

That's not the way she was at all

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Gales Gallery, York University

Edition of 30

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exhibition description

1. **I am my grandmother's shomer** (2009) archival photographs, photo album, wax, ash
2. **I never recognized her except in fragments** (2009) wax, archival photograph
3. **You, the absent** (2009) vintage suitcase, fluorescent light, plexiglass
4. **I feel better now** (2009) vintage suitcase, wax, archival photos, ink, collage

artist statement

"I recognized a region of her face, a certain relation of nose and forehead, the movement of her arms, her hands. I never recognized her except in fragments, which is to say that I missed her being, and that therefore I missed her altogether. It was not she, yet it was no one else. I would have recognized her among thousands of other women, yet I did not "find" her. [...] To say, confronted with a certain photograph "That's almost the way she was!" was more distressing than to say, confronted with another, "That's not the way she was at all." (65-66)

Departing from Roland's Barthes's words, I began to re-examine the conventions of photography and the materiality of photographs with this body of work. As Barthes relates his devastating experience trying to recapture his mother through a series of images, I couldn't help but relate his experience to the loss of my grandmother, a Holocaust survivor. As he "was struggling among images partially true and therefore totally false," (66) I began to see how none of the images collected of my grandmother could begin to encapsulate her identity, or could even begin to articulate the

spaces and places that I remembered her belonging to. The work also began to involve other individuals that I have loved and lost in my life including my late stepsister and a past partner. With their loss in mind, I began questioning the ultimate stability of the photograph as image and document. How can this fetishized indexical object be as fleeting and ephemeral as memory itself? I was simultaneously disillusioned and reinvigorated by the medium of photography precisely because of its malleability; and, thus, inspired experiments and photographic explorations with sculpture and installation, particularly materials such as wax.

The importance of raw materials became a central part of the image's fragmented space of identification. Wax is used both as a substance to preserve the longevity of an object and a substance that obscures and obliterates the image it attempts to protect. This inherent dichotomy is a central contradiction that is played out through many of the works. Also, on a more basic level, wax references the Jewish tradition of lighting Shabbat or Yertzeit candles. For instance, *I feel better now* is an object-livre that attempts to play with these contradictions as the suitcase is filled with wax, submerging and solidifying silhouetted cutouts in a static way. Conceived as a work meant to be opened and read like a book or graphic novel, *I feel better now* contains excerpts from Art Spiegelman's seminal graphic novel MAUS. The excerpt depicts a pivotal moment of meta self-reflexivity where the artist is ruminating on the success of his work and confronting the various problematic aspects of his practice as he has to deal with press and movie deals. Quoting a particular line from the novel, I am also becoming self-reflective and commenting on the nature of my work. Has my work been reduced to a cathartic therapy session? Do I have the right to appropriate a family member's trauma as the basis for my work? Do I feel better now that the work is complete?

Also, fire (more precisely the absence or remnants of fire) is also an important material to acknowledge. It consumes the images, destroying the object, emphasizing absence. *You, the absent*, also attempts to convey the overwhelming texture of absence through all-consuming light (the carnal medium that links all individuals to one another in photography). The very absence of a discernable image creates an emotional and psychological distance that is reflected and refracted throughout the space. Partially destroyed by fire and preserved with wax and alternately hidden and revealed, *I am my grandmother's shomer* searches to reconstruct a more personally meaningful image someone I have lost. Literally, turning the convention of a family album on its head, the work reflects the cyclical and conflicting nature of trauma; since, in the words of Margerite Duras, "photographs promote forgetting." (89) However, the burned and looped pages suggest another paradigm of trauma, where memories persist and haunt in ways that are

unforgettable. Here, the forced attempts of forgetting are ultimately futile.

As a whole, the exhibition thematically explores the “unbearability of memory” (Hirsch 32) as seen through the lens of a camera. The crux of the exhibition lies with a predicament described by Barthes as he recognizes a region of his mother’s face or a recognizable mannerism, but fails to ‘find’ her. In a way, this exhibition is a futile attempt to recapture the memory of those that I have lost and continue to mourn. Part requiem, part cathartic exercise, I must contend I am not satisfied with saying that “that’s not the way she was at all.”

works cited

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Bio

Jessica Thalmann was born and raised in Thornhill, Ontario, and is working towards her Bachelor of Fine Arts from York University. She is the 2009/2010 recipient of the Willowdale Group of Artists Painting Award and has shown and galleries such as Whippersnapper Gallery, Keep 6 Contemporary, the Arts and Letters Club, the Bata Shoe Museum, Gallery 1313, Art Gallery of York University, Sleeping Giant Gallery and Toronto's Outdoor Art Exhibition. She was also a curated artist for this year's Nuit Blanche 2009 with a project entitled "Take Shelter": a project that deals with issues of homelessness poverty in urban spaces.

