

Have you seen your mother, baby?

In Camera Lucida, philosopher Roland Barthes describes, but refuses to show, a photograph of his mum as a girl. Forty years later, a photobook pursues the mystery, writes Sean O'Hagan

There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it.”

This poignant recollection occurs in Camera Lucida by the French thinker Roland Barthes. Published in 1980, it remains, alongside Susan Sontag’s On Photography, one of the most influential books ever written on photography. In 2004, it was made into a work of art by Idris Khan, whose single mysterious photographic image is titled Every Single Page of Roland Barthes’s Book Camera Lucida. It haunts the writings of the late WG Sebald and, in 2009, it inspired Photography Degree Zero, an anthology of writings on Barthes.

The passage above describes Barthes’s discovery of a portrait of his mother, Henriette, aged five, in which she is standing next to her seven-year-old brother “in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a winter garden in those



The Kiss, 1984, by Barbara Diener



The photograph found by Sean O'Hagan

days”. For Barthes, grief-stricken by his mother’s recent death, the snapshot somehow evokes her “unique being”. He writes: “I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother.”

The appearance of the Winter Garden Photograph is a pivotal moment in Camera Lucida, shifting the narrative away from the theoretical towards a personal meditation on loss and photography’s intrinsic relationship to mortality. Barthes had begun writing the book soon after Henriette’s death in 1977 – it had just been published when Barthes himself died in hospital after being struck by a laundry van in Paris. Although the snapshot initially made Barthes exclaim: “There she is!”, his analysis leads him to question the complex, bittersweet nature of that epiphany. Like all family photographs, it is essentially a tantalising glimpse of the irretrievable, a cruel reminder of “what has ceased to be”; like them it evokes a past we often have no lived memory of, but also a sense of our own encroaching mortality.



Mom, 1988, by Alec Soth



Ka-Man Tse's Holding this photograph with Yeema and Yee-jeung



Winter Garden by Dan Estabrook

The picture is also the mystery at the heart of Camera Lucida. In a narrative punctuated by images by the likes of André Kertész, Richard Avedon and Alfred Stieglitz, the shot of his mother as a girl is nowhere to be seen. “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me,” he writes by way of explanation. “For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ordinary...”

In the 40 years since, by virtue of its very absence, the Winter Garden Photograph has attained an almost mythical aura, so much so that some critics have questioned that it ever existed at all. It has become firmly lodged in the collective consciousness of photography students and practitioners through the strange, melancholy drift of Barthes’s writing. I cannot be the only photography buff who, while rooting in a junk shop or a flea market stall, has happened

on an old, faded photograph of a girl from another time and thought immediately of Henriette.

In May 2017, I began rifling through a box of old photos in search of one such image, having received an email from Odette England, an American photographer and academic. It was a request “to submit a single photograph to the Winter Garden Photograph project ... a reflection on Barthes’s unpublished snapshot of his mother”.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY THE ARTISTS

I can't be the only buff who, rooting in a flea market, found a photo and thought of Henriette

Now, three years later and just in time for Camera Lucida’s 40th anniversary, England’s ambitious project has come to fruition in a photobook comprising the responses of more than 200 photographers, writers and artists. Entitled Keeper of the Hearth – the French meaning of the name, Henriette – it is by turns fascinating and bemusing. “Every single response was included,” elaborates England. “Forefront in my mind was the question: ‘Who am I to say what constitutes a valid or worthwhile interpretation? I didn’t weed anything out.’”

My contribution is a small portrait mounted on time-blemished card of a young girl from another time, sitting on a chair in a garden, wearing a white cotton smock and flower-bedecked hat. A flea market find, it is, in my mind at least, a portrait of the young Henriette, poised and at ease in the camera’s gaze. On the opposite page, a fragment from Camera Lucida, also chosen by me, reads “... she triumphed over this ordeal of placing herself in front of the lens ... with discretion ... She did not struggle with her image, as I do with mine: she did not suppose herself.” That last phrase, describing the young Henriette, is pure Barthes, astute and playful. It evokes her youthful poise and confidence – and, by extension, her breeding – and Barthes’s own discomfort when posing for a portrait, a discomfort many of us will recognise.

The American documentary photographer Alec Soth responded with a portrait of his own mother stretched out on a sofa, beneath a wall of family portraits, one of which shows him as a young boy, grinning and clasping a ball. His text reads, “Twenty years have passed and so much has changed. But that boy and the way he looks at his mother are pretty much the same.” Soth tells me the older he gets, the more he thinks, like Barthes, that “every photograph has the aura of death”. “The irony about my selection is that my mom is still alive,” adds Soth, “Nevertheless, when I look at that picture now, what I see is approaching death. And not just for her!”

This sense of time’s inexorable passing is something of a constant. German-born photographer Barbara Diener submitted a picture of her two-year-old self kissing her father through what looks, on first glance, like prison bars. The snap was in fact

taken on the stairs of their home by Diener’s mother, who titled it on the back: The Kiss. “I always thought it was an interesting photograph – strange and tender at the same time,” says Diener. “It also works metaphorically for the kind of relationship my father and I had. We were close, but there were barriers we could never quite get around.”

Since her father’s death 13 years ago, the snapshot has inevitably taken on an added resonance. “Losing him was one of those life-changing, earth-shattering events I am still processing today. Indirectly, my projects since his death convey a sense of loss or longing.”

There is longing, too, in the two photographs chosen by Ka-Man Tse. The first is a black and white group from 1964, taken by a relative at a family wedding. It is, she says, the earliest existing photograph of her mother, who was 10 years old at the time. “There she is,” says Tse, “sitting at the end of the table, looking directly at the camera, a child amongst a table of adults, all women.” For her, it carries a similar resonance to the one Barthes identified in the snapshot of his mother. “It’s the chicken in the middle of the table, it’s the look in her eyes, the white socks and her shoes,” she elaborates, referencing Barthes idea of the “punctum” – the incidental detail that can unsettle the viewer with its poignancy.

Tse’s other submitted image shows five female hands cradling that family snapshot. “The hands on the right side of the frame are my aunt, who was 71 at the time,” says Tse. “She is in the photograph she is holding, but as a teenager. The middle hand is mine, and I’m wearing my own wedding ring in Hong Kong where gay marriage it is neither legal or recognised.”

The past haunts the work of Dan Estabrook, a conceptual artist who uses 19th-century processing techniques to make images that combine photography and collage. “For the last few years, I’ve been using tintypes,” he says, referring to an early process in which chemicals were used to create images on metal, “which I cut up and reassemble like jigsaw puzzles.”

In Estabrook’s collage, the young girl in the foreground has no face, her features having been replaced by an oval of polished silver that is a kind of mirror. “To be honest,” he says, “I was a little embarrassed at how literally I interpreted the project – I just wanted to make this unseen thing. The silver is there, I suppose, for all the self-reflection the image carried for Barthes, and for us now.”

Keeper of the Hearth attests to the continuing resonance of an image none of us have seen and that may not even exist, and to the singular spell of Barthes’s odd, mischievous, melancholy take on photography and its seemingly intrinsic relationship to death. For all that, one has to wonder if Camera Lucida’s importance attests above all to the power of words to evoke the ineffable in ways that photography simply cannot.

Keeper of the Hearth by Odette England is published by Schilt.



Shame factor ... Kai Luke Brummer, left, in Moffie

‘It’s a triggering film’

Moffie, about a gay conscript in the South African army, gave one critic a panic attack – but director Oliver Hermanus is unrepentant. By Guy Lodge

From an outside perspective, South African cinema tends to announce itself through occasional breakout films rather than consistently visible directorial careers. Back in the 1980s, The Gods Must Be Crazy was a global hit that didn’t do much to raise the profile of its director, Jamie Uys. Fourteen years ago, gritty township fable Tsotsi won the country one of its first Oscars, only to send director Gavin Hood directly into a proficent but culturally anonymous Hollywood career.

In Oliver Hermanus, however, the country has produced its most significant auteur in generations. The 36-year-old Capetonian studied at the London Film School, but returned home for his art. His 2009 graduation film Shirley Adams, a tough mother-son portrait set on the Cape Flats, launched a career marked by global critical acclaim. He stepped up to Cannes with Beauty, a startling study of a closeted Afrikaner that made it to UK cinemas; his third film, The Endless River, did not.

Moffie, Hermanus’s poetic yet visceral fourth feature, feels like the one that will cement him in the contemporary arthouse canon. A war film that returns to the anxious queer terrain of Beauty, it has been collecting awards and plaudits since premiering at Venice last autumn. It’s his most accomplished film yet, though not his most personal: it adapts André Carl van der Merwe’s semi-autobiographical 2006 novel, based on his experiences as a gay teenage conscript sent to fight in the South African border war in the early 80s.

A gay director born after the events depicted in the film, Hermanus was intrigued by the idea of exploring a regimented realm denied to men of colour in the apartheid era, while finding common ground in his closeted white protagonist’s suffering under a vicious Afrikaner patriarchy. “The subject matter did bother me at first,” he says from his home outside Cape Town, where he’s self-isolating under coronavirus lockdown. “It was my mum who actually said to me, ‘Why make another film about white men in apartheid South Africa?’”

“The challenge is to find the centre of it that resonates with you completely. And for me, that became not just about the character’s sexuality, but about the shame factor: the fact that under this regime, boys were sort of shamed into becoming a certain kind of man. Because we

keep asking the question, especially in South Africa: where does our toxic masculinity come from? When I looked at it that way, as an exploration of our past that informs our present, I was more comfortable with it.”

Van der Merwe’s novel had a more defined romantic throughline; though Hermanus’s film outlines an attraction between protagonist Nicholas (Kai Luke Brummer) and a fellow misfit recruit, he deliberately downplayed the love story. “A key rule of mine from the very beginning was that there was going to be no kind of conventional love scene: it wasn’t going to be a relationship drama,” he says. “It was going to be more about our connection to this problematic era, and the generation of men who lived through that.”

In doing so, Hermanus was prepared to be confrontational – taking the book’s title, a common Afrikaans anti-gay slur, as his cue on that front. “I know it’s a very triggering film – it had to be,” he admits. “We’ve had an overwhelming range of reactions to the film in South Africa: some from gay men who had been to the army and felt identified and recognised, some from men who don’t necessarily acknowledge the fact that they are still traumatised. One member of the press had a panic attack at a screening. These are common experiences but they haven’t been widely addressed in South African culture.”

Though the film is set in the whites-only domain of the army, Hermanus doesn’t skimp on depicting anti-black violence: “It was a dangerous choice, I know, to have all of the black characters be physical objects, victimised on the sidelines. But that’s how it was: there’s a white gaze there, and we needed to see that.” He cites inspiration from the 2010 Abdellatif Kechiche historical drama Black Venus – which depicted the white objectification and abuse of black South African performer Saartjie Baartman, to divisive effect.

Hermanus is prepared for pushback, but doesn’t see South African cinema evolving via kid-glove treatment of its own ugly history. “The challenge in the South African film landscape right now is that it still seems to exist very much within racial boundaries: white money making nostalgic pieces for white people that are devoid of black people, and then you’ve got black film-makers making romantic comedies and genre films about black lives,” he says. “I decided we were going to put the world in the headspace of white South Africa in the 80s, to show what that looked like from the inside.”

Moffie is out on 24 April on Curzon Home Cinema

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