

Unkel Bobbel, Aunt Muck and the Wood Goose

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Traditional portraiture can often seem stuffy and uninteresting to those for whom the sitter in the image is unknown. Formal, serious, sullen or stiff poses often do little to inspire or reveal any deeper insight into the character of the person portrayed. Unlike painting, photography captures a scene in a fraction of a second - the click of a shutter can unwittingly expose the subtlest of nuances. Gestures, movement, a hint of a smile or glare of the eyes can speak volumes and enliven the image in a multitude of delightfully unexpected ways, opening up the interpretation of the picture.

Conversely, as the ultimate democratic medium, domestic photography has ensured that we all have records of our families both living and passed on. The instant recognition that comes with the familiar conventions of the family photograph, often generates an empathic and warm response, even when the family is not our own.

The photographic portrait is one of the foundations of the medium, adopted since its inception in the 19th Century. Due to the accessibility of the medium, the photographic portrait has also transformed the definition of what a portrait can be. Prior to photography, to have ones painterly portrait captured was once the privilege of the rich. Photography changed that by allowing for people from all levels of society to be photographed, providing evidence of their existence, to be recorded in a way never realised before. Ordinary people, working men, women and children could be captured in a more natural setting, reflecting their circumstances more truthfully.

One of the joys of looking back at old photographs is that we can construct stories and narratives, real or imagined from the clues given to us in each image. Clothing, décor, obsolete objects like typewriters and gramophones all provide evidence as to the time an image was taken and build a picture that goes beyond the two dimensional into a more tangible place both physically and emotionally. The photograph as 'object' seems more present with old photographs that may be damaged, faded, curling, small and square, with rounded corners or scalloped edges. They trigger nostalgia and even as the faded tones or colours seem befitting, as if the era somehow was those colours all along. Looking at old albums family resemblances can sometimes skip one, two or even three generations and appear in the faces of the young like a mirror to the past. Von Stenglin puts up her own mirror to her family with her work, which began after a discovery of an old shoe box in a drawer of 400 photographs and negatives.

These pictures were found at a country house in south Germany where her grandmother's things were stored, a far cry from the castle in the in Bavaria that she had grown up in and is now occupied by her sister. The images were taken in the 1930's and 1940's and depicted her grandmother's formative years in rural Bavaria.

When looking at these photographs, Von Stenglin's grandmother told her stories about the family members within them. Over the course of those initial three hours, the title *Uncle Bobbel, Aunt Muck and the Wood Goose* came about, as in one of the stories her grandmother explained how Uncle Bobbel had fallen in love with Aunt Muck whilst on a wild goose shoot.

Coming from a German aristocratic background, her grandmother's upbringing was a privileged one. This window into the past still resonates today in the values, moral standards and traditions of Von Stenglin's own upbringing. The wealth, however, was lost during the war in which her grandmother's two brothers fought and died in as soldiers serving in the Wehrmacht.

Now living and working abroad, Von Stenglin can look at these photographs and utilise them with enough detachment to explore her own heritage through her artistic practice. Every family has skeletons in the closet, which often lie untouched for several generations. It transpired that her great grandfather was well known for being anti-Nazi and the fact that both of his sons were called up to fight in the last days of the war, was in itself unusual. As an archetypal Aryan family - and an aristocratic family at that - it was normal practice to make sure that an heir was left to continue the family bloodline. The fact that this did not happen and subsequently both sons died in war, was seen as a punishment for her great grandfather's views.

Von Stenglin discovered by reading the diaries of her other grandfather's family in the archive of their former castle in Czech Republic that her maternal grandfather had been pro-Nazi at the beginning of the National Socialist regime but, by the end, the great desperation felt by family was acute. These uncomfortable polarities are present in all of Von Stenglin's work as her photographs alongside archival images both compliment and contradict each other in equal measure.

Von Stenglin's relationships to her family were strengthened during the making of her archive as her research took her to visit locations and family members she had not seen since childhood. The forming and cementing of these relationships are quite visible in the work. Delicacy is needed to put each diptych in place. The editing process when pairing up the images was a lengthy one and crucial to the success of the project. Although there is often an archival image in mind when Von Stenglin photographs her subjects, choosing the one that fits governs the success of the diptych as a whole.

Many of the archival images were small contact prints. When taking her own photographs Von Stenglin tried various formats and sizes with which to pair up with the vernacular archive in order to create her numbered diptychs. The realisation that the contemporary trend of large crisp fine art photographs was unsuitable for such a personal project and would overshadow the family snapshots dictated the final presentation of Von Stenglin's work. One has to step close to engage with and thus initiating a more personal response to them. Framed with large mounts and dark wooden frames gives the sense of longevity to the work. Ranging from large and medium format to 35mm, negatives are often undusted, dodged or fogged to increase the aged appearance for a less jarring visual aesthetic. She does not retouch her work in any way; a practice now used by most fine art

photographers' to refine the image. Von Stenglin's absence of drive for perfection imbues her work with a refreshing sincerity and warmth. As a result, her diptychs pivot between the past and future, creating an archive in the past tense for the future.

When taking her photographs Von Stenglin often has an image from the archive in mind as a potential image to pair up with her own. She becomes the conduit, linking the past with her own ideas and experience both inherited and newly created.

In Diptych 4 we see a view of an attic with a uniform illuminated by the light through a skylight alongside a torn photograph of Von Stenglin's grandfather. The roof line in the attic is repeated by the tear in the family portrait. It is notable that the uniform hanging on the door of the wardrobe is in fact a Maltese Knight uniform owned by Von Stenglin's great grandfather, not the one worn by her grandfather. These thread-like visual links invite comparison but do not dictate to the viewer, whom is encouraged to draw their own narrative links and possibilities.

The exhibition *The Photographer's Eye*, mounted by John Szarkowski at MoMA in 1964 famously included vernacular photography, splitting opinion amongst critics, some of whom saw it as undermining the traditions of canonical photography. Today, anonymous archives and images are appreciated for many historical, stylistic, sociological and aesthetic reasons. Museums, galleries and dealers exhibit, produce catalogues and sell vernacular photographs to a growing audience that appreciate their intrinsic value beyond classical notions of artistic worth.

Von Stenglin's understanding of the social nature of the aristocracy in her own life is reflected skilfully through capturing gestures of the rich which are more easily demonstrated than described. She is an anthropologist digging beneath the layers of her own kin, yielding a rich tapestry of variables to be dissected, studied and examined. In another of Von Stenglin's photographs the nonchalant confidence of a man in a tuxedo who looks over his left shoulder as a waitress hovers behind him with a soup bowl. To the left of this the archival image of two men and a woman stand on a lawn, tennis racquets in hand personify the ruling classes' bourgeois lifestyle. This self-assurance and level of sophistication portrayed is reminiscent of the idealistic lifestyles of Jaques Henri Lartigue's photographs in the same era. At first glance, Von Stenglin's photograph could have been taken in the 1980's. The obvious dust marks and miss-alignment further this illusion.

Repetition is an important part of vernacular photography as it more accurately represents the overall mundanity of human experience. Although we would perhaps all hope that our lives appear dynamic and exiting to others, the actuality is often banal. Daily routine and repetition is a common occurrence rather than the exception. Von Stenglin pictures the grandeur of her family's past she also reveals the present less glamorous side of life as buildings fall into disrepair but still hold visual clues to their former austerity.

Cryptic imagery is a common occurrence and part of the enduring appeal of vernacular photography with quizzical images of people doing things that are out of the ordinary and recording it for posterity amongst them. One such image in Von Stenglin's archive

depicts a girl posing in a backwards crab position. It is easy not to notice the setting she is in until the image alongside it features uncanny similarities. The picture of an opulent banquet room with ornately painted ceilings also has white painted panelling and parke floors. Whether or not they are the same room is unimportant, the visual connection acts as a catalyst for the viewer. In doing so, Von Stenglin propels the notion of her own archive as a progressive organic entity, which in itself may be the inspiration for another archive years later.

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