

# YOU LOOK JUST LIKE HER

BY

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## THESIS

Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Science

College of Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

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Submitted, November 18, 2011

*For Elena*  
*I miss you every day*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express the sincerest gratitude to the members of my thesis committee, Elaine O’Neil, Jessica Lieberman and Carla Williams. Your advisement and encouragement helped hatch this work from my imagination. You kept me open, you challenged me to be better, to question, to push harder, and you always supported my ideas, even when I was not quite sure of them. Thank you for helping me cross the finish line.

I want to thank all of my peers at RIT, especially, Gretchen Arnold, James Bellucci, Christine Heusner, Ratna Khanna, Stephanie Quarto and Emily Winton. You provided invaluable critique and insight, and most important, friendship during strange times.

I wish to thank my entire family, especially my father, Duane, for always supporting me, no matter what the endeavor. I am especially grateful to Emilie Campana, Peg Kinnick, Janice Koncious, Kathy Oberman, Susan Pack, Pilar Sanchez, and Geri Tkac for sharing their memories with me and providing the narratives to create this project. I also want to thank Dana Ugolini for instilling in me at a very young age, an infinite love of art.

This work would not have been possible without the constant support of my husband, Lou. Thank you for always believing in me.

# YOU LOOK JUST LIKE HER

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## ABSTRACT

*You Look Just Like Her* is a process-based photographic installation exploring the limitations of any one media as a means to build a complete narrative. When I discovered that little accurate information could be gleaned about my deceased mother from her collection of family photographs, I interviewed the other participants in the visual family histories. Once the stories were complete, I transformed the visual truth into a fiction of my own by using digital manipulation to become a by-proxy participant in the early years of my mother's life. In order to create an panoptic experience for the viewer, this thesis presents an altered visual history combined with an aural history, which are merged through repurposed digital technologies.

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## Introduction



Fig. 1.1. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011

The progression of this thesis took a somewhat tangential path. It started as commentary on western medicine and the current state of the health care industry in the United States. For a moment, it turned to tragedy, death and loss. Next, anger was expressed in an appropriated satire of the legal system, which dealt with death and loss caused by medical malpractice. My work had consistently focused on the medical industry, but I had not realized my own grief was driving that work. After three years of working, I felt as if I had been trying to bake cookies with sand; while it was entirely possible, the end result was something I would not want to eat. I could not understand my work or its meaning until I understood the role grief played in the creation of it. The different approaches I employed since beginning graduate school always brought me to the same understanding: The impetus for my work was the untimely and avoidable death of my mother, Elena. That understanding was the first spark for this thesis project.

# Chapter 1 – Impetus, Conceptualization, Early Process

## Impetus

As an artist, I create work as outward manifestations of internal processes which cannot be otherwise evaluated or expressed. My struggle to come to terms with the unexpected loss of my mother eventually allowed me to determine I wanted to explore the relationship I had with her rather than critique the systems I blamed for her death. In early 2010, fascinated with the notion of how we teach ourselves our own histories through photographs, I began to examine my family photographs in order to decipher and clarify my own history.

My mother died in 2003; she was 56 years old and I was 25. One regret gnawed at me constantly: I missed my chance to get to know my mother as an adult. The break that happens in many mother daughter relationships when young girls reach adolescence is highly intense and emotional.<sup>1</sup> This separation has to occur; otherwise, children would never leave home. In order to develop my own ideas and establish independence, I needed to push away from my mother, which I did to the extreme at a very young age.

Watching my friends and family, I observed the reconciliation that occurs later in life and the strong, intense friendship which is forged when young women realize their mothers are not the enemy, but rather, their most brilliant and strongest allies. My mom and I were just starting this reconciliation when she died.

I was looking for a way to reconnect to my mother, to feel her presence in any way possible. Being in a better place with my grief, I was ready to look at my family albums. Some family album researchers, including Jonathan Seabrook, suggest that healing can be facilitated through viewing the family albums: “Sometimes the pictures release a stream of consciousness, open us to the most intimate of feelings, re-awaken old vulnerabilities. They help people to

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<sup>1</sup>Jacquelyn Douglas examines why the separation is more intense with mothers and daughters, states:

The adolescent rebellion, for separation, is a complex phenomenon, but for the daughter, it is complicated in a special way by her relationship with mother. Girls typically are more intense about getting their independence, in part in reaction to the very close identification that the mother usually makes with her maturing daughter.

Jacquelyn Douglass. “A Study of Literature of Mother-Daughter Relationships As It Relates To Self-Esteem of the Adult Daughter” (Ph. D diss., Temple University, 1988), 58.

complete their relationship with the dead, make a final assessment, say goodbye in a way that is impossible in the first access of grief.”<sup>2</sup>

## Conceptualization

A dichotomy revealed itself in the two distinct storage methods I discovered while examining my family photos, indicating the photos were regarded in two very different ways. Albums created after my parents married were neat and tidy; the images had been carefully placed into the albums in chronological order. Older photos of my mother taken before she was married were somewhat haphazardly stored in a single large box, as if discarded, forgotten, or regarded as an insignificant past. I became fascinated with the images in that box, snapshots of my mom when she was in her teens and twenties (Fig. 1.2). She and her friends were always gorgeous and meticulous, with big 1960s hair, perfect makeup, chic clothing, and attitude.

In *Family Photographs: Content and Meaning*, Julia Hirsch states, “When we know that a particular photograph is that of a family member we can easily fit it into whatever fabric of family experience time has already woven. It acts as a new thread in an old weave.”<sup>3</sup> I placed these images into the narrative and timeline I thought I knew. However, instead of seeing my mother as I knew her, or as she existed in my



Fig. 1.2. An unedited image from my collection of family photographs

memory, I saw *Elena*. I saw her differently and found that I was really able to access her identity in these images, an identity quite different than the one I had grown up with. There was this very fascinating duality at play, which came from finding out who she was beyond the person I believed her to be. Not

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Seabrook, “My Life Is in That Box,” in *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, ed. Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (London: Virago, 1991), 173.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content and Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 5.

only was she the mother archetype as I knew her, but once upon a time, she had been young and hip and was very much like me. I began to identify with the young woman who was more like me rather than the mother I needed as a child. I could relate to her more as an equal rather than as the all-powerful mother.

As I made my way through the images, I recognized many faces, but could not put together any cohesive story. I could not trust what was revealed to me in the small images I was sifting through because these photographs held as many secrets as they did revelations.<sup>4</sup> While investigating these images, I was making up the narratives, but my interest was in the real stories, what really happened on that day, at that time. There were too many unfamiliar people and places. Without the owner to narrate, there was very little discernible narrative in the photos. My mother's story could not be "learned" because in the visual history there were too many missing pieces.

Born into a huge extended family with strong bonds, my mother loved to tell me stories from her childhood and early adulthood. From the time I was a very little girl, I heard all about her life growing up on Summit Avenue,<sup>5</sup> a street inhabited by much of her extended family. These photos were the proof, the representation of the stories which fascinated me as a child. Theorists, such as Susan Sontag,<sup>6</sup> suggest that we create photographs to make ourselves immortal, to save the moment forever. I had Elena's immortality in my hands, however, without captions I could not decipher the code in which her life's story was written. Universals were evident—living rooms, bedrooms, front porches, back yards—but with no context they were meaningless. I desperately wanted to draw the lines between the people and the places, but could not. My mom had told me so much about her life, but sadly, I could only remember bits and pieces and, I am sure, I was only told the age appropriate "PG" versions. Wishing I could

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<sup>4</sup> "Family photography is. . . provoking. It invites our curiosity about personalities and relationships but cannot fully satisfy it. . . . We have no more than a set of poses, of textures, to go on, and we recognize finally, that the picture, like the faces we see on the television screen when the sound has been turned off, tells us only the barest of narratives." Hirsch, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Summit Ave was located in downtown Youngstown. My grandmother, three of her sisters and countless cousins all lived within two blocks of each other. Most of the streets' inhabitants were related.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag discusses the photograph's role in immortality in *On Photography*: "Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. A family's photograph album is generally about the extended family and often, is all that remains of it." Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 9.

remember more, I grasped for any bit of information I may have stored in my subconscious, but it either was not there or was not ready to come out. When the subject of the photograph is deceased, the factual truth is a mystery because there is no one to explain the scene. The photograph can speak for itself only to a point. The details, subtleties, humor, and back-stories are lost. The desire to learn about Elena's past inspired me to really look at the photographs. The mystery inherent in viewing this type of image forced further inquest into her past because these photographs did not function as proof. They were fragmented clues to *a* past, but needed to be placed into some kind of context in order to be understood.

## Early Process

At the beginning of this process, I viewed these snapshots as a sort of substitute for an oral history, they functioned as a surrogate of Elena's storytelling. I needed them to provide the concrete information through which new facts about her life could be known. It was a solitary process. However, in my attempt to draw narratives from the images, I determined that a true history was not attainable because the stories were being filtered through my own experience, memory and imagination,<sup>7</sup> and thus became *my* version of her story.

While at first my influence on the narratives appeared to be a big obstacle, it brought me one step closer to my next breakthrough. Smitten with the images and curious to learn more, I realized that I was most concerned with the stories specific to each image, which could only be passed down through a genuine oral history. Martha Langford establishes the link between the album and its participants, which explained my need for an oral history. She states, "Separation of the album from its community casts it into an unnatural silence. The contents, structure and presentation of a photographic album are the vestiges of its oral scaffolding."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre muses on imagination: "The act of the imagination is a magical one. It is an incantation destined to produce the object of one's thought, the thing one desires, in such a way that one can take possession of it. In that act there is always something of the imperious and the infantile." Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1978), 177.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Langford, "Speaking the Album: An Application of the Oral-Photographic Framework," in *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, ed. Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister, vol. 4 of *Remapping Cultural History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 224.

Langford goes on to say, “albums are virtually useless unless examined in the company of their compilers, or at least with members of their circle, who can interpret the social arrangements and signs.”<sup>9</sup> Needing to hear an explanation of what was happening in each photo from authentic participants, I began seeking out the secret keepers, those friends and family who could recall the events depicted in the photos. I was looking for the clear memories, and the textured and complete truth, that as Hirsch states, reaches far beyond the scope of the picture itself.<sup>10</sup> Accepting the inabilities of photography, I asked Elena’s friends and family to gather photographs of her taken before she was married, the segment of her life when she was young, free, and childless: the unfamiliar identity with which I could most identify.

I traveled to my hometown, Youngstown, Ohio, numerous times during the next year to meet with each person supplying photographs. Only interested in factual accounts, I asked them to discuss only snapshots in which they knew the specifics going on at the time of exposure. I was really struck that these people had kept so many photos of her, however blurry or old. The images were all cherished: some framed, others placed in special albums or boxes.

These meetings, which provided me with the opportunity to learn a great deal about Elena were short and long, sweet and painful, but always healing. I was able to speak about her and hear others speaking about her, opening a dialog we just could not have had previously. The photos were a catalyst to push us through our grieving together. The grief took a backseat, even if for just a short time, and we were able to speak about her with joy and happiness. I listened to stories and reveled in her glory days. I began to know her on a much more intimate level than I ever had before. This process was indeed starting to reconnect the broken string from mother to daughter, and in an implausible way, was allowing me to experience a reconciliation.

In a somewhat circular process, the images triggered the oral history and inspired these people to tell me about Elena’s life, and the narratives passed on to me reinvigorated my inquiry into her collection of photographs. On my second trip to meet with more of her friends and

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<sup>9</sup> Langford, “Speaking the Album”, in *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, 224

<sup>10</sup> Hirsch, 5.

cousins, I brought with me her collection of photographs, hoping someone could tell me more about them. I was more focused on the experience and being present, shifting my role from her daughter to artist, creator, and collector, and began to make recordings of these meetings to insure the exact details of the stories could later be recalled.

Ever since I was a little girl, and still today, everyone has always told me I look just like my mother and that my mannerisms mimic hers. Even our voices are nearly identical. This provided me a unique ability to explain and understand some of the unknown photos better than her friends once I knew the basic storylines. I knew those faces, those expressions. In learning about her, I found myself in both the images and in the recollections of her.

On one of the last trips back from Youngstown, I had *the* breakthrough. Gathering stories to go along with almost all of the photos in her collection had armed me with a truly accurate portrayal of who Elena was before she became my mother. The collection process had been most important to me, but my next concern was transliterating my process of discovery into something universal that others could enjoy and experience as art. Henry Sayre muses on quantifying art in *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*: “A family portrait is a family portrait, and it is art because it is art (or, at least, because someone has declared it to be so).”<sup>11</sup> The art experience I would create had to mimic my journey, give my experience meaning beyond itself and make that meaning accessible to others.

Thinking about the stories, I realized that I was recalling them as if they were my own memories. However, the mental images weren’t mine and neither were the memories. Instead, they were stills from her photographs, but they had changed, almost, into moving pictures.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Hirsch states:

Pictures of the dead are always with us but we see the dead as alive. . . . The emotional impact of so many encounters is both powerful and confusing. The living and the dead congregate; parents appear younger than their children; and all these faces in the midst of their respective lives are innocent of the destinies which will link them one to the other. The great pulls of history, cause and effect, are obscured: and the arrangement which engages our emotions in a rush of curiosity, nostalgia, guilt, sorrow, love, and anticipation dissolves the passage of time into a series of parallel moments. The arrangement neither interprets nor represents life for us. As never really happens, it is all happening here at once.

Hirsch, 124-125.

The events came alive for me.<sup>13</sup> They had become real experiences in my mind.<sup>14</sup> This process made me part of the narrative. The conversations elicited and memories roused allowed me to step back in time and become a by proxy participant in the early years of Elena's life. No longer simply looking for clarification, I stepped back in time and became a witness to the events. Photographic veracity was necessary to illustrate this to the viewer. Since photography does, as Sontag writes, furnish evidence and prove what we hear, but doubt,<sup>15</sup> photography was the perfect vehicle for this intervention. I would place myself into each image to manifest my otherwise unseen role in her experience. As an "authentic" participant, each image held the photographic evidence to support my concept. This process of combining an altered visual history with a factual oral account in order to create new memories of my mother became the central objective of this thesis.

Loftus, Elizabeth, Cassandra Delaney, and Michael Shaughnessy. "An Interview with Elizabeth Loftus about Memory." *North American Journal of Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2000): 27-37.

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<sup>13</sup> Confabulation is a symptom where the individual truly believes what he or she is saying. Morris Moscovitch discusses this in *Memory Distortion*, stating, "The account is drawn fully or principally from the patient's recollection of his actual experiences, including his thoughts in the past and current musings. . . . Usually confabulation serves no purpose; it is motivated in no other way than by the patient's attempt to relate his or her experiences." Morris Moscovitch. "Confabulation." in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, ed. Daniel L. Schacter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 229.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Loftus specializes in false memories. The phenomenon is quite common. In an interview she states:

We have not only convinced people that they were lost in a shopping mall, but we convinced other subjects that they saw a drug bust that they had never seen. And. . . young children were convinced by suggestion that they fell off their bicycle and had to get stitches in their leg, or that they got their hand caught in a mousetrap and had to go to the hospital to get it removed. Once a false memory is created, it can be very confidently held, it can be described in great detail, and it is very difficult for anyone to tell the difference between a false memory and a true one.

Loftus, Elizabeth, Cassandra Delaney, and Michael Shaughnessy, "An Interview with Elizabeth Loftus about Memory," *North American Journal of Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2000): 27-37.

<sup>15</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 5.

## Chapter 2 – Technical Process, Meaning, Contemporary Space

### Technical Process

The digital process kept me busy for months as I photographed myself, then painstakingly placed myself into each image. It was very important that each image was perfect, with no evidence of my alterations because the finished photographs had to read as authentic family photos. Thus the digital process was tremendously time consuming, requiring up to thirty hours to complete each one of the forty-four total pieces in the exhibition.

The idea seemed simple enough at first. Photograph myself, then digitally composite that image into an old photograph from Elena's collection. However, the trick to successful compositing is meticulous attention to detail at every step of the process. The shooting process was demanding. Matching the angles and lighting in the original images often required reshooting one pose five or six times before obtaining a usable file. Studio strobes set up in my shooting space were almost always able to replicate the lighting conditions in each image. Bright sunlight was the most difficult to replicate, so ultimately those shots required that I leave the studio. In each sitting, the camera was set to automatically shoot one frame every five seconds for 150 frames. A mirror was used to aid my posing and the original photo was always on hand as a reference. After each shutter release, my poses changed very subtly, tilting my head or shifting my gaze or changing my posture, hopeful that one of the shots in the group would match the original photo. After each shooting session, the digital files were transferred to my computer and the process of selection began. Each image was layered on top of the original to see if they matched up. If my pose was off by even a fraction of an inch, the image was useless

and the process had to start over again (Fig. 2.1. Original image, Fig. 2.2. An unusable pose layered into the image, Fig. 2.3. A successful version made with the right pose).



Fig. 2.1. An unedited image from my collection of family photographs



Fig. 2.2. Work in progress – Rejected image from *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011.



Fig. 2.3. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*, Detail. 2011

Once a successful image was obtained, the editing process began. Matching the new images of my face to the color shifts in the old photographs presented the next obstacle. The original images were edited slightly to correct for this color shift, but the final images still had to read as authentic family photos. The retouching and restoration was kept to a minimum so the viewer could still believe the authenticity of the final images. Large blemishes (tears, damage, and erosion) were removed, while the colors and tones were kept as true to the originals as possible. I utilized all the tools available in Photoshop to blend myself into the images, from filters to replicate lens blur, to adjustment layers to match the skin tones, colors and density. While most of the compositing technique was seamless, I left miniscule traces of the process in a few images, nothing glaringly obvious, just subtle hints to indicate to the viewer that the images were not quite what they seem at first glance.

Many factors influenced the selection of the Elena images. While some were chosen because they had the most interesting composition, or the subjects were in focus, or they had held up best over the years; most were the ones with which I felt the most connectivity. Some were big events: weddings or senior prom. Others were chosen because they had the most compelling stories. Also, in multiple images taken on the same day, in the same environment and

of the same people, I became a different person in each photo. This approach set the viewer up to question the authenticity of the images and figure out that I had placed myself in each. He or she would be able to make comparisons between images and discover my physical presence.

## **Meaning**

Experientially, there was an enormous difference between viewing images from Elena's collection with stories and viewing them without stories. There was more of a connection to the images once the narrative had been passed on to me and more time was spent looking at them. After the real truths – the historical data, the narratives, the group dynamics, the relationships depicted, the hidden meanings, the secrets, which could not be discerned from simply viewing the images – were disclosed to me, the images held more allure. Stories, passed from person to person, are just stories and without some kind of proof, are not usually regarded as truths. However, the manner in which these stories were gathered enabled me to experience feelings of rightful possession. Additionally, spending over one thousand hours on the creation of these images caused the narratives to be absorbed into my consciousness.

The memories did not belong to me, but the process had made them mine. Placing myself in the images as a witness allowed me to join events impossible for me to have experienced, as I had not yet been born. Not only had the stories been passed on to me, but also with my physical presence in the image, the photographic “proof” was there, rooting my existence in the narrative. A dichotomy emerged: while reconstructing her truth, I was simultaneously creating a fiction.

While editing them, the recorded narratives became part of my process. Each story was played back as its image was being created. The distraction created by this painstaking digital process allowed my subconscious to wander. The boundaries of my own identity were lost. When I placed myself in the images as her friend (Fig. 2.4), her mother (Fig. 2.5), her aunt (Fig. 2.6), her cousin (Fig. 2.7), the photographs became real, and I formed a real connection



Fig. 2.4. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011



Fig. 2.5. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011



Fig. 2.6. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011



Fig. 2.7. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011

to the experiences captured in these images. Photographic veracity allowed this fiction to occur. In the introduction to *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, Annette Kuhn discusses photographic veracity, stating, “the photograph is widely held to be a record, a piece of evidence that something happened at some time, somewhere—in the time and the place in front of the camera.”<sup>16</sup> I utilized the fact that people are less likely to question the veracity of these particular images because it is not expected that photographs from the 1950s and 1960s would be altered.

Since the invention of the camera, photographers have exploited photographic veracity to betray the viewer. Sontag explores this idea in *Regarding the Pain of Others*:

What is odd is not that so many of the iconic news photos of the past, including some of the best-remembered pictures from the Second World War, appear to have been staged. It is that we are surprised to learn that they were staged, and always disappointed. . . . We want the photographer to be a spy in the house of love and of death . . . . No sophisticated sense of what photography is or can be will ever weaken the satisfactions of a picture of an unexpected event seized in mid-action by an alert photographer.<sup>17</sup>

Even though a falsehood was created in my work, my intention was to give the viewer a very specific experience. Their desire for and faith in photographic veracity made my work possible.



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Fig. 2.8. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011

<sup>16</sup> Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister, “Locating Memory: An Introduction,” in Kuhn and McAllister, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2003), 52-54.

## Contemporary Place

Artists consistently work with the family album; it is a universal well that is almost always overflowing. Raphael Goldchain, Irina Werning, and Taylor Jones each explore this seemingly bottomless subject matter. Goldchain recreated his family's visual history<sup>18</sup> in which he photographed himself as his family members, creating haunting, beautiful portraits (Fig. 2.9 and Fig. 2.10). He published the work in the book *I Am My Family*, which stands in for photographs that either did not exist or could not be found. In a provocative way, his was the opposite of my own process, whereby he knew the stories, but had no photographs. Our work shares the personal thread, but his was created to pass a visual history on to his children, while my work utilized collecting and looking as a way to reconnect to my mother.

Irina Werning's project, *Back to the Future*, is a way of reenacting old photos today. She uses an old family photograph as the inspiration for a new photograph,



Fig. 2.9. Raphael Goldchain, Self-Portrait as Reizl Goldszajn. *I Am My Family*. 2001

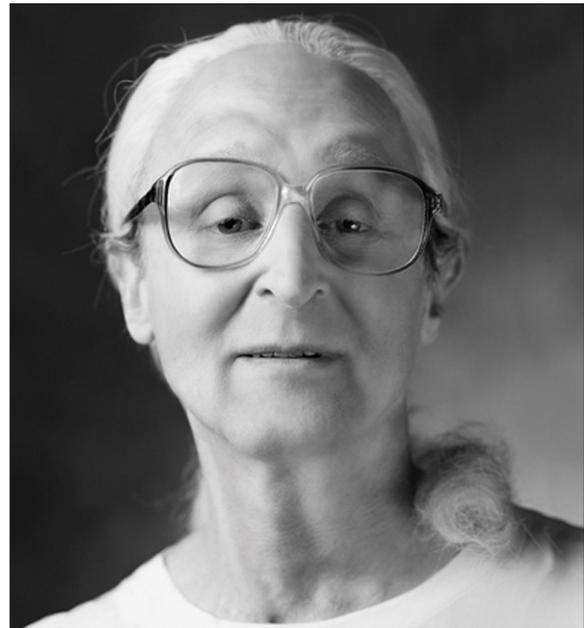


Fig. 2.10. Raphael Goldchain, Self-Portrait as Do-a Miriam Feller Gewanzneider de Laks (Tia Mira). *I Am My Family* 2007

<sup>18</sup> "After a long process of genealogical research, he used theatrical make-up and costuming to physically and psychologically transform into his family members, capturing these bold characters in photographs that evoke traditional portraiture." Rebecca Gruber, "Interview with Raphael Goldchain," Jewcy, accessed July 19, 2011. [http://www.jewcy.com/arts-and-culture/interview\\_rafael\\_goldchain](http://www.jewcy.com/arts-and-culture/interview_rafael_goldchain).

rephotographing the exact person, and mimicking the same environment, pose, and expression as the original photograph (Fig. 2.10). She has involved the public in her process: She invites people in certain locations to submit photographs via her website, then chooses which to rephotograph/reenact.



Fig. 2.11. Irina Werning, Flor, Male, Sil in 1983 & 2010 *Back to the Future* 2010

Taylor Jones, of the website Dear Photograph ([www.dearphotograph.com](http://www.dearphotograph.com)) has turned the process over to the public entirely. He accepts and posts photographs (Fig. 2.11) submitted to his website. What started as an idea in his kitchen to rephotograph an old image in its original location has grabbed worldwide attention, garnered him the number seven spot on Time magazine's top fifty websites of 2011,<sup>19</sup> and resulted in his idea being stolen by a large U.S. corporation.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 2.12. Dear Photograph, *Letting Go of My Mothers Hand*. 2011

<sup>19</sup> Harry McCracken, "Dear Photograph - The 50 Best Websites of 2011," Time Magazine, accessed October 1, 2011. [http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2087815\\_2087868\\_2087873,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2087815_2087868_2087873,00.html).

<sup>20</sup> A Chevrolet car advertisement ran during the 2011 Baseball World Series that replicated Jones's exact technique without his permission. The Des Moines Egotist, "Shameful: Chevy Rips Off Dear Photograph," The Des Moines Egotist, accessed October 20, 2011, <http://www.thedesmoinesegotist.com/news/national/2011/october/19/shameful-chevy-rips-dear-photograph>.

While experimenting with photographic veracity and working with family photographs are not new ideas, I used the fiction I created to allow my audience to share my experience. At first, I did not notice the metaphysical question functioning in my work. It was not until much more time was spent with my created history that its true multifaceted nature was revealed. I recalled how my mom had told me that from the time she was a little girl, she knew she would have a son named Vince and a daughter named Sara, and she did. The question arose, *Was I already there?* She knew that one day her daughter would exist. She thought of me and what my life would be like. I had always existed because she knew that I would. I am the manifestation of her expectation, and hope, and these photographs illustrate that concept.



Fig. 2.13. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011



Fig. 2.14. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011



Fig. 2.15. Untitled. *You Look Just Like Her*. 2011

## Chapter 3 – Exhibition.

### Design, Location, Installation, Experience

One of my intentions in this work was to create for the viewer an experience that could mimic my own; an experience that could convey the healing process I had gone through and the connections created within it. Even though the aesthetic was not a main concern, I chose to show these images in a gallery, therefore some consideration had to be given to the aesthetic. I determined that the best way to elevate these family photos was to present them in a style consistent with how we expect to experience fine art.



Fig. 3.1. Detail of the installation at Four Walls Gallery.

The images were installed as a wall grid, referencing the family photo walls in the basements of my childhood. (Fig. 3.2) Usually littered with newspaper clippings (Fig. 3.3), ticket stubs and program flyers, these walls were comforting to me. We gathered in the basements, probably because it was usually the only indoor space that could comfortably hold the entire extended family. The photos on those walls were a representation of the family, those usually present in the room, but even if they were not present, I could always find them on the wall and there was tremendous comfort in that fact: Everyone was there.<sup>21</sup> This is where my love affair with photographs began. At a very young age, photographs comforted me: It only makes sense that a photographic process helped to resolve my grief over a tremendously tragic event. My installation was not a direct replica of those photo walls; it was more of a thank-you note.



Fig. 3.2. Detail of the photo wall in the basement of Sandro and Grace Ugolini's home. From the collection of Dana Ugolini.



Fig. 3.3. My mother's engagement announcement from the Youngstown *Vindicator* has been hanging in her aunt's basement for over 40 years.

<sup>21</sup> Julia Hirsch states:

Bonds that have lived in time, and also endured beyond it, are an underlying theme in all family photographs. The dead and the dying live forever in our family photographs as long as our eyes see them; and for all the material richness of our photographs—for all the clothes, rooms, cars, and pets we see in them—it is our glance that bestows the final gift of life. To look at a photograph is to be a medium: our mere glance warms flatness. But finally we bring to family photographs far more than our eyes. We bring all we know of what lies beyond the edges of the picture. We bring our knowledge of childhood and adulthood, and all that goes on between and beyond. We can understand the photographs even of strangers because we know that pictures of families are made and stored in the same ways that families themselves endure.

Hirsch, 131.

The stories that started as notes for my convenience had become integral to the work. Without them, the meaning of the images within the display would be less dimensional. Meditating on the stories and spending more time listening to the recordings helped me to understand that it was the voices themselves that facilitated access to the experiences materialized during the creation of the images. Heartfelt and genuine, the stories had to be told in the original voices, which were part of my mother and part of this process. The love and the loss heard in each recollection were inseparable from my experience of the images and had to be part of the exhibition. When I thought about the sound and the best way to deliver it, I found a much more complicated obstacle.

Being immersed in both the images and the recorded stories, mixed with the memory of my last trip to a museum, generated an idea for the integration of the sound. I would appropriate the guided audio tour system to enhance the audience's experience. The gallery experience became an integral part of the work. Instead of using old-fashioned headphones, I wanted to use newer technology: the cell phone.<sup>22</sup> Rather than traditional audio guide information, my audience would hear something unexpected that would enable a deeper connection to the work.

The nature of the cell phone lent itself well to the personal nature of this work. We are all so connected to our phones; I actually can not remember the last time I left the house without my phone. Using his or her own device helped the viewer connect to the work on a more personal level. The audience was able to listen to the stories at their leisure, like a conversation on which they were eavesdropping. They could choose to keep listening or move on to another story. They could listen to the same story again and again. They could call from the gallery while viewing the images, or from the privacy of their own home. This system allowed each viewer to dictate how he or she would experience this exhibit.

Four Walls Gallery was off the beaten path and looked a little bit like a home. It was

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<sup>22</sup> Museums are phasing out the headphone delivery system for their guided audio tours, replacing them with an interactive audio tour accessible from any phone.

small, and intimate, but still held a lot of people. The building itself was in an isolated area, half residential and half business. Windows comprised the entire front and wrapped around the side of the building so the work occupied some outside space at night as the light bled out onto the street, allowing passers-by to look in on the wall closest to the window (Fig. 3.4).



Fig. 3.4. Four Walls Gallery, exterior 2011

I displayed the images on one wall in an asymmetric grid (Fig. 3.5) because I wanted the viewer to be able to experience them both individually and as one cohesive body of work. While viewing one image, the eye could wander from one to another and back again.<sup>23</sup> This also encouraged the viewer to explore the people in the images and look for either the familial connection, as many people in the photos look alike, or the fact that some of the subjects (most importantly, myself, and Elena) appeared multiple times in the images. The narrative relationships between the images were just as important as the existence of any singular image. There was not one cohesive narrative told from beginning to end in the images presented, but an identity could be discerned by viewing the images as a whole while simultaneously listening to the oral history.



Fig. 3.5. Gallery Installation, April 1, 2011

Audio map takeaways (Fig. 3.6) were on a pedestal by the entrance. These 8

<sup>23</sup> “The album is a meeting place, not an encyclopedia. When we sit and look at an album together, we do not necessarily look at every image. As we converse – as we tell the album’s story to each other – we glide over certain images, and linger on others. Memories stir emotions; happiness, pride, grief, or possibly anger. Not everything will be shared, or even consciously experienced. Even in its original ‘remembrance environment,’ an album’s telling includes many lapses into reflective silence.” Langford, “Speaking the Album”, in *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, 226.

1/2 x 11-inch color copies were a miniature version of the photographic grid on the wall and included legible images. Printed in the bottom corner of each image was a number that corresponded to each story, which was the number to select on the phone to hear the specific recording for that image. Viewers used this map to navigate the audio system with the photos (Fig. 3.7), and also took these guides home with them.

There was a distinct separation between the art and social areas. I set up the space so that the food, drinks, and socializing were enjoyed far enough away from the images that the viewer could have enough quiet to listen to the narratives (Fig. 3.8). It was very powerful to view the opening reception from outside the gallery; it looked like there were two different events happening. The combination of the grid installation, the guided audio tour and the arrangement of the space elevated this collection of family photographs to the level of fine art; what one would expect to find in a museum or gallery.

Once installed, my images could be seen through the windows from outside the

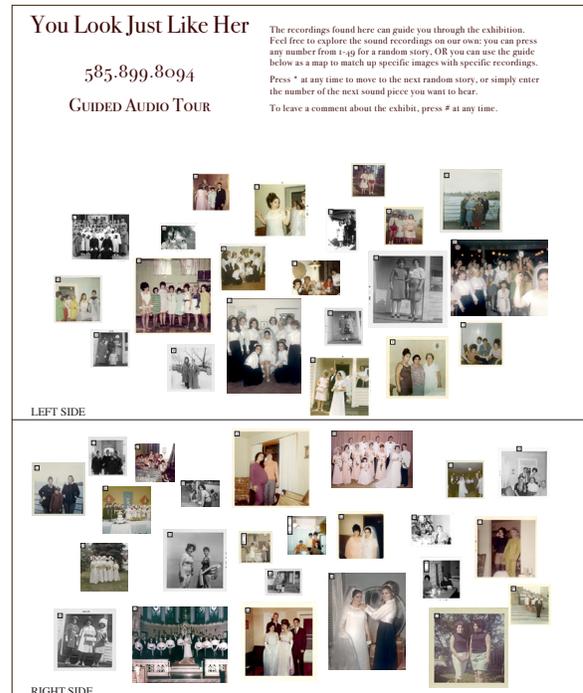


Fig. 3.6. Guided Audio Map



Fig. 3.7. Opening Reception, April 1, 2011.



Fig. 3.8. Opening Reception, April 1, 2011, Audience Interaction.

gallery. I placed large posters with the audio tour phone number and sound map on the front windows of the gallery so that anyone walking past, at any hour, could experience the work. At night, the glow of the gallery light invited viewers to experience the work even during off hours (Fig. 3.9).



Fig. 3.9. Night view of Four Walls Gallery

The power of this work is that it exists on levels far beyond the immediate reasons I had for making it. Viewers accessed it on many levels and became participants. Viewers could relate via the clothes or the hair, the stories told, or the faded images reminiscent of their own collections; nostalgia seeped from these images. The recorded audio was compelling and helped the viewer connect in a personal way to someone else's history. I wanted the viewer to not only connect to the work but to figure out part of my process. The images with the subtle clues, the repeated spaces and miniscule traces left of the process as discussed in Chapter Two, were strategically placed near each other within the grid to help the viewer discover my physical presence was in each image (Fig. 3.10). The participant could thoroughly explore these multiples within the display. It was my hope that if the viewer discovered any of those clues, the desire to go back and reinvestigate both the images and the stories would be overwhelming. The sizes of the images varied,



Fig. 3.10. Detail of Grid Installation

some were true to their original size, others not. This was both an aesthetic choice, to make the prints function as a whole and help lead the eye around the wall, but scale was also meant to function as another clue for the audience. I took photographs from the 1950s and 1960s with the familiar dates stamped on the borders and I enlarged them to a size not often seen in these types of prints. The clues were scattered throughout the images to help the viewer detect my visual intervention, thus causing them to question the veracity of the work and contemplate my motives.

At the opening reception, some viewers discovered my presence in each image and others did not. This was a critical question throughout the creation of the work: Did it matter if the viewer realized I was in the photos? Before the opening reception, the most important part of this work was that the viewer detect my intervention, otherwise they could not have an authentic experience or appreciate the process that went into the creation of this work. I sometimes went so far as to say that if they did not notice my intervention, the work would be deemed an enormous failure. After the opening, I did not feel that way at all. I saw that I had created an exhibition that controlled the viewers experience to an extent, but it was the letting go which allowed each viewer to become a participant and experience a truly personal connection to the work. I transformed the space and created a unique art experience that made a very personal process accessible to the public. My choices were intentional, and would aid them on their way, but regardless of discovering my little technical secret, people still related to the work and my process of discovery was now their own experience.

## Exhibition: Opening Reception

On opening night, viewers were captivated by the images and the stories. Everyone had his or her cell phone out. Some of the stories were comical and others were more serious and it was easy to determine who was listening to which (Fig. 3.11 and Fig. 3.12). Some people were laughing and pointing at objects in the images, sharing their favorite stories with their companions who might have been listening to a different story on their own cell phone (Fig. 3.13). Others were quietly listening, exploring the images as if they were looking for hidden treasure. A few people gave me a list of their favorite stories. Performatively, it was as if Elena were there, telling her own story. As Langford writes, “A photographic album is an instrument of social performance.”<sup>24</sup> The wall layout and space setup worked in conjunction with the photographs and sound as a conduit for a group experience. Viewers fed off of each other’s energy and shared experiences. They



Fig. 3.11. Opening Reception, April 1, 2011, Audience Interaction



Fig. 3.12. Opening Reception, April 1, 2011, Audience Interaction



Fig. 3.13. Opening Reception, April 1, 2011, Audience Interaction

<sup>24</sup> Langford, “Speaking the Album”, in *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, 223.

saw themselves and their families in my photographs. Jeremy Seabrook explores how the shared experience of viewing family photographs can bring people together:

... [R]ecognizing ourselves in others seems somehow to increase the significance of our photographic trove, its predictability compensated by our greater sense of belonging and stability. This mixture of feelings, and a rush of others, is excited by personal photographs and concentrated in the presence of a photographic album....Although the photographs evoke personal memories, it is interesting to observe how many of these are shared by countless others. What seems to individuals a unique and indeed private destiny is in fact part of a wider social pattern. Social experience is often offered up, hesitantly, shyly as though it were a personal treasure, while so much of it was part of a shared flow of common socially determined events.<sup>25</sup>

The viewers wanted to connect to the work, to my process and to each other. For some, it opened an unexpected dialog. So many people approached me and shared their own stories, some about their own family photo collections, others about the relationships they had with their mothers or daughters. Some were even inspired to open up about their losses and grief. The people who were standing near the exhibit were discussing these same topics with whomever happened to be nearby. I was heartened by that fact that my photographs could create such an experience. During the opening reception, tears were spilled in the presence of strangers. Complete strangers connected while experiencing the work and discussed subjects usually saved for grief counseling or late night drinking sessions. By opening myself and sharing my grief, I inspired others to do the same. My healing had permeated the work and the gallery space it inhabited was transformed into a safe, healing place which was filled with life.

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<sup>25</sup> Seabrook, 173.

## Epilogue

The phone system I used allowed me to collect data on how many calls were received, what the callers listened to and what times of day the calls were placed. I had more than 200 unique callers the night of the opening and 635 total unique callers throughout the month the show was on display. Each and every story was listened to. There were more than 1500 calls total, which means not only did many people called back to listen to these stories again but there were new callers as well. Not only were people engaged while in the presence of the work, they came back for more. The calls were placed at various times of day throughout the month and many were placed when the gallery was closed, meaning people either called from home or from outside the gallery. The system also allowed visitors to leave messages for me. The messages consisted of more personal accounts of lived and shared experiences left by those who had something to say, but perhaps could not discuss it in public. I am elated that this process, my photographs and my art, not only reached other people but also enabled them to have their own experiences. Creating artwork that can affect the viewer on some emotional level has been my objective since I first starting taking photographs. With this work in particular, the driving force of wanting the viewer to have an emotional reaction shaped the entire body of work. In that regard, it was successful and will be a benchmark for my future work.

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