

## ARTS

# Moving Images from a Mixed Bag

Though uneven, *Death and the Family* provokes reflections on life

## VISUAL ARTS

### Death and the Family

Works by Gisele Amantea, Marian Penner Bancroft, Wyn Geleynse, Paula Levine, Toby MacLennan, Ross McElwee, Lani Maestro, Dennis Oppenheim, Larry Sultan, and Bill Viola. Curated by Karen Love.

At the Presentation House Gallery until June 11

• BY KEVIN MUTCH

When I arrived at North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery an hour before closing time for an initial look at curator Karen Love's group exhibition *Death and the Family*, I was warned somewhat sternly that I hadn't given myself enough time. And indeed, half an hour after the gallery had closed I was still less than halfway through the installations, photographs, and videos that comprise the show, necessitating a long second visit. Considering that most art shows are consumed in minutes, I was left wondering just how strained the patience of typical gallery-goers would be after they'd taken in the whole thing. To put it another way, I wondered how many would bother.

This represents both a problem in contemporary culture and a problem with the show. With a hopelessly eroded late-20th-century attention span, I found myself squirming restlessly a quarter of the way through Toby MacLennan's 45-minute video, "How Will I Know I'm Here". MacLennan juxtaposes short glimpses of inexplicable scenes (an elderly couple prances naked in the woods, a deer stands timidly in one room of a house, a woman luxuriantly parts her legs in a pool of mud, et cetera) without so much as a shred of narrative to tie them together. In the venerable spirit of art video and experimental film right back to the surrealists, she eschews linearity—apparently trusting that viewers will weave complex associations, meditations, epiphanies, and so forth from these often haunting images.

This actually worked quite well for a while, until one too many of these bizarre collisions brought on a sort of imagination overload. After that, I found myself wishing she had broken the work up into four or five discrete pieces, which might have been more digestible. This might also have helped me to understand the video's connection with Karen Love's curatorial focus on "work which look[s] at those times within the context of the family environment when we learn of our own mortality". Although a statement informs us that "How Will I Know I'm Here" was made in response to the death of the artist's mother, this was not one of the many rather varied interpretations that sprang to mind as I watched it.

Gisele Amantea's video installation *and sorrow come near us no more* is equally protracted. Amantea combines a velvety-black "shrine" with a monitor on which a seemingly interminable interview with her parents plays. Although there is a spare elegance to the piece overall, the video component seems only to function as someone else's genealogical home movie.

In the same room, a series of photographs is grouped together to document a colossal installation by seminal earthworks artist Dennis Oppenheim. *Polarities* (1972) consists of two large negative prints of abstract drawings by Oppenheim's daughter and late father that frame a grid of 15 smaller photographs and a map. The smaller pictures, taken from the air, are of gigantic versions of these drawings that Oppenheim produced in a field using magnesium flares. I found that the heroic scale and perfectly spaced flares resulted in "drawings" that were devoid



In *My Mother Posing for Me*, excerpted from "Pictures from Home" and on view at the Presentation House Gallery's *Death and the Family* exhibition, photographer Larry Sultan puts an unsettling spin on the prosaic details of everyday life.

of character compared to the vivid purplish-black enlargements on which they were based. Next to the striking and even beautiful pairing of one of the daughter's first drawings with the father's last one, the flares in the field seem like a lot of superfluous bother.

Oppenheim manages to set up a

genuinely interesting deliberation on life and death in one's family that is neither maudlin nor dull. Another artist, Larry Sultan, accomplishes something similar with his photographs, which are excerpted here from a larger body of work called "Pictures from Home". A grid of stills

blown up from home movies (every good installation needs a grid, it seems) is set beside a series of Sultan's photographs of his elderly parents in their home. Several of these are astonishing, managing to make the most prosaic details of life seem quite fantastic.

SEE NEXT PAGE

## Death and the Family

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

In *My Mother Posing for Me* (1985), the artist's mother stands self-consciously against a vivid-green wall in her living room while her husband, seemingly oblivious, takes in a baseball game on television. Everything about this couple balances precariously between noisy suburban kitsch (the mother wears a satin western shirt and white slacks) and timeless, patrician elegance. In the middle of this tension Sultan manages to focus on the worn, wistful face of his mother, where a variety of emotions seem ready to emerge from beneath carefully applied blue eye shadow, rouge, and bright lipstick.

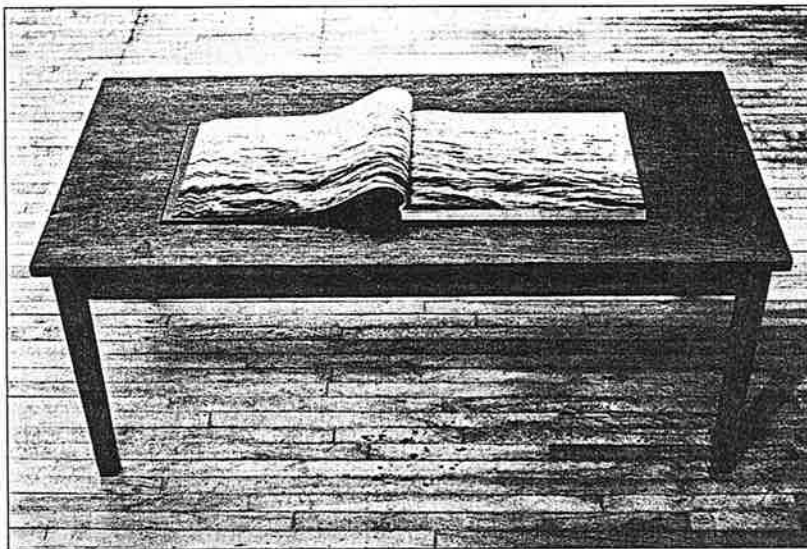
Lani Maestro exhibits a considerably more metaphysical response to mortality, in this case the death of a person she refers to as her "heart mother". In an artist's statement that I found frankly irritating, she describes her installation *a book thick of ocean* as a "site for mourning and loving where the book...activated ocean-depth emotions within me and my close friends" and concludes poetically: "A book

thick of ocean. A gravity of love that knows no bounds. A cradle."

Steeling myself for a feel-good session, I approached a table upon which a large bookwork lay open. Handling it gingerly (gloves are required), I was pleasantly surprised both by its conceptual rigour (the entire book consists of a single image of an expanse of ocean, repeated on every page) and by the way in which, like it or not, it managed to evoke just the sort of profound responses that Maestro claims for it.

There is much more to the show, including a two-hour film by Ross McElwee to be screened at the Pacific Cinémathèque on May 12 and a 54-minute video by Bill Viola that will be shown at the Western Front on May 26. Despite its demands on the viewer's time, *Death and the Family* contains a great deal of rewarding art. Karen Love has done an admirable job of assembling artists who, although formally and intellectually disparate, bring compelling perspectives to issues that affect us all. As she remarked during the show's opening, "I believe that much of this work which looks at death is ultimately about how we live." ■

## Surviving Grief



By MICHAEL CHRISTOPHER LAWLOR

### "Death in the Family"

Curated by Karen Love  
Presentation House Gallery  
Vancouver, British Columbia  
June 17 to July 30, 1995

A GROUP EXHIBITION OF STILL AND TIME-based photographic works curated by Karen Love of Presentation House, "Death in the Family" examines issues relating to human mortality from the perspective of a generation of mature artists. In Medieval times, entire communities performed rituals such as The Dance of Death in remembrance and acceptance of the common fate of humanity, but in our culture the contemplation of death is so lacking that, when death does occur, many of us have to engage counsellors to teach us how to grieve. Often, it is only when we experience a death in our immediate circle that we find out from others we know that they, too, have suffered losses and, more importantly, survived through grief.

Various aspects of dying, or living, are explored in Love's exhibition: life as a series of rites of passage; the shifts of identity that occur when a parent dies; the extension of life through visual and oral documentation; the creation of memorials that are specific, gener-

al, or metaphorical; and simple meditative work.

Wyn Geleynse's and Larry Sultan's relationships with their parents, as evidenced in their works, can be approached with reference to Lacanian psychoanalysis, which speaks of "The Death of the Father" as a necessary step to adulthood, and to the mundane fact of time's passage as parents and children alike move towards old age and death.

In *Portrait of My Father* (1982), Geleynse uses a portrait of himself holding a blank sheet of paper as a projection screen for an image of his father on a 16mm loop. In the accompanying text panel, Geleynse reveals that he initially intended to show his father as an indecisive man but now admits that his father does not appear indecisive in the finished piece. This failed attempt to belittle his father both reveals to Geleynse that he had underestimated his father and shows him that he is more like his father than he had previously accepted.

Larry Sultan's colour photographs of his parents, combined with prints from 8mm home movies taken during Sultan's childhood, reveal aspects of Sultan and his family in much the same manner as a family album. A narrative reading of the images reveals a close, conspiratorial relationship between Sultan and his mother and a more

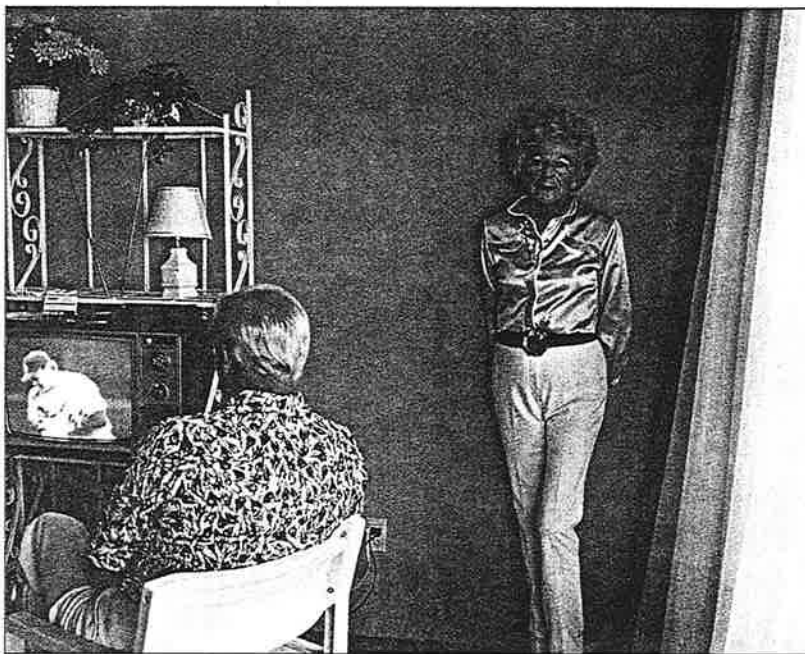
distant relationship between him and his father. In an accompanying text panel, Sultan writes about an intimate conspiracy with his mother, who only pretended to be asleep when, as a child, Sultan slipped into her bedroom to photograph the bottoms of her feet, which he had never seen before. Further evidence of the bond between Sultan and his mother is provided by Sultan's recent photographs, which show her to be quite active in dressing and posing for his camera. Sultan's father, however, generally seems less willing to reveal himself, appearing pictured from the back, or hidden behind newspaper, or standing behind Venetian blinds viewed from across the garden in an evening shot of the house. Oedipal connotations are clear from the photographs, and in his public talk at Presentation House, Sultan revealed that his father did not think of his (Larry's) mother as being as old and aged as the pictures revealed and so did not like many of the images of her.

Marian Penner Bancroft's photo-documentation of the last year of Dennis Wheeler's life was an act of recognition that there are powerful demons in the world—and they are not friendly. In Dennis Wheeler, Bancroft's brother-in-law, the demon was acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, and Wheeler died from it in Vancouver on November 8, 1977. The series "Running Arms to a Civil War" is Bancroft's lifting arms to photograph, produce evidence, and show Wheeler's last battle. Both Bancroft's working method and the plain titles of the photographs—*Dennis, Joey and Susan, Vancouver; Susan, Vancouver; Susan, Mother and Father*—reveal a snapshot aesthetic that is belied by Bancroft's formal compositions, which clearly convey certain defining moments in one family's emotional journey towards the loss of a promising life.

Lani Maestro's *A Book Thick of Ocean* acts as a site for Maestro to mourn her heart mother, a woman whom she had had a close familial relationship with but was not related to by blood. Maestro often uses images of water as a metaphor for healing, and in this massive tome, the same image of waves repeats on every page. At 23 kilograms, the book cannot be held in

**ABOVE**  
Lani Maestro, *A Book Thick of Ocean* (1993), hardbound book, printed in duotone, cameo dull paper, 50.8 x 63.5 x 5.1 cm, book cover in linen, title engraved in silver ink, 23 kg, wooden table.

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**ABOVE** Larry Sultan, *My Mother Posing for Me* (1985), from the book *Pictures from Home*, published by Harry N. Abrams.

**OPPOSITE** Marilyn Bridges, *Valley of the Volcanoes, Andagua, Perú* (1989), gelatin silver print.

one hand to read. Flipping a page is a physical act requiring that the our hands go through a one-and-a-half-metre arc as we carefully grasp the edge of the page and turn to the next double-page spread of the same duotone image, the repetitions serving as a metaphor for the repeated thoughts that afflict a survivor working through grief.

Dennis Oppenheim's *Polarities*, 1972, brackets the death of the artist's father through the juxtaposition of two photographs, one an image of the last graphic marks made by his father before dying and the other an image of his daughter's first marking. Working out of doors, Oppenheim initially treated the two photographs as schematics, using magnesium flares to recreate them as 150-metre drawings in various landscapes. The exhibited map of the places where the works were presented marks their physical location as surely as *Polarities* identifies Oppenheim's position as one generation within his family.

Video and film works by Giselle Amantea, Paula Levine, Ross McElwee, Toby MacLennon, and Bill Viola, ranged technically from Amantea's straightforward, black-and-white, live, video-taped interview with her parents, who are now deceased, to MacLennon's unconventional filmic presentation on a large screen over a pool of reflecting water.

Amantea's *And Sorrow Come near Us No More*, essentially an oral documentary of her parents' lives, re-

veals aspects of a family history that are often rarely discussed, assumed to be known already or overlooked in the course of everyday living. Backed by a black velvet cloth decorated with silk roses, a video monitor resting on a table covered with black flocking sits directly in front of a black flocked chair intended for the viewer. Visually banal, Amantea's documentary quickly becomes absorbing as the physical arrangement of the space enables the viewer to concentrate fully on the story of how two people grew up, met, found work that was not necessarily what they would have freely chosen, responded to societal pressure to get married, and raised a family on the income from the work. This family history, as familiar as it might be to anyone of the same generation as Amantea's parents who was raised on the Prairies, gains poignancy as the abstract history of the region becomes specific to these people speaking to us after death.

Paula Levine's silent, black-and-white video *One Year of Mourning* (12min.) is a simple, eloquent meditation depicting a series of used, crumpled tissues being thrown onto a tabletop. The camera moves quietly through close-ups of aimless action as a hand picks up, shakes, or drops the tissues. Sometimes the hand just taps the table, in that aimless impatient movement asking time to pass. The crumpling of the tissues is done off-camera, and it is our empathy that provides tears.

A filmmaker who is documenting his own life, Ross McElwee has become well-known in certain circles for his autobiographical film, *Sherman's March*. At the beginning of his new film *Time Indefinite*, a sequel to *Sherman's March*, McElwee is 39, unmarried, and on his way to a family reunion in North Carolina. In the manner of some photographers who always carry a camera, McElwee takes a movie camera wherever he goes, a one-person film crew. As *Time Indefinite* unfolds, McElwee announces his engagement, gets married, visits his elderly grandmother (who later dies); his wife has a miscarriage; his father dies suddenly, and McElwee visits other members in his family in an attempt to come to terms with the loss; and McElwee's wife has a baby. McElwee's self-deprecating sense of humour makes *Time Indefinite* entertaining to watch as the filmmaker persistently lays bare his changing relationships with other family members.

Bill Viola presents scenes in his videos as though they are being seen through a slowly blinking eye: a building explodes, blink, a family poses for snapshots, blink, an apple tree, blink, and so on. In *Angel's Gate* (4 min.) and *The Passing* (54 min.), Viola's technique of creating memories through the building up of sequences of evocative images does not so much create a narrative as it sets up a feeling of being in a dream where we understand things more fully, and at many deeper levels, than we can when awake.

*How Will I Know I'm Here*, a 45 minute video made by Toby MacLennon in 1993, was projected onto a large screen hung over a reflecting pool of water that allowed the image to extend, reversed, below the level of the floor. Integrating humanness with nature, MacLennon's sumptuous film maintains the pace of a beating heart as it explores and celebrates interactions in overlapping cycles of birth, living, death, and decay.

"Death in the Family" was relevant and important for the different ways it showed of grieving. The sharing was helpful, in part, because death has been a taboo topic of conversation for too long. In thinking about the exhibition, I found myself coming to a better understanding of the effect that the

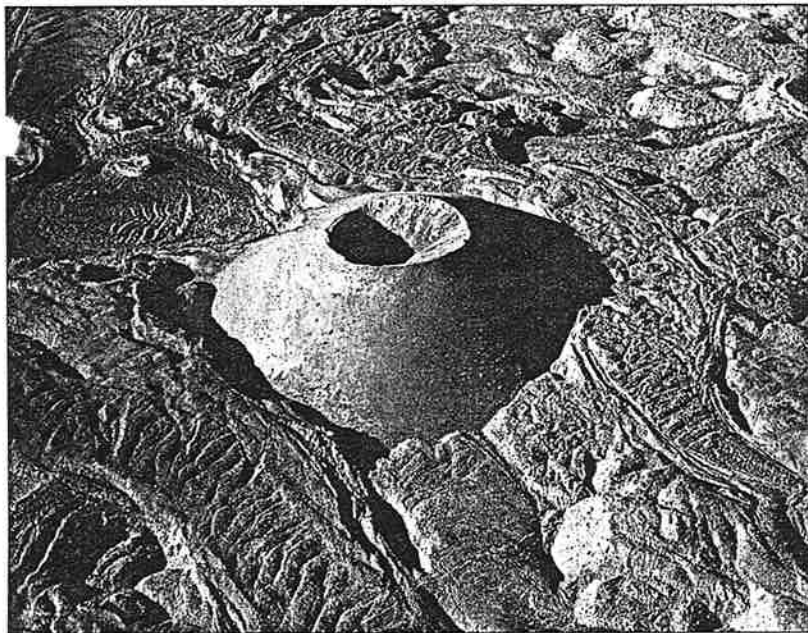
deaths of family and friends have had on me, and others I have spoken with have reported having similar experiences. As the Baby Boom generation enters middle age, they appear to be turning away from the cult of youth that encouraged them to believe they were immortal to

explore the often difficult and disturbing issues that every generation must eventually face. ●

**Michael Christopher Lawlor is a Vancouver-based artist who uses photographic techniques but has not used a camera in fifteen years.**

SOLO EXHIBITION

## Metaphorical Documents



By RAFAEL GOLDCHAIN

**Marilyn Bridges:  
"Planet Perú:  
An Aerial Journey  
through a Timeless Land"**

Royal Ontario Museum  
Toronto, Ontario  
April 8 to July 23, 1995

IN THE APTLY-NAMED EXHIBITION, "PLANET Perú: An Aerial Journey through a Timeless Land," Marilyn Bridges transforms the Peruvian desert "pampas," by means of choice of light, point of view, tonal scale, and detail rendition, into rich and formally complex artworks sometimes strongly reminiscent of abstract paintings from the modernist period and at other times of images in the surrealist vein. Lines, patterns, and textures conspire to make the viewer forget archaeology or to-

pography and experience the beautiful abstract qualities of Bridges' images, only to realize with a start that the images document large earthworks created many centuries ago, landmarks that can only be seen in their entirety from the air. In short, Bridges' photographs balance aesthetic concerns with the requirement to record accurately Perú's archaeological sites, the surrounding landscape, and the pervasive effects of human intervention.

A strong theme running through Bridges' photographs is the interaction between natural forms and human-made forms, both contemporary and ancient. In the photograph *Experiment in Desert Living*, for example, the abandoned buildings of a contemporary lifestyle experiment are seen standing on a flat, sandy desert plain. The buildings are flanked on one side by the

barely visible outlines of buried prehistoric compounds and on the other by a half-moon shaped sand dune. The site is crisscrossed by the subtle, drawing-like tracks left over time by various land vehicles. As the photograph was made from a point directly above the site, the perspective is flat and depth is created solely by the shadows of the various structures, which blend with the structures to create simple to complex shapes. This visual approach, coupled with the delicacy of the tonalities and lines, is reminiscent of modern drawing and painting, especially works by Spanish artists Tapiés and Joan Miró.

Bridges uses various modernist visual strategies to organize and give meaning to her images. In the photograph *Sand Dunes and Truck on Coastal Pan-American Highway, near Chala, 1989*, for instance, Bridges organizes the picture into three distinct planes while eliminating spatial recession, thereby emphasizing the interplay and contrast between textured sand, patterned dunes, lace-like surf, and linear road. In contrast to this magnificent abstraction, a toy-like truck labours to negotiate one of the small sand dunes that obstruct the road, evidence of human intervention in the vastness of the natural setting.

The surrealistic overtones of Bridges' images become even more overt in works such as *Desertscape, near Carhua, 1989*. Here, Bridges again eliminates perspective by photographing from directly above, transforming the scene into a beautiful abstract composition of desert and dunes where the sloping light casts bright highlights and inky shadows similar to those in lunar photographs. An illusory landscape is created wherein the dunes at the bottom of the image look like land and the flat desert at the top looks like sky, while the shadows of the dunes along the top of the "land" look deceptively like distant mountains and the small isolated dunes in the "sky" look like clouds.

As a surrealistic and humorous nod to the UFO aficionados in her audience, Bridges includes *Inca Kola, near Lima, 1988*, a twilight photograph of a flat desert scene crisscrossed by rural roads. In the centre of the image, a UFO-like storage tank advertising Inca Kola, a Peruvian yellow-coloured, sweet,

Bridges' photographs balance aesthetic concerns with the requirement to record accurately Perú's archaeological sites, the surrounding landscape, and the pervasive effects of human intervention.

# Life and Death and Art

by Jacquelyn Ménard

Erosion of religious and social traditions in Western nations has caused many individuals to be incapable of dealing with the idea of their own mortality. Modern intelligence and sensibility do not provide us with sufficient coping skills for life's fatal outcome.

Consequently, people spend most of their time trying to "forget about it," or burying themselves in existentialist gloom. Over the last 25 years, people's hearts and minds have started to change and look for guidance via ancient Eastern philosophies. For some, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism proposed subtler, more interesting and wholesome perspectives on the subject of creation and destruction, while First Nations' Shamanism suggests there is a precious connection between the cycles of life and death.

At the Euro-American grass-roots level some groups have formed, such as the Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and the Ram Das Foundations, whose purpose is to ease the physical suffering, and spiritual and emotional anxiety experienced by the dying person and the family. The group exhibition *Death and the Family* —

diverse works in photography, video, film and mixed media showing at Presentation House Gallery from April 22 to June 11 — specifically focuses on family relations and how they ultimately shape our understanding of mortality.

Included in the show are well-known contemporary visual artists from throughout North America. Their works reflect the complex perceptions and depth of feelings associated with the death of a family member.

Gisele Amantea's installation with black and white video, flocked table and wall pieces, titled *and sorrow come near us no more*, plays on her own Italian background, and honours the understated lives of her aging parents.

Marian Penner Bancroft's suite of 25 photographs, *For Dennis and Susan: Running Arms to a Civil War* documents the pain and emotions of her family dealing with the imminent death by leukemia of her brother-in-law.

Ontario artist Wyn Geleynse's *Portrait of my father* presents a moving image of his elderly father.

Bill Viola's video, *The Passing*, inundates our senses with strangely primal sounds and with images deconstructing linear time while

recording the process of organic/emotional collapse. This work shares a somewhat common vision with Toby MacLennan's piece *How will I know I'm here*, a mixed media installation. The kaleidoscopic 45 minute projection leads the viewer through a series of astonishing, bodily and psychic states effected by the encounter with her mother's death. Poetic, mythic, surrealistically beautiful, the visual flow is doubly enhanced by a powerful soundtrack of classical and contemporary musical compositions.

Other artists in the show deal with experiences of aging, family loss, healing and remembrance, through various means of installation, photography, video and text.

This skillfully chosen array of works playing against one another raises a string of bitter-sweet questions for the viewer, questions that demand to be consciously or subconsciously investigated: can we really comprehend our parents' lives and their death? Is it too late when we finally do so? Does there exist a mysterious but fundamental continuum between the generations? Can sorrow free a frozen intellect? In such circumstances, is art able to help the living face death and can the artist avoid voyeuristic deviation? ☯

*Death and the Family* will open on Saturday April 22 at 2:15 p.m., with a walking tour by Curator Karen Love and artists, followed by a reception. A series of public events is also planned, check with the Arts Alive Calendar of Events for more information.

Jacquelyn Ménard is the Education Coordinator at Presentation House Gallery.

**Lani Maestro**  
"a book thick of ocean"  
detail of installation.

*Death and the Family* Group Exhibition.

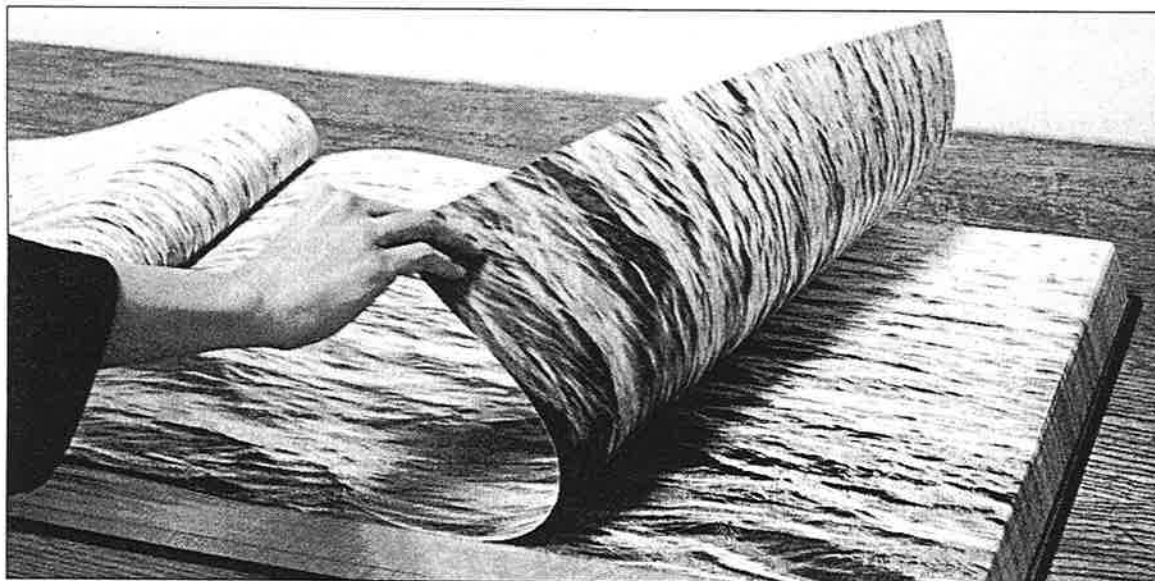


Photo: courtesy of Presentation House Gallery.

# Death in the Family & Family Album

Presentation House Gallery - May and June  
Burnaby Art Gallery - June and July

by Andrea Anderson

The use of the term 'family' for these two visually striking and inventive overlapping shows is not unproblematic. A fall-back to conventionally defined notions of family for their themes seems evident, although the forms and images representing the family are more open than the exhibitions' titles imply. The families in *Death in the Family* are linked by marriage or generations (blood or sex), but, as curator Karen Love pointed out in her talk at the opening, "a number of works suggested a contemporary, more open, notion of what constitutes family...by referring to close friends." Although the forms of the works in this show were multifarious, ranging from video to photography and installation, the fact that "the strength of a family bond can be felt outside of blood relations" seemed lost in the context of the normative definition of family implied by the title. As a single parent by choice, I have deeply ambivalent feelings about my own family of origin. As a result, friends often acted as a family members. Specific works did address this: Paula Levine's videowork *One Year of Mourning*, a spare monument of used tissue compiled over a year, is dedicated to a brother, who died 4 years ago, and best friend, less than a year ago; Lani Maestro's *a book thick of ocean* was made as "a site for mourning and loving... the woman who is not her biological mother but the person who she was with all during the time when she was growing up." There were commonalities in the other pieces, however the impression was overwhelmingly nuclear.

The theme, however, wasn't death so much as the transition between generations, especially in the case of the beautiful and moving Bill Viola and Toby McLennan tapes. Viola's ruminations on these passages, in *Angel's Gate* and *The Passing*, associated the birth of a child and the death of a parent with Jungian symbols like light, water and desert landscapes, but contemporary architectural settings kept it from becoming too ahistorical. McLennan's *How Will I Know I'm Here* was a more mythical and mythicizing representation of these passages with stories about the death of a parent and animal imagery standing for life outside of our own cycle. It resonated with commonalities of experience and belief: a passage hit me full force with a memory of my friend, but I also found it spectacularly evocative of "the way we live." Marian Penner Bancroft's series *For Dennis and Susan: Running Arms to a Civil War*, depicting her brother-in-law and close friend Dennis Wheeler as he was receiving treatment for leukemia in 1977, could be seen as an image in advance of the proliferating, hopeless battles against cancers and AIDS that have ensued in recent years. Wheeler was a key figure in Vancouver's early seventies art community, and was a fulcrum of change in art history and institutional practices. Penner Bancroft's documentation of Wheeler and his wife Susan shows the leveling effect of illness in the banality of his and Susan's lives while they fought the civil war going on inside him with determined dedication.

This exhibition demonstrates new and reformulated rituals for making death meaningful, and hopefully will generate more social and cultural validation of this increasingly brutal and arbitrary event.

It is apparent from looking at the *Family Album* exhibition that the title is somewhat ironic. What is not apparent is whether the intention of the exhibition is limited to stretching the conventions of the family album as material document or if it goes beyond the aesthetic to the social form of the family by chal-

lenging our conventional understanding of the family as exemplified in the family album. What I think the show does is to *locate the gap* between the kind of family understood as the conventional (nuclear) family of the 'family album' and the families represented in this exhibition. The subtext of *Family Album*, and one that links it to some of the work in *Death in the Family*, is the element of choice, rather than convention or obligation, that enters into the construction of families. Families are constructed relationships; not givens, not 'natural'. The title "Family Album" belies this awareness. It connotes a simplistic assumption of the family as a social construction derived from biology. Fortunately, the work interrogates this. The title's irony becomes evident when considering the complexity of this work and the issues it raises.

Barbara Cole's work is concerned with the *material* (literally and figuratively) aspects of the construction of the family (overlapping dress patterns chosen by herself, her mother and her daughter; *Nevermind*: a weaving of overlapping sound waves of herself and her daughter saying 'never mind.') Unfortunately, Cole is so preoccupied with the process of constructing her work that the results are rather deficient in involving the viewer. Perhaps had the *Nevermind* piece been an aural as well as visual experience, incorporating the actual sound of the voices, this intersection would have made it much more intriguing for the viewer.

On the other hand, George Gaudette's work often involves the viewer in an intersection of text and image that complicates an obvious reading of his work as 'Narrative', as it was titled here. His rapturous meditation on his daughter's animated baby face, *15 Minutes*, a grid of 15 shots of her elapsing over 15 minutes, is a rational ordering of the chaotic play of expression over her face. The grid format of the work interrupts its narrativity. This interruption is a replication of how Gaudette chooses to represent his family. A key to his flexible construction of his own identity is in *All the Other Photographs Were Burnt*, which tells the story of his grandfather who left the family when his children were young, and wasn't wanted back. According to family myth, he changed his name frequently. Gaudette's relationship with his daughter, like this possibly mythologized relationship of his grandfather to his family, is a chosen one; he is not her biological father. His ability to completely identify as his daughter's father is comparable to his grandfather's adaptation of different identities depending on his life circumstances. An image of a late-night street scene with the text "Margaret has told me that she is seven months pregnant" discloses Gaudette's entry into his chosen family. These words are represented as being spoken in the liminal, uninstrumentalized time of the middle of the night; the family is constructed in the margins of social time and space, rather than within the expansive daylight typically represented in the traditional family album.

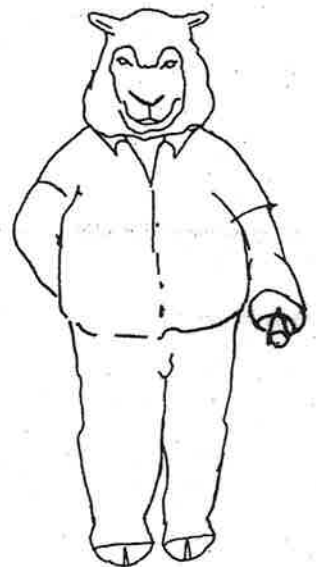
Margaret Boan allows her daughter's identity to emerge in *The Hockey Player*, (a take-off on Jeff Wall's picture of one of his sons, *The Backpacker*), in which she is depicted angrily gripping a hockey stick which reads "Metis hockey club." The stick is held together with tape, a fractured instrument of action. The term 'Metis' could be abstracted from its specific French/Cree meaning to become a sign of her daughter's mixed European and Native heritage, which isn't displayed in this family unit. Since my own son is European/Canadian and Arabic, with no album of his father's family, this picture makes me wonder about the identities of children of mixed biological/ethnic backgrounds. Boan's daughter's background, and her roots in Native culture, emerges only fortuitously, in the cultural sign of the hockey stick. Since her constructed family is as seamless on the surface as the proverbial family of the family album, there is no absence which she seeks to fill. But the visible absence in my son's family album does not drive him to inscribe it with cultural or social practices specifically related to his father's background. He enthusiastically

identifies, on the basis of the colour he inherited from his father, (perhaps having internalized an identification with his father's situation as a refugee), with resistant cultures and strategies in general. Colour may just be his alibi for being opinionated; he may be no different than any socially conscious white kid. I end up wondering if the factual but submerged elements generally left out of the family album, and alluded to in *The Hockey Player*, are complicating and interesting, but not terribly important, to identity?

Boan's disarmingly witty hand-sewn diapers send-up the exaggerated commodification of children's goods in this era when babies are a hobby since they are all (supposedly, since the 'pill') chosen. The sexual connotations of some point to the increasingly sexualized commodification of children, from those cute posters of little kids kissing to movies and Calvin Klein ads.

Boan and Gaudette present perplexing works that provoke consideration of what 'family' is, how it constructs identity, and how familial relationships are commodified. Both shows presented a great opportunity to think through the fundamental issues of death and signification within the parameters of the family.

□



## The good dishes

Wayne Arsenault's *Salle à dîner*,  
at the Gallery Sansair 11 to 26 August 1995

by Jeff Deby

A pastiche of impressions and comments by the reviewer, conversations with the artist, and comments on the subject at hand by other Vancouverites.

*The good china. Well it was white. Very, very white; around the rim there was a black and gold Japanese pattern. But it was only used with company: acquaintances or semi-strangers, when we ate in the dining room. If they were well-known, they ate in the kitchen, off the stoneware. It was the seventies, so there was a lot of stoneware happening.* (Mark S. Kershaw)