmentalize. These last memories of my father and of our family together and intact only surface again when I am confronted with the tangible evidence of having existed at another place and space in time. Looking at these three-dimensional objects is not the same thing as finding an old photograph; something about the invisible traces of the embodied actions/events/performances surrounding them makes them almost like spiritual icons—objects that emanate or radiate

other forms of knowledge and presence that suggest meaning outside of the things themselves.

The essays ahead grapple with the tangible and intangible stakes of memory as well. The authors explore ideas of anonymity, visibility, muffled voices, knowledge, lacunae, performance, forms of labor, recovery, embodiment, legacy, and negotiation connected to the scholarship, recovery, curating, and sustaining practices involved in women's literature and archives. While there is no possibility of a return to the past, a capacious approach to archives, these essays seem to suggest, holds the promise of enriching, guiding, and re-imagining the present.

My work as a scholar of gender studies, theater, and material culture comes directly out of growing up in the art world, with an artist mother and a mother who *was/is* an artist. Our work, my mother's and my own, returns again and again to the ephemerality and tangibility of the archive, the personal, collective, historical, imagined, place of meaning and memory, the fragment of the forgotten, and the documented trace. I suppose it is also about representing what cannot be seen—the entangled weight of grief and loss we weave through our overlapping stories.

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