Currents in 21st century literature

Casus Familia or the eroded family in the photographs of Frank Rodick

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The following is excerpted and translated from the article "Currents in 21st century literature," of which the section "Casus Familia or the eroded family in the photographs of Frank Rodick" is part. Images and links have been added to facilitate reading. All images ©Frank Rodick.

We will focus on the way in which the Canadian photographer Frank Rodick investigates, through a reconstructions of old family portraits (the exhibition *Casus Familia*, 2018), the links between face, subjectivity and memory….

Casus Familia or the eroded family in the photographs of Frank Rodick

The Canadian artist Frank Rodick exhibited in 2018 at the Haroldo Conti Cultural Center an exhibition called *Casus Familia*, made up of a set of photographs of his parents and himself, which are accompanied with small texts. Photographs that, in one way or another, give an account of the history of the family, intersected by the Holocaust.

In this case, we find the relationship between the images and the texts that accompany them suggestive, which at the same time refer to larger essays — published on his website — where he writes about the creative processes behind the portraits of the three members of the family.

Frank Rodick is an only child, and a survivor of his parents. His mother's family was exterminated in the concentration camps and this event had a notable impact on her, who traumatically transmitted it to her son. His father was an amateur photographer and it is mostly from those old family album photos that the artist constructs his work.

A first impression of the series of portraits of Frances, his mother, and Joseph, his father, is that of witnessing an

untitled self, no. 6

experience of the sinister and desolate. This strangeness deepens when we observe the series of self-portraits, *untitled selves*, made by the photographer, which cannot be read without having seen the series of his parents; in *untitled selves* his features appear blurred, almost erased, where the beginning and the end of the face are confused, disintegrating as if they were grains of sand.

Frances (red pearls), 2012

Joseph (Did I fall?), 2015

His essays reveal something of this quandary as he recounts the tremendous, painful bond of love and anger with his mother — marked by the heavy inheritance of extermination — and of a certain indifference, distrust and apathy of his father towards him. We may argue that the faces are constructed to generate something else, a construction from that complex family inheritance, plagued by fears and a certain loneliness. And also as a way of exploring the strangeness that bonds generate, in that game of knowledge and ignorance of others and of oneself, despite family bonds.

The essays are a kind of affective map where the artist goes through a series of complex, contradictory emotions about life with his parents, the dense plot of those connections, his own subjective collapses. At the same time, this family memory does not cease being connected to the traumatic conflicts and agonies of history, where the intimate is within the fold of a vaster historical exterior that pierces bodies, languages, and affections.

In his series of portraits Rodick insists on extracting meaning from those old photos, forcing them to reveal silenced things, as if treating that material (through processes that, in the case of the parents, add oxidized layers of paint, while in his self-portraits, the process is reversed, scraped and removed, turning the contours almost into dust) could open memory towards unexplored terrain, untraveled by language, that in turn opens the image towards some astounding memory where, in the words of the artist, the memory acquires more flesh than the reality of the past.

What do these faces transmit? What tensions do they show? In what way does the game between contours and shapes play out, between the features that outline them and those that break them up, cross them out or erase them?

Part of the series is about his mother, Frances. Rodick states that "My mother was born in Canada. Her father, my grandfather, was in Canada but his family was in Europe during the war and they were all killed in the Holocaust. This of course became a very important story for my mother and it was a dominating motif of her entire life. It also became something crucial for me. It all starts with that." And regarding his father he adds: "I wanted to do something about the story of my father. Each photo, except the last one, which is a photo I took about thirty minutes after he died, shows different points in his life: as a child, as an adult…. I photographed what he wrote [on his deathbed] and I included it in the portraits..." (From the *Perfil* newspaper interview: "Three generations crossed by the memory of the Holocaust in a photographic exhibition,", 08/09/2018).

Joseph (I am not ready to go), 2015

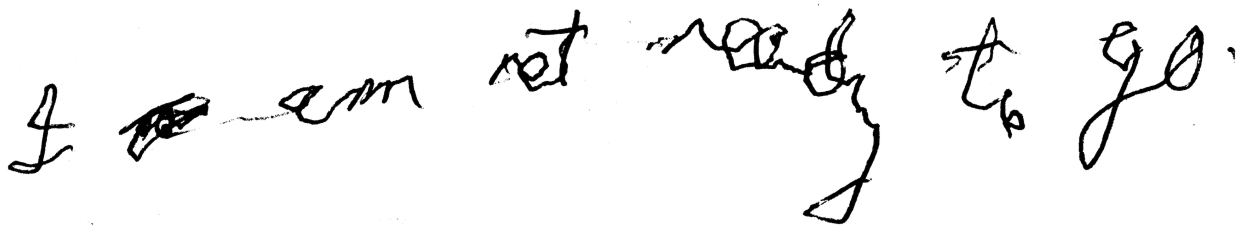
Joseph (2004/09/26/00/15), 2015

Frances (stone-blind), 2012

Frances (you must console me), 2015

We can glimpse, under the layers of acid, lines and stains on the image — especially, on the eyes — the face of a young woman, beautiful in appearance. The contrast with the treatment given by the artist is, to say the least, disturbing. Only the outlines of that young face remain since her countenance is destroyed, or, more accurately, eroded. It may be that some of what she suffered in life, such as Alzheimer's, dementia and memory loss, is inscribed in that erosion, as well as all of her family's past, the catastrophe of the Nazi extermination — whose monstrosity has tormented and filled her with lifelong fear — and led to that complex bond with her son. The passage of time becomes matter that erodes everything, a cluster of affects that cannot be translated outward except in an extremely intense way, which operates by simultaneous strokes, saturated layers on that face that was once portrayed in its youth and that, as says the son, despite everything remained the face of the the most important person in his life. Of his father, Rodick says, these images are embedded with text written by that man, a few days before he died, on a sheet of paper, due to his inability to speak. The last photo of his father (*Joseph [2004/09/26/00/15]*, 2015, above) is the post mortem image — just like in his mother's series — now without vision, in a place where there are no words.

The entire series can be read as a gesture by the son to unravel what kind of a man his father was, a man who endured a childhood of poverty, illness, losing a much-loved older sister who died at a very young age, and war looming on all sides. The artist's questions revolve around investigating the mistrust and disaffection that he experienced from his father throughout his life.



"I am not ready to go"
Detail from Joseph (I am not ready to go), 2015

Finally, a brief comment — for reasons of length — about the series of self-portraits [the series *untitled selves*] that acquires further meanings when we connect it with the previous two series. If, in his parents' portraits, Rodick worked by adding layers, erasures and disintegrations, when it comes to his own face he works by stripping and subtracting (cutting the features, scraping them until they become imperceptible). There are no longer defined contours, there is a stripping of all density, color and texture in the images, a kind of erasure that is denoted by small dust particles, by dots on the paper that are disappearing. The photographer suggests that this was, somehow, the image missing from the series of his parents, of his and their collapses and successive collapses. In both processes, the iconic value of photography is deconstructed, including the meanings attributed to a "family album," and an unknown future is entered. The erosion of specific family traits reveals the non-human presence of time: of what disappears, or of what remains when the parents are gone. Rodick's process invents other elements for these eroded faces, suggesting motion that does not stop.

untitled self, no. 79 and *untitled self, no. 23*, 2017

FR (persona, no. 1) and *FR (persona, no. 2)*, 2014

97532, no. 1 (Frances in death), 2012