

*In a Condition of No Light*

*A l a n a P e r i n o*



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## *Abstract*

*In a Condition of No Light* is an autofictional investigation into lineages of familial domesticity. The performances therein circumnavigate one family in one domestic environment, yet are in dialogue with repertoires learned and rehearsed within legacies of myth, literature, theater, film, music, and image; as well as through the otherwise untraceability of embodied memory and inherited trauma. The methodologies used are primarily photographic but also encompass practices reaching towards sculpture, installation, and performance. The line of questioning reserved for this inquiry is how a home, its objects, and inhabitants generate, spacialize, and embody the conditions of wealth, whiteness, and gender. At stake is the potential to fracture calcified molds, reenvision archetypes of enmeshment, and develop rituals of empathy across time, selves, and generations through the impossible practice of healing.





## *Prologue*

My mother lives in a dark apartment with beautiful things that are easily broken. I lived in this apartment with my mother and eventually my stepfather as well. I was a child then. My mother and I would dress up, photograph each other, and write stories that ran parallel to our lives. Not much has changed and even though I no longer live there, I still make photographs of myself in this apartment. Lately, I find myself in my attachments to objects, corners of rooms, and the ways my body arranges itself comfortably or uncomfortably while visiting. Sometimes I ask my mother and stepfather to be in the photographs. Sometimes we dress for our parts. Sometimes we make up stories about why. Sometimes only the apartment appears, the apartment and perhaps its objects. I often wonder if this work is autobiographical. My instinct is to say that it is not because I don't want it to be. I have become a very private person and the moments depicted here are all very private in nature. But I also know that when I look at the pictures, the facticity of my mother's face reminds me that regardless of how many people we may pretend to be, we simply cannot help but be ourselves. There are some instances in the work when I look at an image and see my mother. There are others where it looks as if my mother is wearing a mask of herself. Personally, I cannot help but see myself in all the roles and gestures that I perform in these images, but I would never suggest that these photographs of my mother and stepfather are valid representations "of" them.

In the early conception of this work, I photographed myself seated on my mother's lap. A recreation of a formative memory of intimacy when in a panicked state, I rushed to her, and she placed me on her lap to soothe me. She pulled my shirt over my head to the front of my body so she could lightly touch my back with her fingertips to assure me of her attention. Someone was watching at that time, I believe it was my stepfather, or my grandmother, or perhaps it was the watchful eyes of ancestors I felt from beyond the physical confines of the room. I had recently learned in synagogue that the dead watch over us, and this became a great source of my anxieties. My shoulders crowded forward in shame from the emotional outburst, and from the gaze of the forgotten witness. Today, my shoulders will crowd together in moments of emotional dysregulation, close to my ears, as if I am still holding that shirt against my chest with my bare back exposed. A burning sharp red pain emerges at the right of my sternum, a nucleus of

vulnerability, the place where my shirt collected. The intention of this staging was to recreate this somatic memory I have held from a time when I was very young. When I say somatic memory, I mean the evidence that exists in my body as residue of lived and imagined experience. I say lived and imagined experience because there are times when I am not so certain as to the truth value of my recollection. Some stories from the past, which likely are true, feel like shallow representations of deeper experiences that can only be retold to their fullest meaning if they contain an element of fiction. Some stories that my mother tells, stories she learned from ancestors, novels, books and plays, feel more true than what I remember myself. My mother does not remember the original occurrence of this exchange we recreated and I sometimes wonder if it ever happened. But my body has no doubts about the passing of this moment between us that forever shaped the response of my nervous system and my conditioned behavior in circumstances of discomfort.



Figure 1: Alana Perino, *Lap*, pigment print, 2021

This work I make of my mother's apartment explores the physical and psychological space of my childhood home and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships that inform my somatic experience of that space. The photographs and the stories that accompany them here are only truths insofar as truths are unrepresentable. In my images, and in the stories I tell, I create fictions rooted in autobiography. The work is about the plastic truths of the apartment, and how it serves as a stage for the performance of wealth, domesticity, whiteness, and gender. And because the work is about the apartment, it is also inevitably about the things in the apartment, and the people who occupy the apartment – all of which respond in both strange and careful ways as we circumnavigate each other in the play of our given domestic roles.



## *Narcissism – The Fixation of My Own Reflection*

My mother never admired her face. She inherited a deviated septum from both her mother and father, and they from centuries of Ashkenazi Jews before them. She didn't consider our family to be a family of beautiful people. Our family members are small, often hunched and pale with weak physical dispositions. They look not unlike caricatures that circulated widely before American diasporic Jews were allowed and encouraged to become white, nor unlike the caricatures that circulate even now as anti-semitism remains despite this impossible assimilation. When my mother was pregnant with her first and only child, she prayed that I would look nothing like her. That I would be tan, lean, and undeviated like my father. His nose was large as well: Italian, certainly not the picturesque nose of the white women who she aspired for me to be; but at least it wasn't Jewish. She believed that beautiful people have the strongest advantages and wanted nothing but the best for her child, who was to be an extension of herself. After I was born with my father's features, she left him for a life with a beautiful baby that seemed impossibly upwardly mobile. She was newly financially independent and no longer in need of his support. I imagine that she would hold me and say, as Barbara Streisand's Fanny Brice once said to an empty theater, "Who's an American beauty rose, with an American beauty nose, and ten American beauty toes!?" (*Funny Girl*).



Figure 2: *Funny Girl*, movie still, 1968



Figure 3: Caravaggio, *Narcissus*, 1599-1597

My mother taught me, first and foremost, that I was beautiful. To this day, I am entranced by my reflection, and by the images I render of myself. Ovid's Narcissus was also enamored by his own image, but his mother never told him that he was beautiful. She was warned by the blind seer Tiresias that if her beautiful son ever beheld his own image that it would kill him. She removed all the mirrors from their home, covered the reflective surfaces and did not allow him to bathe in standing water. It was only in adulthood, removed from the safety of his mother's coddling, that he saw a glimpse of himself on the surface of a pond (Caravaggio). "Transfixed, suspended like a figure carved from marble, he looks down at his own face; stretched out on the ground, stares into his own eyes...he admires all that he's admired for, for it is he that he himself desires, all unaware; he praises and is praised, seeks and is the one that he is seeking; kindles the flame and is consumed by it" (Ovid 107). As the seer prophesied, he could not look away from

his own gaze, withered away and died, his body transforming into a flower. My image transfixes me when I gaze upon my self-portrait, as Grete Jacobson obsesses over her mirrored image in Madame d'Ora's photograph (D'Ora). I am fixed in the image like a figure carved, a figure who seeks praise for my presence and a figure who is praised for my performance. I am as beautiful as my mother says.



Figure 4: Madame D'Ora. Actress Grete Jacobson in a House Dress from the Wiener Werkstätte. 1917

When I was young, my mother photographed me daily. I loved the attention as I rarely saw her during the day when she was occupied with facilitating our upwardly mobile life. I would create scenarios that she might want to photograph. I would dress up in her hats and

gloves and pose like Leslie Caron. Gigi has weekly lessons with her Aunt Alicia, a retired courtesan, to practice the art of presenting herself glamorously, eating delicately and moving gracefully in space, so that she will be able to provide for herself as a woman. My mother also insisted that I learn etiquette, how to behave and act like a person of sophistication. I would hold a teacup as instructed by Aunt Alicia. “The saucer must look so much a part of your fingers that it could only be removed by surgery” (*Gigi*). She wanted me to be dignified, elegant, to display composure, but, most importantly, she wanted me to be a woman. And in this way and so many others she wanted me to be a mirror of herself.



Figure 5: *Gigi*, movie still, 1958

Alison Bechdel’s mother was a performer, playing roles such as Catherine Sloper and Fanny Cavendish. In her graphic novel, Bechdel traces her therapeutic journey and her relationship with her mother through research into the 20<sup>th</sup> century early developmental psychological findings of D.W. Winnicott. Next to a panel of her mother applying stage makeup is a drawing of Winnicott’s 1967 journal entry, “Mirror-role and Mother and Family in Child Development: Individual emotional development the precursor of the mirror. The mirror is the mother’s face”(Bechdel, 213). At this developmental stage, mother and child are one and the same, almost as they were in utero. Bechdel recalls the shattering of this perception in her experience of Lacan’s mirror stage on panels of herself as a baby approaching a mirror. She



describes the transition of the “I” signifier. “When a baby identifies herself for the first time in a mirror, there’s ‘a flutter of jubilant activity,’ a ‘leaning-forward.’ The reflection in the mirror is you...but not exactly. It’s backwards for one thing. And it’s all of a piece, unlike the diffuse way you’ve experienced reality until this moment...in this moment you identify with your image, your double, and unattainable ideal” (Bechdel, 231-232). The mirror crashes down the staircase, baby Alison along with it. From this moment forward the mother and child should be ontologically separate, each ego firm in its unique subjectivity and objecthood. Unless the mother, whose needs perhaps went unmet by her own mother in childhood, creates a narcissistic cathexis of her child. Bechdel reads from Alice Miller’s *Drama of the Gifted Child*: “On the contrary, she loves the child, as her self-object, excessively, though not in the manner that he needs, and always on the condition that he presents his ‘false self’” (Bechdel, 167). Bechdel never accuses her mother of being a narcissist, at least not directly. Yet panels appear juxtaposed in ways that suggest correlation. Her mother read the book before it was published. I think that gesture, on the part of both Bechdel and her mother, was very brave.



Figure 6: Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother? : A Comic Drama*, panel, 2012

My mother says the photographs I make of us are sad. She suggests that people may think that we are terrible to each other, that she is a bad mother. I tell her no. I have tried to save her from expectations that she cannot fulfill, to grieve the fantasy of motherhood I had held over her, and to save myself from longing. This Alice Miller quote did not appear in Bechdel's book: "Only the never-ending work of mourning can help us from lapsing into the illusion that we have found the parent we once urgently needed...Such a parent was never ours, for a mother can react empathically only to the extent that she has become free of her own childhood; when she denies the vicissitudes of her early life, she wears invisible chains" (Miller, 92). I assure her, as I always have, that she is not a bad mother, that she gives me all that she has to give. And that I will always love her for who she is, and I hope she loves me for who I am, even the parts that do not reflect her.



Figure 7: Alana Perino, *Mirror Stage*, pigment print, 2021

At the entrance to my mother's apartment is an antique poster for Willian C. de Mille's early 20<sup>th</sup> century play, *The Woman (The Woman)*. Two figures, both white, and both presumably

women, gaze at each other in a shallow domestic mise-en-scene. One figure, poised at the edge of an upholstered chair, looks up at the other, eyebrows raised, almost pleading, hands desperate at the arm of the chair and the tip of her knee. The other figure, older, impossibly erect, looks down at the seated person, so much so that her eyes are almost closed. She is stern, strong, and perhaps unfeeling, despite the handkerchief she holds in one hand. She gestures unempathetically, “What is all this to me?” The poster is larger than life and hangs above eye level, which forced me to look up to *The Woman* as a child in a way that mirrored the seated figure, desperate and pleading. I wished that the younger figure could be stronger, or that perhaps the older figure might bend with sympathy. This, I learned, was the relationship between women.



Figure 8: *The Woman*, color lithograph, 1911

For some time, I only understood this relationship as gendered and intergenerational, but I eventually learned that it was also racialized. In *The Oppositional Gaze*, bell hooks writes, "...I remember being punished as a child for staring, for those hard intense direct looks children would give grown-ups, looks that were seen as confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority...Imagine the terror felt by the child who has come to understand through repeated punishments that one's gaze can be dangerous" (hooks, 115). I no longer consider myself to be a woman (truly I never have) but the pressure of societal gaze upon my visibly gendered body rendered me not only a woman, but a beautiful woman, a beautiful white woman. My mother impressed upon me that to be a beautiful white woman was to be afforded considerable advantage in the world. For much of my life the privilege of being seen as a beautiful white woman outweighed the cognitive and somatic dissonance of knowing that I was not and would never be a woman. hooks describes how black female spectators "Identifying with neither the phallogentric gaze nor the construction of white womanhood as lack...construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation" (hooks, 126). There is a queerness to the gaze of black womanhood that hooks establishes, a gaze which functions in opposition to white supremacy and heteronormativity, a gaze that questions modes of representation and systems of power. The stakes of my positionality as an inheritor of the privileges of whiteness and that of a black queer woman are not equivalent. Yet the insights of this queer oppositionality inform my response to an inheritance of gendered, intergenerational white contempt. In this way I wonder if my queerness, a practice of questioning, functions as a "rupture" or a disidentification with discourse in the foyer of my childhood home: a self-regarding oppositional gaze. How could I ever be a woman? A woman, or the image of one in my imagination, white in its conception, has always been merely someone desperately pleading in a chair, or an impossibly erect unempathetic figure with a handkerchief.

I am not a woman, but I sometimes create images of myself as a woman. This is not to say that these images aren't of me but that they are bound by a locus of experience oriented towards a feminine archetype. Cindy Sherman's self-portrait *Film Still #14* undeniably contains her image, but the image itself is of another person, specifically another woman (Sherman). I wonder if Cindy Sherman thinks of her makeup, her handbag and the skirts in her images as prosthetics? As extensions of herself, that allow tropes of femininity to be more easily reached? I wonder if Grete Jacobson felt that way about her house dress? As I reach for my mother, I turn

toward the objects that render our images more aligned, more reflective: a phenomenology of longing. Madame D'Ora, and Grete Jacobson were Jewish, as is Cindy Sherman. I imagine we also have in common a fixation with our own reflection. Is the origin of that fascination the awareness that therein lies the image of our mothers?



Figure 9: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #14*, gelatin silver print, 1978



## *Inherited Trauma – The Difficult Women*

Henryk Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* is composed and written from the perspective of mothers and children: a mother who loses a child, a child who loses a mother (*Symphony No. 3 (Symphony of Sorrowful Songs)*). Gorecki was a child in Nazi occupied Poland, near Auschwitz, not far from where my mother's grandmother might have been born. Bessel Van der Kolk describes the biology of trauma, "When memory traces of the original sounds, images and sensations are reactivated, the frontal lobe shuts down, including, as we've seen, the region necessary to put feelings into words, the region that creates our sense of location in time, and the thalamus, which integrates the raw data of incoming sensations...The emotional brain (the limbic area and the brain stem) expresses its altered activation through changes in emotional arousal, body physiology, and muscular action. Under ordinary conditions these two memory systems – rational and emotional – collaborate to produce an integrated response. But high arousal not only changes the balance between them but also disconnects other brain areas necessary for the proper storage and integration of incoming information, such as the hippocampus and the thalamus. As a result, the imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations" (Van der Kolk, 211). I never knew my great grandmother, but I knew my grandmother. And I know that in her are traces of her mother, that have forever changed her and my mother in turn, and myself. When I write about these mothers, I listen to Gorecki's symphony. It is mournful, mystical, and operatic. It communicates something of the unspeakable.

Clinician and author Mark Wolynn, whose work centers on inherited family trauma, explains that once traumatic memories are triggered we "reenact aspects of the original trauma in our day-to-day lives, unconsciously we could find ourselves reacting to certain people, events, or situations in old familiar ways that echo the past" (Wolynn, 1). We are learning that this "past" is not limited to our lived experience. "In Rachel Yehuda's study, the children of Holocaust survivors were born with low cortisol levels similar to their parents, predisposing them to relive the PTSD symptoms of the previous generation" (Wolynn, 19). This embodied knowing of Poland does not live in me in the same way that it does in my mother. Yet the blessing of generational distance from the original trauma does not preclude my body from having learned

the conditions of this genocide, nor does it soften the loss of this memory. “The traumas we inherit or experience first hand can not only create a legacy of distress, but also forge a legacy of strength and resilience that can be felt for generations to come” (Wolynn, 24). Jews have inherited this resilience for thousands of years through exiles and genocides through biological and behavior adaptations in order to survive and thrive. My family raised me to fear outsiders, to flee in moments of confrontation, to abandon instead of reconciling. This psychosocial learning was nurtured outside of my body in the family system and inside my body through shared ancestral biological environments.



Figure 10: Julianna Roccoforte Novello, *Blooming Syzygy*, 2021

There is an illusion in *Blooming Syzygy* that all the people in Julianna Roccoforte Novello’s photographs are her parents (Novello). Small differences in physique, eye color, or hair thickness proves otherwise. We are led to know that the community she photographs shares, if not the same biological environment, then at least a cultural environment enmeshed enough to perpetuate patterns of biological and gestural sameness. In the copy of the book she gave me, Julianna signed the first page, “For Alana, a kindred spirit.” Following this are images of what I understand as portraits of a strange kind of kindred, a warm voyeurism. They seem to also be



photos of herself. Their color commands an immediacy which places me in the contemporary, and yet the gestures harken to generational households of intimately known family systems. Unexpected moments of half-finished makeup, opaque bathing rituals, and the appearance of uncredited song lyrics jostle me between the quotidian and the cinematic. I think of her when I photograph my mother washing her hair in the sink, her mascara spilling uncomfortably into her eyes, as she avoids getting water in her ears. Julianna grew up in a borough not too far from my grandmother's. For this and other reasons we are kindred spirits.



Figure 11: Chantal Akerman, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, movie still, 1975

Chantal Akerman filmed *No Home Movie* in her mother's house (Akerman). Inside, I see glimpses of another mother's home in a different Akerman film: *Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles* (Akerman). While both films are centered around domestic ritual, the homes themselves, for which the movies are named, are as much a subject of the films as the people who occupy them. The homes and the things in the homes, both observe and are complicit in the lives of those who live there. Bowls, tables, beds almost appear in unity with the architecture of the space itself, but if I look closely at the objects, the adornments of the home fall away like so many coats and rings. Ackerman's mother comments during dinner with her

daughter at the kitchen table, “I like the potatoes like this, I’ve never had them with the skin.” I am certain that it is the same kitchen table as the one in *Jeanne Dielman*. At that kitchen table we watch Jeanne peel potatoes. She then overcooks the potatoes, buys new ones, and peels those as well. Suddenly I see Jeanne Dielman as Akerman’s mother, perhaps not a survivor of the holocaust, but a survivor of something, who learned that there was only a certain way to do things. My mother washes her hair in the sink. “I know I’m crazy, but I just can’t stand getting water in my ears.” This practice hurts her back, and she often hits her head on the faucet. My mother’s mother also washed her hair in the sink. For some time, I did as well. I have since unlearned this practice, but not others of similar inheritance. I wonder if Jeanne Dielman’s mother always peeled potatoes.



Figure 12: Chantal Akerman, *No Home Movie*. Directed by Chantal Akerman, movie still, 2015

My mother’s mother was and is always referred to as a difficult woman. She didn’t like to leave the house, she didn’t like to be in public. According to my mother, she did not enjoy life and was mostly afraid of the world. She struggled with basic hygiene, never owned anything nice, and the food she ate was bland. My grandmother’s mother was also, by legend, a very difficult woman. As a child I believed that she was treated with electroshock therapy. My mother tells me today that this is not the case, that it was other members of the family who underwent

such procedures. The women in my family have always constituted themselves as heavily burdened, mentally speaking. My mother blames this condition on centuries of inbreeding in our Jewish ancestry, some kind of genetic predisposition that would emerge sometime later in life within an unlucky few. In contrast to my grandmother and great grandmother are the myths of their husbands. It has been suggested that when G-d made my grandfather he “broke the mold.” That there have not been nor will there ever be anyone as sweet and as caring as he was. I’ve always felt that this suggestion destined me to take after my mother’s mother and the mothers before her. I too am often afraid to leave the house, I am easily overstimulated by sounds, smells, tastes, and I become quickly depleted in social situations. When my mother disapproves of my behavior, she says that I can be “very difficult.” When she is pleased with me she says that I can be “very sweet when I want to be.” At this suggestion I feel challenged to overcome the nature of my inherited penchant for disappointing others and mold myself into an impossible shape. I wonder if my grandmother and my great grandmother could also be very sweet when they wanted to be. I wonder where in their body the breaking point occurred and the mask of their sweetness broke. I wonder if my grandfather ever felt impossibly molded or if my great grandmother felt that her shape was too unwieldy for her loved ones to hold.



Figure 13: Alana Perino, *Florals*, pigment print, 2022



## *Pathologies – Personal and Social Dysfunction*

My mother loves stories about dishonest men, conniving fiancés, neglectful husbands, murderous widowers. She and I lived alone together in that time between when we moved to the new borough and when my stepfather moved in. We watched noir films together, ones with Ingrid Bergman, Joan Fontaine, and Grace Kelly. In *Gaslight*, Paula Alquist’s husband questions and manipulates her perceptions of reality. He claims she is hysterical, delirious, shattering the validity of her subjectivity (Cukor). The term itself, “gaslight” comes from the film. Ingrid Bergman is stunning and all the more so in the angled narrative light. In this film, shadows become characters, and light is an omen of some unthinkable loss of cognition. When my stepfather became a frequent visitor, it became strange to be in my own home. He didn’t like to keep the lights on. It was already a dark apartment but now the shades were also mostly drawn, shafts of light darting through occupied and unoccupied rooms. There were new creaks, and footsteps, and darting eyes ready to engage or avoid. A relentless anticipation of a new reality at the whims of someone I hadn’t yet learned to trust. Paula Alquist learns to distrust her husband, confronts him in an aggressive climax and leaves. My mother learned to trust him, he remained, and we never endured that kind of drama.



Figure 14: George Cukor, *Gaslight*, movie still, 1944

I began seeing a psychologist when I was ten years old. These meetings remained a family secret as my mother was attached to her conception of me as an unusually gifted child. I remember the analyst as a bearded man from Europe, though I'm not sure where. He had a small closet filled with toys, very few of which interested me because they were not my own. But I was fascinated with a marble chess set he kept on a bookshelf near a photo of Freud. At the time I didn't know who Freud was. I assumed it was the analyst's father, since they were both bearded and vaguely European. He and I would play chess and he would ask me about my dreams.

Freud's developmental psychology of personal dysfunction is founded on a drama of domesticity that was first performed in 429 BC. In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud tells the story of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. "Oedipus, the son of Laius, king of Thebes, and of Jocasta, is exposed as an infant because an oracle had warned Laius that his still unborn son would be his murderer. The child was rescued and grew up as a prince in an alien court, until, in doubt as to his origin, he too, consults the oracle, and is warned to avoid his home since he was destined to murder his father and take his mother in marriage. On the road leading away from what he believed to be his home, he meets King Laius, and in a sudden quarrel strikes him dead. He comes to Thebes, where he solves the riddle of the Sphinx, who is barring the way to the city. Out of gratitude, the Thebans made him their king and gave him Jocasta's hand in marriage. He reigns for many years in peace and honor and begets two sons and two daughters upon his unknown mother. Then, at last a plague breaks out — which causes the Thebans to consult the oracle anew. Here Sophocles' tragedy begins. The messengers bring the reply that the plague will stop as soon as the murderer of Laius is driven from the country. The action of this play consists of nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever mounting excitement - a process that can be likened to the work of psychoanalysis - that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered and of Jocasta" (Mulvey, 193). The process of self-discovery that Oedipus undertakes is analogous to the methodology of Freudian therapy where the past is investigated in order to reveal the personal and social dysfunctions of the present.

Feminist theorist Laura Mulvey broadens this analogy to the detective genre and film noir. "Oedipus, ahead of the genre, acts as a detective faced with a murder to solve, and the hybrid, two-part story acquires another formal duality...a double time structure. There are two stories to be told. The first precedes the opening of the narrative and is the story of the crime.

This story is gradually unfolded in the course of the second which is the story of the investigation...What is at stake on this level of narration is not just the ability of an exceptional man to interpret clues and evidence, but the ability of a man to understand the truth of his own history...The relationship between the Oedipus myth and psychoanalysis, therefore, lies in its narrative methodology and the metaphysical implications of its narrative form” (Mulvey, 191-192). When the audience in ancient Athens watched *Oedipus Rex* on stage, they would have recognized it as a popular myth and would have considered Sophocles’ play a retelling. Freud’s readers would have also considered his narrative of Oedipus to be a retelling. The themes of *Oedipus Rex* the myth, and the trilogy of the Three Theban plays, is chiefly concerned with circular narratives, a story of inheritance, trauma, and generational curses. This story as told by Sophocles, which is punctuated with foretellings, tellings and retellings, gains more and more meaning through its repetition. “Repetition is both a recall of an earlier moment and also a variation on it and creates a return. In this way the narrative structure of *Oedipus Rex* renders it not only a mythic story, but a story of the coming into being of a myth” (Mulvey, 201). Literary critic Shoshana Felman points to the importance of repetition as a mechanism for myth making. “It is the compulsion to repeat a lived experience that generates symbolization and consequently myth and narrative” (Mulvey, 201). Trauma reenactment, or “repetition compulsion,” as Freud called it, functions by the same mechanism. Fragments of memory, bodily sensations, images and emotions are released through a familiar exposure which can only be resolved by a visceral engagement with the embodied experience and the truth of lived and inherited pasts. Here as well as in the creations of myths, imagination, memory, and perception exchange functions.

The drama that I am engaged in is compulsorily cyclical in its staging, mythmaking, and retellings. There is no climax, only repetition and anticipation. I find myself disinterested in staging a resolution. I have been diagnosed with a litany of DSM manual designations, few of which I identify with and none of which I will divulge here. There is a power to this kind of non-description, a blindness which defies category. The prophet Tiresias, who disclosed Oedipus’ fate, the same prophet who foretold the death of Narcissus, was blind and lived as both man and woman. The seer chastised Oedipus in his refusal to acknowledge the truth of his past, “So, you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this. You with your precious eyes, you’re blind to the corruption of your life, to the house you live in, those you live with — who are your parents? Do you know? All unknowing you are the scourge of your own flesh and blood, the dead below

the earth and the living here above, and the double lash of your mother and your father's curse will whip you from this land one day, their footfall treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding your eyes that now can see the light!” (Sophocles, 183). Once faced with the realities of his fated past, Oedipus blinds himself out of sheer desperation, with his wife-mother’s jewelry. In the following plays and supplements of the Oedipal mythological universe we learn that this murder, this intergenerational crime, is not born of Oedipus and will not end with Oedipus. This violent climax, this act of self-flagellation, functions not as a resolution but as a portal for the continuation of the saga into the coming generations as it was inherited from the previous generations. The myth projects out of the domestic realm, into the socio-political sphere, and finally into the construction of histories.



Figure 15: Alana Perino, *Pearls*, pigment print, 2022



In my work I resist the demand to fabricate a false resolution, to divulge histories which may only serve to flatten possible experiences, my subjectivity, possible implications of guilt, and the lives of larger communities who may be implicated. David Lynch bemoans the pressures from fandoms to reveal Laura Palmer's killer in *Twin Peaks* (*Twin Peaks*). Laura Palmer's mystery was not made more sublime by the revelation of her killer. It was that very revelation which foreshortened the indeterminate narrative possibilities and metaphysical properties imbued in his melodramatic mimesis of a town torn asunder by murder. Discovering the murderer, exposing the guilty, naming a diagnosis, only truncates the mycelia of possible truths that can exist simultaneously and in contradiction.



Figure 16: David Lynch, *Twin Peaks*, video still, 1990



## *Melodrama – Bourgeoise Impossibilities*

Memory can be an unreliable source of truth, but only when we define truth as mimetic verisimilitude. In this mode, truth becomes flattened and distanced from internal and transhistorical realities which are informed by patterns, emotions, sensory perceptions, and the oppressive authority of fictions. Like the experience of trauma, where the language center of the brain becomes impaired, some representations are inexpressible within a realist mode. Literary theorist Peter Brooks describes the art of melodrama as the desire to express all. “Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship” (Brooks, 4). In a world where every word and gesture carries implications of physical, psychological, and spiritual conditions, nothing is spared an excess of meaning. *Mise-en-scène*, lighting, props, and music all transform into an expressive code of symbols that point to the texture of truth. Melodrama seems to me to be inherently Jewish, not only in its implicit connection to theater and cinema (which has been shaped by Jewish culture, particularly in the spheres of Jewish American diaspora), but in its commitments to over-expression in resistance to whiteness. Jewish neurosis, while a psychoanalytic trope alluding to mental illness, has come to define Jewish performance, in the private sphere and as a theatrical-cinematic device. These gestures of psychological disorder, unacceptable to white bourgeois sensibilities, mark moments of behavioral and neurological divergence when Jews are unable to assimilate into whiteness. This bourgeois impossibility demands a repression of dramatic internal experience and dramatic external expression: hallmarks of melodramatic Jewish subjectivity.

My mother and stepfather are firmly attached to the appearance of non-confrontational domesticity, a home that is not made difficult by expressions of emotion. To quietly allow patriarchal, racialized, and gendered ideologies to reproduce without resistance. The kind of respectable home which alludes to the upward mobility of white aspirations. For film historian Thomas Elsaesser, “The social pressures are such, the frame of respectability so sharply defined that the range of ‘strong’ actions is limited. The tellingly impotent gesture, the social gaffe, the hysterical outburst replaces any more direct liberation or self-annihilating action” (Elsaesser, 79).

Any challenge to this normativity may be qualified as exaggerated behavior not suitable for a respectable home. In a universe without confrontation, there is no possibility of expansion or rupture. “The characters are, so to speak, each other’s sole referent, there are no worlds outside to be acted on, no reality that could be defined or assumed unambiguously...They are locked into a universe of real and metaphoric mirrors” (Elsaesser, 79). To render this domesticity in melodramatic truth is to allow for a visualization that reveals the overdetermination of gestures, roles, objects, and space as a closed nexus of referentiality confined to the universe of the home.



Figure 17: Alana Perino, *Mother's Dress*, pigment print, 2022

I imagine that my mother always wished for her home to have a staircase like the ones found in larger and more affluent houses near our building. These homes have columns at the entrances, elaborate molding, and many floors. Catherine Sloper, who would have been my neighbor, would have lived in one of these homes. Catherine is a fictional character from the play *The Heiress* adapted from a 1880 Henry James novel titled *Washington Square*, named after the street where she lived. Henry James wrote many melodramas, but this is the only one placed in the past, specifically in the old New York of his youth. Shortly after moving to Washington

Square, my mother saw the play (adapted by two Jews, Ruth and Augustus Goetz) and would recount the story when we passed Catherine's portrait or what would have been her home. The way she tells the story is different from the play she saw, which is different from the novel and movie, and is also different from how I tell it now. Catherine Sloper's mother was a sweet and beautiful woman who died early in Catherine's childhood. Raised by her cruel and overbearing father, Catherine was reminded often that she did not have the charm of her mother, would probably never marry, and therefore would be a burden on him until the end of his days. Catherine did meet a suitor as an adult, but her father insisted that he was only interested in her dowry and threatened to cut her from his will and financial support if she chose to accept his proposal of marriage. Catherine waited in a chair by the window the night she and her fiancé were supposed to run away together. She sat there until morning because he never came. Some years later, after her father died and she was disinherited, the suitor returned to her home on Washington Square, professing his love and regrets. She agreed to marry him again. Waiting in the same chair by the window, she got up and closed the curtain when he arrived. He waited outside the house until morning because she never let him in. Years later, Catherine died in that house, as did her father and her mother before him.



Figure 18: William Wyler, *The Heiress*, movie still 1949.

I am my mother's only child. She tells me that one day her home on Washington Square, and perhaps everything in it, will be mine. I photograph myself – approaching the vertical axis of the staircase, as Catherine did, which only exists in a melodramatic imagination of my home – in anticipation of what I must give up of myself to accept such an inheritance (*The Heiress*).







## *Haunted – The Home as Protagonist*

“Grandma would have said, ‘The dead so close to the living.’” And it was true. From the car window on a highway to another borough with my grandmother trailing close behind us, cemeteries seemed to rise from the backyards of homes. We left Washington Square only for funerals. Washington Square Park itself used to be a cemetery. But that was when the neighborhood lived another life. A life before the upwardly mobile pushed northward on the island of Manhattan. The park was built in the eighteenth century and with it, the Greco-Revival Federalist row of houses that ran adjacent and would later become known as Washington Square. Desperate to leave the outer borough where she was raised, my mother bought an apartment in a high-rise off of that same park in the eighties. Not a row house – those were for another class of people altogether. I lived there with my mother. As did my grandmother until she died. She sat in the living room armchair. Or slept in her bedroom which is now my stepfather’s office. They married soon after my grandmother died, when there was room for him in the apartment. Despite the fact that she remained chiefly in the chair in the living room, my grandmother took up much space. That chair is no longer in the apartment and I don’t remember what it looked like. It was replaced by another chair, which looks like my grandmother. That new chair is old now. It’s covered in neutral toned flowers, like the house dresses she wore. There was a time my grandmother was new and living in an outer borough, perhaps near her family who recently arrived from the shtetl. They didn’t have much because they didn’t bring much with them, so she said. They didn’t talk about what they had before because they didn’t have anything nice, so they said. I imagine my grandmother didn’t like this new borough or this apartment. She said that it felt like a museum. That she was always worried about breaking something. It was true. The apartment was not a row house, but my mother did everything she could to make it appear like one from the inside. Signifiers of Greco-Revival Federalist whiteness were scattered amongst signifiers of Jewish assimilation. None of these things were inherited, though they had the quality of inheritance to them. Even now, nothing of my mother's mother, or father, remains in this apartment. Even the shabbos candlesticks my mother purchased for herself because she wanted them to be silver. I sometimes wonder if my mother didn’t keep these objects because she

was already trying to shed so much of what she inherited from the outer borough and what was left of the shtetl. This inheritance she keeps in her body.



Figure 19: Alana Perino, *The Chorus*, pigment print, 2023

My mother has a collection of busts, modest enough that they don't overshadow her other beautiful objects with their presence. The things in the house have always held a certain kind of subjectivity, but none as much as the ornaments with articulated faces. I often wonder what I'll do with these things when they become mine. Will I keep everything? The Hermès scarf collection? The imitation-mahogany furniture? If I brought the busts to a home of my own, would I accidentally break them in a state of comfortability? The arrangement of my mother's home calls attention to its own delicate nature, creating clear and narrow paths to traverse so as not to disturb anything that may become easily dispossessed. Making photographs in her home is akin to making copies of objects that if ruined, wouldn't carry the shameful consequence of her disappointment and his resentment. Two-dimensional replications can fall flat in a room. Or if flatness is not an issue, the desire to own, to hold out perhaps, or to push off the edge of a table is not satiated. There is a sense of holding something close to your belly that makes it belong to you.

In mold making, silicone rubber needs to be brushed onto intricate objects. Rubber can be harmful. It may change the chemical nature of the material being molded. Tinting the color, tarnishing, weakening. There is an assumption that when you make a mold, the original object may not emerge fully intact. The mold encapsulates the object, bearing down pressure as it hardens to a certain malleability. Two halves of plaster are shaped and dried to create a stable shell. This shell is called the mother mold. Mold making is a practice of aspirational mimicry. When I release the original object from the mold and all the subsequent replications made with it, I wrestle my hands and arms into the cavern of the silicone, careful not to damage what's inside. Akin to helping someone give birth. Success in this process is measured by the detail of the replication. The texture of the original not present materially on the casted object must be present haptically.



Figure 20: Alana Perino, *Enmeshment*, installation image, 2023

Plaster is a fitting choice for a cast. Ruins of architectures and cavities left behind by bodies have all been shaped in plaster. Before the invention of photography, molds were cast from the faces of the dead before they were interred. A plaster cast remnant to be kept in a drawer, on a pillow, or perhaps in a glass cabinet to be admired and remembered. When a Jew is

buried, their body is covered in a thin shroud that will easily decompose. Only the children, the parents, or the spouses get to look upon the face of the dead before the burial. At home, mirrors are covered with sheets, towels, and blankets. It says in the Talmud that the soul can enter through a reflective surface. I always wondered if the veil kept our souls in our bodies, or kept the dead from returning or approaching too close to the living. Once I made a cast of my own face. It emerged from a silicone mold encased in another mold, a mother mold, and it was the perfect image of my death.

Every image of my mother becomes a memento mori. I can still only read life in my own photographic image, and discomfort in my stepfather's. But my mother's photograph is rendered eternal to me in the way of my plaster face. Installation artist Christian Boltanski believed that to photograph someone was to render them dead. He described this process as "dehumanization," a rendering of a person or a body as separate from its memory. The archival photos he used were enlarged often to the point of being unrecognizable and were eulogized in their altar-like lightbulb constructions (Boltanski). The shadows created from these lit objects are integral to the installation. A Boltanski installation often has the aura of being candle-lit.



Figure 21: Christian Boltanski, Boltanski, *Monument (Odessa)*, installation image, 1989

For a mold of my mother's face I would use wax, a material significant to the rituals and spirituality of Ashkenazi Jews. Paraffin wax was invented in Germany in the nineteenth century, marking a major advancement in the practice of candle making. Prior to its invention, Jews in the Central and Eastern European diaspora were unable to use tallow candles which were made from the fats of non-kosher animals. Instead, they used oils in their rituals, a practice which dates back to the first temple period. The paraffin wax candle, a marker that is so heavily inscribed in the contemporary rituals of Jewish practice, can also be understood as a marker of Jewish assimilation into whiteness. In Kabbalah, a field of Jewish mysticism, the candle is a symbol of the connection between heaven and earth, a material vessel that is capable of tethering a flame which reaches higher towards heavenly aspirations. As such, candle lighting is a practice often reserved for women, a vessel that is both material and spiritual in its capacity to bring forth divine light in the form of children. This sculpture hasn't been completed yet, but when it is it will be melting, creating new forms in its dedication to the transformation of energy as its old forms are undone.



Figure 22: Alana Perino, *Inheritance*, installation image, 2023

I wonder what material will render my stepfather's face eternal? I think of glass, which in its visual ethereality is sharp and heavy. The transparency is stunning and powerful to behold. There is an exquisite sensitivity to light, and an illusion that perhaps I can see its depth entirely. I am scared to work with glass. I've broken it in the past and been broken by it. For now I work with something else. Silicone can approximate glass, it is light and does not cut, and given the right texture, it can break apart and simulate the illusion of an edge. This material is used in theater, perhaps for dramatic scenes from a Tennessee Williams play. Somatic therapists and artists work in languages of theater. A well-supported scene is set with the right emotional activation to simulate a moment that may never be resolved but which might with time and practice become smoother, less volatile, and less fearsome. The objects handled can be held closer to the body. After removing a cast from its mold, I can't help but hold it on my lap and behold its beautiful face.



Figure 23: Carolyn Drake, *Knit Club*, 2020.

Carolyn Drake's *Knit Club* includes an image of a mold interior (Drake). The mold is of a woman's face, though I can only assume it's a woman because everyone pictured in the book

with few exceptions is a woman or a child of a woman. I am sure it is an adult's face because of the size of the mold in relation to the adult hands that cradle the mold, seemingly in the air above the head. Evidence of makeup lines the eyes of the mold, which is visible as a negative of a face, what a face might look like if it was regarded from the inside of the head outward. The face appears relaxed and gentle, a pose which is necessitated by the working time of the mold materials, which require sitting still for at least a half an hour. I see the interior of the mold as I see the interiors of the homes that are photographed, creased with the evidence of invisible female domestic labor. I imagine these women, photographed in their opaque rituals, to be the same creeping women in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The unnamed protagonist, who is held by her husband in a cruel confinement describes the centripetal subject of her captivation: the wallpaper of the room. "The pattern does move – and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them very hard" (Gilman 15). There is wallpaper in Knit Club as well, peeling, and yellowing, rendering the interior experiences of otherwise impenetrable faces.

At night, when my mother and stepfather are sleeping, I creep and crawl around the apartment, photographing. This is when I have the most freedom and inhabit my most fugitive of roles. I am reoriented to see the apartment as a eulogized space as described by philosopher Gaston Bachelard. I know where every object is in this house. Even after having not lived here in over twenty years. As a child, knowing where everything belonged was essential because everything had its place, as every secret has its casket. Ostensibly I could move the object, but perhaps the object was important in a way that I could never anticipate and perhaps I might forget where the item stood and in what orientation, or fold. "Wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life...In the wardrobe there exists a center of order that protects the entire house against uncurbed disorder. Here order reigns or rather this is the reign of order. Order is not merely geometrical; it can also remember the family history" (Bachelard, 78-79). When they were asleep, I learned where everything belonged. Things that I couldn't put away by myself. Things that never came out of closets. Things that were locked in drawers. Things hidden behind books. No one knows I do this. No one, that is, but the apartment and the chorus of objects who

are privy to the secret habits of the actors that cross their shared stage. In the security of this solitude, the members of this silent ensemble fix me with their penetrating gaze. In his topophilia, Bachelard asks us to “consider an image not as an object and even less as the substitute for an object, but to seize its specific reality...the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions” (Bachelard, XIX). Alone, I see the apartment “the way it appeared to my child’s eye, it is not a building, but is quite dissolved and distributed inside me: here one room, there another, and here a bit of corridor which, however does not connect to two rooms, but is conserved in me in fragmentary form” (Bachelard, 57). This apartment, an inhabited space which transcends geometrical space, transforms into a truer representation of my subjective experience, a home filled with mirrors.



Figure 24: Samara Golden, *The Flat Side of the Knife*, installation image, 2017

In Samara Golden’s installation, *The Flat Side of the Knife*, mirrors create a mise-en-abyme of the physical and psychic reality of the domestic interior (Golden). I myself



have never walked on a mirror, though I see it was once possible to do so in Golden's immersive installation. To experience the work, to move through it is to be walking on glass, specifically a reflective glass that implicates you as a subject and object of the work itself. I am looking to create an immersive experience that is akin to the sixth dimension that Golden's installation occupies, a dimension that invites the past, present and future of spaces, objects and the self to exist simultaneously as one experience. I try to do this first with my images, and second with their arrangements and relationships to each other in space. This exercise feels akin to the process I see in Joanna Piotrowska's *Frantic*. Piotrowska photographs adults engaging in the child's play of fort building, where the architecture and objects of domesticity are used to create another form of shelter within the home. These fragile and fugitive spaces occupy a psychic and psychological world in which the house, and the systems of power which inform houseness and homeness do not offer enough protection. Here, childhood, adulthood, and the fears of houselessness come together in a singular experience of vulnerability (Piotrowska). I too make new homes inside of the home that I photograph, as an exercise engaging the apartment in ways that alert me to the overdetermination of objects and spaces. In this way, I practice creating unexpected and secure spaces outside and inside of my body.



Figure 25: Joanna Piotrowska, *Frantic*, 2017



## *Somatic Therapy – Practices in Neuroplasticity*

My approach to making photographs is foundationally somatic, or so I like to feel. My body is a tool for performance and a collector of information. It is simultaneously irreducibly material and inescapably responsive. In this way, and others, my emotional body is the same material as my physical body. In their introduction to *Feeling Photography*, Brown and Phu describe the materialist frameworks of theorists like Burgin who resisted the use of emotion in photographic criticism. For these thinkers, "...Feeling was an epistemological problem for the late twentieth-century criticism that saw the photograph as fundamentally a 'material product of a material apparatus'" (Brown and Phu, 2). This hierarchical analytic understanding of the image short-circuits when I consider my apparatus of somatic experience, and the mechanics of my bodily knowing. I know fear because I can feel fear. I couldn't think fear without feeling fear. I know where it lives in my throat. I know safety lives elsewhere. But I also know that fear is not an ectoplasm that settles around the body and is otherwise invisible. Fear has a fibrous texture which contracts upon the release of cortisol and adrenaline. I know that information, optical or otherwise, if perceived as a threat will surpass my prefrontal cortex and activate my vagus nerve which runs down my spine. I know comfort because I can feel comfort, in the slowing of my circulation and in the slack of my face as I relax into a body that doesn't need to perform to feel safe. In this way, I will feel before I will know. Feeling is a condition for knowing as light is a condition for seeing.

My embodied relationship to my childhood home can be described as a failure of orientation. The furniture and objects there were made and arranged for some bodies more than others. They were made for bodies that were clean and careful. As such, my body, which was often unkept and prone to bursts of energy, was never fully allowed to phenomenologically extend through the objects present. Sara Ahmed describes how a system of possible movements, which might allow the surface of spaces as well as bodies to take shape, may be limited by the interrelation of bodies and things. Bodies don't inhabit space, rather they haunt space. Bodies themselves are haunted by the repetitions of actions with objects and within space. These rehearsals orient the body to behave and move in familiar ways. Even now I am drawn to comb the rug fringes when I pass through the living room, as if my presence needs to be hidden to

preserve an immaculate arrangement of objects in their place. This failed orientation might be described as a queer orientation, an orientation which does not allow the body to fully turn or subsume the position of heteronormativity but demands an oblique relationship created by bodies out of space. In my embodied knowledge, I can feel the proximity of my inheritances, a certain kind of bodily haunting. “To think of this implicit knowledge as inherited, is to think about how we inherit a relation to place and to placement: at home, ‘things’ are not only done a certain way but the domestic ‘puts things’ in their place. The family itself becomes what we implicitly know as what surrounds us, a dwelling place. We might even say that we ‘inherit’ the family as a form, as an inheritance that is shaped through intergenerational work” (Ahmed, 124-125). Whiteness itself is a social inheritance and straightening device which “corrects” for the unruly lines and shapes of queerness, disability, neurodivergence, and non-whiteness. “Heterosexuality as a compulsory orientation reproduces more than ‘itself’: it is a mechanism for the reproduction of culture, or even of the ‘attributes’ that are assumed to pass along family lines, such as whiteness” (Ahmed, 161). In resisting that regulatory straightness, I forge formations of oblique orientations, new shapes and systems of support. I orient my art practice around this discomfort, this refusal to inherit, this orientation which urges turning around rather than turning towards, which constitutes a new way of dwelling in the world as well as a shattering of generational curses.

The body is aware not only of itself, but its position, movement, momentum, and proximity to everything around it. This kinesthesia is informed by proprioception (two concepts invented at the turn of the twentieth century) by which we are aware of our body’s relationship to itself. I am aware of the “I” through which my sense of self emerges through the process of my breathing, and the sensations it creates in my bones, muscles, and blood. In the early twentieth century, singer, orator and coach Francois Delsarte and author and performer Genevieve Stebbins argued that the mind and body gap is bridged by emotion. The Delsarte System of expression claims that emotion can activate bodily movement and that same bodily movement can generate emotion. Stebbins choreographed pantomimes in order to elicit corresponding responses such as grief, affection, and surprise through “artistic statue posing.” These pantomimes were staged and photographed. There have been moments in my photography practice where I request the exactitude demanded of a Stebbins dictatorial routine in order to achieve something akin to an emotional response. “Hand now expands into conditional attitude nor.-ex, animation; little finger pointing to normal zone of the torso. Forearm bending until little finger is brought to left

side of normal zone. A moment's pause; then the shoulders lift, face expresses surprise; hand drops decomposed, position of arm retained. Now sink elbow, pressing upper arm against side, throwing decomposed hand into relative attitude con.-nor. Unbend elbow, which throws hand out and up into relative attitude ex.-ex” (Foster 106-107). Stebbins would not have been aware at that moment in history that research into the functioning of mirror neurons would corroborate that pantomiming physical actions elicits corresponding sensations, emotional or otherwise, in the brain of those simply witnessing the movement. The term empathy, which is not much older than the term kinesthesia, the experience of merging with an object of contemplation or regard, is rendered not only quotidian, but biologically traceable. “Because the same neurons fire both when an action is performed and when it is witnessed, we are constantly enacting at a neural level the actions we see around us” (164). When I direct my mother to hold a position and she accommodates the request, we are acting in a mutuality of observing and responding, creating resonance that reverberates on our bodies, in our minds, and on those who witness our pantomimes. This process of metabolization, though filtered through the histories, rehearsals and simulations where the self is formulated, allows the observer to rehearse multiple roles via neural pathways through one's own movement as well as those of others.

When I arrange a photograph I do so with the aid of a score, a symbolization of a process which extends over time. This temporal transcendence is similar to myth, ritual, mysticism and religion. The score differs from a script insofar that it is not regimented, does not require memorization nor necessitate an expected outcome. Landscape architect, designer and teacher Lawrence Halprin describes in *The RSVP Cycles* the performative organism facilitated by the score: “The essential characteristic of community in the ecological sense is that all the parts are functioning within their own habitat, that no one element outweighs the other, that each contributes to the whole. Thus, the total ecological community has the characteristics of an organism which lives and grows and reproduces itself in an on-going process” (Halprin, 3). In my photography, a line of action is established and negotiated within the boundaries, resources, and valid subjectivities of all the actors involved. Space is created for these multiple selves which reside within us and between us as well as for the variables of what is unforeseen and unforeseeable. This ecosystem, though, is not unbiased. What is controlled through the score, and what is left to chance, is ultimately determined by me. The photographic work can only be intersubjective to the extent that it reflects the kind of subjectivities that are available and

deemed valuable by me. The organism, despite my best efforts towards collaboration with the actors involved, is composed of versions of myself.



Figure 26: Alana Perino, *The Ritual*, pigment print, 2022

I am often reminded when photographing my mother and stepfather that the parts of them I am most critical of are the parts that I have inherited. I am a fragmented entity, a changeable conglomeration of selves that emerge consciously and unconsciously. Founder of Internal Family Systems Richard Schwartz argues that human systems, in particular the family system, evoke our sub-identities when we are met with rehearsed or familiar circumstances. “The inner family can be vividly brought to life by looking for alliances among various parts/subselves and their ‘cross-generational’ coalitions...extreme relationships are maintained by the frame that each internal family has regarding each other member....Such self-confirming frames or parts,

maintained by ‘more of the same’ circular sequences are characteristic of many internal family relationships, and often are derived from the values and attitudes prevalent in our external families” (Schwartz, 28-29). With work, we can cultivate an inner experience, a Self, which can omnisciently and compassionately observe the fragmented selves who differentiate themselves from each other. This kind of meta-perspective is what I hope to create from, a perspective that is not enmeshed or overly identified with any part. This delicate ecology, which is present in both internal and external family systems can be sabotaged or nurtured as roles are negotiated and renegotiated. In this domestic and internal melodrama, people are neither villains, victims, heroes nor enablers. They inhabit and play all roles simultaneously as they are reflected by and through each other.



Figure 27: Charlie Kaufman, *Synecdoche, New York*. video still, 2008

There is a power in having many roles, as well as a heavy burden. I am awash with both as I play photographer, director, and a leading role. My mother was ready and willing to play a supporting role. She loves the camera, the attention, and my praise elicited when she performs in a way that may be useful for my machinations. Truly, it’s a game. My mother, like me, likes to play pretend, and likes to fuss over beautiful things. She soon took on the roles of assistant, facilitator, and creative collaborator. My stepfather remains in other rooms where he won’t be bothered by the stress of seeing his things moved, but most of all to avoid the bright lights. His

eyes are sensitive, and he is prone to headaches. The apartment is dark to accommodate this, and in order to photograph I must light artificially. Soon, he becomes willing to endure this painful brightness to be photographed as well. I am unsure as to whether he ever wants to be photographed. We make compromises, we create blindfolds for him, turn his face away, allow him to close his eyes. He seems to suggest that he wants to be photographed, to be included, to be fussed over as a beautiful thing. When we include him he is uncomfortable, and yet endures. Caden Cotard pushes against the limits of his personal and professional relationships to create a mimesis of his own life in Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* (Kaufman). I understand the impetus to do this, I myself am doing a version of a play within a play in my mother's apartment. Cotard wants to re-experience a realism that is constantly passing. I want to reimagine an experience that we are constantly rehearsing. Both are *mise-en-abymes* that obfuscate the threshold between fiction and reality. I ask my mother and stepfather to do uncomfortable things. I ask carefully so as not to be refused. The discomfort is common because I ask them to do things differently enough from their usual behavior so that it takes time, if only minutes, to learn. Learning can be a very uncomfortable process.

I saw the *Glass Menagerie* with my mother. Jessica Lange and Sarah Paulsen were stunning in the misty cool light of the apartment stage (*The Glass Menagerie*). The *mise-en-scène* was designed by Tom Pye, but the original instructions for the set were created by Tennessee Williams. Pye's staging, as well as Williams' notes, include the use of projection through screens that create visual separations on the stage and portals into the inner and outer worlds of the characters. They create a heightened reality, a haptic experience as viewed from the audience, that suggests a textuality harkening to something like embodied memory. A projection privileges certain positions in viewing, but a theater audience is relegated to their seats. Here, desire is created. I print and project images (still and otherwise) onto textured and reflective surfaces, linen, silk, plexiglass, and mirrors to engender impulses to view from the side, to engage from an unusual vantage point, to discern so closely that figuration becomes abstract. Suddenly light takes on materiality not only through reflection – a visual experience we have come to expect – but also through refraction – a deflective response inherent in light's movement through mediums and interfaces. I welcome misregistration when I project upon printed works and when I etch onto a surface. In gestural moments like these, I am pulled towards using sound in installation: disembodied voices, arias laid over each other with altered pitches and speeds.



Sound – a sensation that reverberates in space and within bodies – can overwhelm and frustrate the nervous system with its ephemerality. It also has the power to soothe, to smooth what is jagged and abject. These moments of forced perception demand that the body adjust, encounter with curiosity, and approach obliquely in order to understand inherently that mimesis of memory, though replicable to a certain extent, will always be fugitive.



Figure 28: Alana Perino, *Crystal Lamp*, pigment print, etched glass, installation detail, 2023

I assume the mise-en-scène Williams designed with such meticulousness is his mother's apartment. I assume that Lange plays Amanda, as well as his mother. That Laura, with her sensitive constitution, is his sister, who underwent a prefrontal lobotomy. And that Tom, who leaves his family as his father did before him, is Tennessee, who perhaps felt guilt over not

having done more for his sister. The characters, their associated objects and their centers of domestic activity are defined to restrict the mobility of the plot, a melodramatic device. Yet the gestures, staging and words are open enough to allow the audience to imprint their experiences, desires and losses upon it. This is a different kind of projection. I also try to create structures that allow for enough ambiguity to enable an outsider to read upon the work the specificities of what is overdetermined for themselves.



Figure 29: Tennessee Williams, David Leveaux, *The Glass Menagerie*, performance image, 2005

Like Williams, I am interested in having “reduced mobility” in my performances, images and installations. In the production notes of his “memory play” Williams notes “...truth, life or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance (Williams, XIX)” I wonder if Williams felt that he was successful in transforming truth. I wonder if that kind of transformation would feel something akin to an impossible healing. Norman Doidge cites neuroscientist Michael Merzenich’s research that practicing a new skill or visualization, “...under the right conditions, can change hundreds of millions and possibly

billions of the connections between the nerve cells in our brains and maps.’ Once a new brain map is established, new thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can emerge organically, expanding our repertoire when old fears arise” (Wolynn, 50). I wonder if in the restaging, in the reperformance, Williams could experience an embodied activation via mirror neurons firing in unfamiliar ways. The plastic theater and its expressionist techniques create new forms to occupy the inner phenomenology of an audience member. In that witnessing they participate in an eternal neuroplastic metamorphosis. When I photograph in my mother’s apartment, I am in the process of making new shapes, for myself, and for my family. I can feel the nature of our relationships transforming. Even if I can never make this home entirely mine, even if I can never fully heal these lineages, I can at least carve a space for myself where I can fit. I do not know what shape that space or my body will eventually take. I can only feel the cracking of soft tissue as we mold ourselves to fit together.



## *Epilogue*



Figure 22: Alana Perino, *Lap Restaged*, pigment print, 2023

I waited over a year to remake the photograph of myself on my mother's lap. It was physically, emotionally, and compositionally the most difficult picture I have ever made. I was unhappy with the first attempt which generously offered the contours of the living room, its ornaments, and us, its occupiers. My gaze is turned toward the forgotten witness in this scene of my most vulnerable state, my mother's gaze is occupied elsewhere. If my memory of this moment is a true one, insofar as truth is reducible to the impossible objectivity of realism, this is probably how the scene appeared – the morning sun streaming in across the walls, objects easily distinguished from each other, our bodies left in shadow. My second attempt at restaging, though emotionally of the same tenor, is compositionally altered; accommodating for my oblique

relationship with the apartment walls, the furniture, my mother, and with the plasticity of my memory. The light emerges from an impossibly bright source inside of the apartment, a lux ex machina. The objects, figures and space, all actors, collapse in a compulsive circularity of haunting. My mother's gaze remains elsewhere, but my gaze redirects towards a projected self that directs the scene, a self that is learning to take on unfamiliar forms in the pursuit of new repertoires. There has always been a sharp pain in my chest, located to the right of my sternum. It has lingered there since the moment that inspired this image, a moment which has signified the complexity, tenderness, and grief of these domestic and familial enmeshments. This pain, which would flare at the suggestion of an impossible relationship, has since become a memory.







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