Fragments and Past Lives
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This is my favorite photograph from my childhood. It is 1956; I am about 2 1/2 years old. I am sitting on the mantle above the fireplace in our living room. In between my mother (who is pregnant with my sister Karen) and me is “the portrait.” This framed painting is of me, the first-born child, the first-born grandchild. My father’s uncle had this portrait painted from a photograph that my parents had sent him. I have no memory of it being taken; I only remember the story. Until now, I have never even thought about who took it. In the original snapshot sent to my Uncle Sam, I was wearing Mickey Mouse ears and a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, my favorite attire at that age. The
painter took the artistic liberty, probably on my uncle’s instructions, of dressing me in a pink dress with puffy sleeves. Mickey was replaced by the number one symbol of the feminine little girl. To show my uncle how much I looked like the portrait, my parents dressed me up to match the painting so that the photograph would show the painting to be an accurate representation. It is a sign of the times that I did, in fact have a dress very similar to one in the painting. And so I looked like the painting that was painted from the photograph, and the photograph proved it.

The mantle snapshot is just one of many hundreds of evocative and classically American photographs that my parents took of our family. I have returned to these snapshots from the 1950s over and over again. I grew up in the San Fernando Valley suburbs in Los Angeles. Until I was 12, we lived in Van Nuys, in a white middle-class neighborhood of tract houses with front porches and lawns: a perfect backdrop for my handsome father, glamorous mother (neither of whom looked too Jewish), and their three adorable girls. My father lived out the American dream: a child of Russian-Jewish immigrants, he started a successful business and, as his career advanced, we moved to increasingly larger houses. Our family snapshots fit right in with the image of the American family that was being presented at that time in mainstream print media and on TV. In them, our lives appear to be easy and we always look happy. My family’s photogenic life was being played out for the camera while the McCarthy hearings were in full swing, Rosa Parks wouldn’t give up her seat in a bus, schools were desegregated, the labor force was 5:2 men to women, the U.S. secretly helped to overthrow governments in Iran and Guatemala, and the fear associated with the Cold War was rampant.
In my late twenties, I searched through boxes and drawers for family photographs that hinted at the true complexity of our lives, hoping I would discover ones that broke away from photographic convention and stereotypes. I came across several groups of photos of me taken between 1954 - 1956 by a professional photographer who came to our house. (At that time, it was common for photographers to go door-to-door seeking jobs.) I have gone through the stacks of proofs from these at-home sessions throughout my adult life, and it is these three I return to again and again.

I had assumed that the order the photos were taken in went from smiling to crying, but recently I realized that most likely the opposite was true. I must have been put in the chair, became scared of the camera and/or photographer, started crying, reached for my mother and, when she held me, stopped crying and then smiled. Am I seeing my struggle to separate? Reading the order either way, it is the center image that haunts me. I am staring at the camera, clutching my mother, having just lost—or about to gain—my composure. I look at the camera with fear, a moment that is rarely caught on film.
In 1987, my snapshots from the 1950s were the centerpieces of my photographic installations. Since the early 1980s I have engaged in an artistic practice where I project slides (often my family snapshots) into empty rooms to create installations specifically for the vantage point of the camera. Why the 1950s in 1987? Reagan was president and preaching “family values.” The Iran Contra Scandal was unraveling. I turned 33, and Andy
Warhol died on my birthday. Klaus Barbie was on trial in France for his Nazi war crimes. Photographs in the newspapers were still black and white, and images of torture and dead bodies were not shown on the front page. But as we know now (and knew then), nothing was as picture-perfect as it seemed.

In early 1987, I created *Fragments* with my beloved mantle photograph. I re-photographed the snapshot as I most remembered it — an object to be looked at. I projected the slide of the snapshot with its pushpins so that it took on the proportions of an image living in my mind. The three of us look so young and hopeful. The woman in pieces on the floor, actually my sister Patricia, might be the little girl grown up. The contemporary image is shattered but in pieces that look like they can be put back together. The woman’s eyes are closed, as if dreaming, and the borders of the snapshot wash over her like a wave.
In the summer of 1987, I attended the Mac Dowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, for the first time. I brought slides with me of many of the photos in my family’s archive, as well as many re-photographed media images of historic events from the mid-1940s on. I wanted to expand my investigation of the relationship between personal and collective memory by
looking at my own documented history against the backdrop of public images. I was interested (and still am) in how we come to know the world and ourselves through photographs. That summer I created several photographs that incorporated the image of me fearfully clutching my mother.
It was also the time of the trial of Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie. The floating projected image in *Past Lives* is of a group of children hidden in a boarding school in Izieu, France, who were then deported by Barbie and sent to their deaths in a concentration camp.* The photo was widely published and became a symbol of Barbie's crimes against humanity. I was haunted by this smiling image of the children; *Past Lives* is dedicated to their memory. In my projected collage, images of Ethel Rosenberg, the children from Izieu, and me clutching my mother merge. I become the recipient of the weight of my cultural past.

Since the late 1980s I have cut out of newspapers photographs of people holding photos of their loved ones, a universal sign that they have died or are missing. Seeing the photograph as a symbol of loss was a central theme of *Playback*, my slide installation from 1992. The 15-minute floor-to-ceiling projection opens with images of my hand picking up photographs of myself and of my family in the 1950s. These dissolve in and out of newspaper images of people holding photographs. A chronological sequence follows, alternating among my family images, more contemporary self-portraits, and historic images from WWII to the present. A continuously playing live radio scan is the audio background. Preprogrammed stations are scanned, alternating music, news, and talk shows—the audio equivalents of the types of imagery used.

The image I hold in the beginning of *Playback* is a color photograph of the five of us in the backyard of our Van Nuys house in 1959 (top image in collage at right). My father has his arm around my mother and me. I have always noticed my watch in this photo. I am sure that at age five, I was very proud to be wearing it. We all look happy. I begin the piece both looking at this image of my past and presenting it to the viewer.
Playback (mid-dissolve excerpt), 1992
slide installation with live radio scan

Clutching, final image of Playback
Playback ends with a self-portrait superimposed over the photo of me clutching my mother. I can still remember the moment at which, when working at my light table in my studio, I discovered this magical combination of the two slides on top of each other. I gaze directly at the camera, appearing to be holding my past self, who appears to pull at my adult skin. My present and past selves linger on the screen, confronting the camera with resistance, and then slowly fade away.

My most recent installation, Reverb, is a sequel to Playback.** In the latter part of the 1990s, I noticed that photos of displaced families forced from their homes were regularly printed in newspapers to show the horror of the situation in Kosovo. Both sides in the Elian Gonzalez case used the family photo to show how close they were to Elian. Holding photos of the missing and dead became more commonplace and more of a political act. This was poignantly clear in the U.S. in the aftermath of September 11. In 2003, the Abu Ghraib prison photos made it seem for a time that amateur photographs could actually change the course of a war and an election.

Selected audio fragments, taken from on-line audio archives, play randomly alongside the projected images and are complemented each day by a live news feed taken directly from the Internet. Direct broadcasts of past historical events, political speeches, and personal testimonies make different sound/image permutations each time the piece is played. The juxtaposition between the visual and the audio changes with each viewing changing the viewers’ perspective on what they see and hear. In developing Reverb, I returned to my boxes of family snapshots once again. The projected sequence begins with an image of my family taken in 1960 or 1961, a time that was still essentially the 1950s. The five of us pose at the entrance to
Disneyland in a configuration similar to the backyard snapshot that begins Playback. Construction of Disneyland began the year I was born, and it opened in 1955. Starting in 1956, my family visited once a year. Mickey and the Mouseketeers were a big part of my childhood. The second image in Reverb shows my hands holding a snapshot of me with Mickey Mouse ears at age two. Maybe this is the image that was sent to my Uncle Sam.
NOTES


**Reverb** debuted at ArtSway, Hampshire, England, in 2004. The installation uses software designed by Jon Meyer to generate the image dissolves and to stream audio content. For more information and to hear view an excerpt of *Reverb*, please see www.lorienovak.com/reverb.