

Artists' Notebook

SHOOTING FROM THE HIP

Cape Town Artists' already-established profile received a boost earlier this year when her photographic installation *Lost and Found* scooped the FNB Vita Art Prize 2000. Her dazzling work comprises a series of large digital prints on silk organza.

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Terry Kurgan became a talking point in 1997 when her photographic installation entitled *I'm the King of the Castle...* featured in an exhibition called *Purity and Danger*, curated by artist Penny Siopis. The work featured naked and semi-naked sepia-toned prints of her son Jonah playing childhood games for his mother's lens, and it raised many issues on the perceived innocence and purity of childhood. Responses ranged from hysterical accusations of child pornography and exploitation to dismissals of the work as "dressed up" Hallmark images.

Others however, praised Kurgan, not only for raising questions about sentimental depictions of childhood, but also for the way in which she aggressively confronted the criticism. The title of the piece *I'm the King of the Castle ...* echoes a popular children's' playground rhyme and allows us to mentally fill in the blanks: if we accept that it is Jonah declaring himself 'King' then perceivably it is us who constitute the 'dirty rascal'. In this way Kurgan pre-empted many of her accusers, provoking us to ask, who holds the power in these images? Is it Jonah flaunting his toy guns and face paint; is it Kurgan herself as producer of the image; or is it the spectator, as the one who interprets the photographs?

The relationship between a visual record of a moment, and its absence once it has been lost to memory, is a common thread running through Kurgan's recent work. This obsession with the retrieval of memory is conveyed with a quiet but compelling sensitivity to the media that she employs in her works. Her very personal experiences and explorations are given material form through her use of print-based media, presented as installations that are not exclusively the domain of photography.

Trained in the United States and at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at UCT (where she completed her Masters degree), Kurgan specialized in layered lithographic portraits, sometimes using up to 18 hand-drawn plates at a time to produce rich, multicoloured prints. It was after the birth of daughter Jessie that she began to explore, through photography, what she terms a "self-conscious maternal subjectivity", a phrase which she defines

"as a mother who records, as a subject, a system in which she has been constructed as an object".

Psychoanalytic readings of her work are not out of place. In fact, Kurgan embraces both photographic and psychoanalytic theory as her fundamental starting points. "Culture values a maternity that casts a mirroring look at the child, supporting the child's subject formation. The notion of mutual recognition is very threatening and unsettling. Most models of maternity are very disempowering. But, I never feel as though I am revealing anything about my own inner family life. My family are the objects, not the subjects of the work – what or whom I use to tease out other issues. Some of the images of my children are fictions and many of them are performed; we collaborate in telling some sort of story, but not necessarily one that narrates anything to do with them or me. "

The politics of the reproductive body, and the reactions to her work on *Purity and Danger* prompted Kurgan to put together a traveling national exhibition in 1998 called *Bringing Up Baby*. The reproductive body and the rights of women were under the spotlight in the open parliamentary debates about the new abortion laws – "sex, pregnancy, birth, childhood; issues that are usually reserved for conversations amongst women in domestic spaces," says Kurgan. "There is a frustrating absence of men dealing with these issues. It was difficult because I really didn't want this to be identified as a women's show".

Kurgan repeatedly returns to "a place where private experience shades into public performance and vice versa. I do this to confuse the distinctions between them, and also because, once private experiences are out in the public realm, they carry with them in their wake a host of related political and gender issues. In South Africa today particularly, greater openness about private experience would go a long way toward making the public realm a more human place".

This public realm has presented opportunities for Kurgan to manoeuvre into the worlds of corporate and conference presentations, with commissions for the Telkom *Disability with Dignity* campaign, the conference *Beyond Racism*, held in Cape Town this year and the permanent installation of Maternal Exposures in Cape Town's Mowbray Maternity and Groote Schuur hospitals. Originally produced for *Bringing Up Baby*, the texts and images composed from the artist's interviews with patients and hospital staff are presented as a series of backlit, transparent digital prints that read as luminous grids of experience.

Kurgan's work is not simply photography, but *about* photography. The large scale of the work, and the context in which it is placed are of the utmost importance. *Family Affairs* an exhibition held last year at the Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet in Cape Town, won Kurgan her Vita nomination, and paved the way for *Lost and Found* which breaks new ground in her search to give form to subjective and collective experiences of familial relationships, memory and desire.

In an e-mail correspondence between Kurgan and her mother included on the show, she says: " I've continued to regularly photograph the kids. Sometimes they really get into it and other times they resist. But, what's

interesting is that they are by now well aware of the codes and conventions of familial looking, and very often compose themselves into that closed circuit. Jonah protectively enfolds his little sister and tells her to smile – well aware of the (adult) need to record a happy childhood! Just recently though, early one morning and out of the shower, they turned the camera on me, insisting on photographing me without my clothes on. There I am looking horrified, thinking, oops, my stretch marks, varicose veins – vanity, gravity! And Jonah, next to me, clothed and utterly delighted at my exposure”.

The e-mail was sent in response to three ‘generational’ photographs of Kurgan sent to the artist by her mother – her grandmother holding her mother, her mother holding her, and Kurgan holding her daughter Jessie. The images were posed in exactly the same way, and all were taken when their respective daughters were one year old. They are conventionally posed, typical mother and child portraits, but, Kurgan comments, these images seem “like so many veils”, referring to how photographs can so often betray one’s experience of memory.

Lost and Found came close to giving substance to these “veils” of experience. Kurgan made a selection of photographs from boxes of family snapshots – “the ones that never made it into the albums” - included two images she found in a second hand photographic equipment store. “They are the photographs that families take of each other in informal domestic environments. All from the late 50s and 60s, in the particular Kodak colour of that era”. Kurgan’s children don’t feature. Rather, it is now Kurgan as a child, her extended family and strangers that loom like ghosts from a recent past in inter-layered, diaphanous screens.

Taking photographs is not simply an action of point-and-shoot. It may be the way we snap family events and holidays for ‘posterity’, but it’s also about how photographs construct images of ourselves, loved ones and strangers that makes for a compelling study in interpersonal relationships. Whether Terry Kurgan is exploring her role as ‘mother’, or delving into forgotten family archives, these images represent what she describes as “the impossibility of the desire to hold or contain some concrete reminder of present experience. Photographs are almost always a record of something or someone no longer there”. In her work, that ‘Kodak’ moment gains an edge of poignancy and introspection.