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ART REVIEW | 'FAMILY PICTURES'

Blood Unsimple: The Ties That Bind, in All Their Complexity

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Correction Appended

The family has provided precious material for writers from Proust to Austen to Jonathan Franzen, but visual art has been somewhat less devoted to the subject. The 19th-century Parisian avant-garde model for living was to escape home and family as quickly as possible, before they zapped your artistic mojo. Gauguin was the paragon; Émile Zola's 1886 novel "The Masterpiece," based on Cézanne's early days in Paris, offers further confirmation.

Photography is the exception to that rule. Long moments spent posing for the camera have become standard components of modern family life. The history of fine-art photography includes many photographers whose practice flourished in the bosom of the family: Julia Margaret Cameron, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Edward Weston.

"Family Pictures," organized by Jennifer Blessing, curator of photography at the [Guggenheim Museum](#), sounds ripe then with possibilities. The results are more mixed. The exhibition is drawn from the museum's collection, which explains some of its exclusions and limitations. Many artists you associate with contemporary photography and the family are not in attendance: Richard Bellingham, Tina Barney, Malerie Marder; Mary Ellen Mark, famous for her photographs of twins, taken at the "Twins Days" festival in Twinsburg, Ohio.

There is also a sense of false advertising in the exhibition's title. "Family," after all, implies networks and relationships, complicated connections, conflicts and alliances. But the museum's news release extends the exhibition's exploration into "representation of families and children in contemporary art and video." Images of children, one quickly realizes, can operate as a completely different genre.

A good portion of the work falls under this rubric. Rineke Dijkstra's "Beach Portraits" of adolescents posing awkwardly against stark seascape horizons are isolated (and isolating) images of children on the threshold of adulthood. One doesn't think about family when gazing at these photographs.

Hellen van Meene, like Ms. Dijkstra, makes portraits of adolescents. Anna Gaskell's fairy-tale images explore similar terrain. Loretta Lux's eerie images of youngsters suggest childhood as an alien planet, orbiting in a galaxy parallel to adulthood. Robert Mapplethorpe's images of exposed, naked (rather than happily nude) children are unsettling in a different way. Collier Schorr's black-and-white photo of a young man's torso is both an updated homage to Weston's photographs of his son and part of a larger project exploring gender roles.

Sally Mann is perhaps the best-known contemporary photographer of children, specifically her own. The relationship between photographer and subject is hence fraught with all kinds of complications. Ms. Mann, represented here by black-and-white photographs from the late 1980s and early 1990s of her ethereally gorgeous children (now grown), has been accused of everything from neglect to child abuse. The questions raised by her dual role as artist and mother, simultaneous protector and potential exploiter of the family, and her choice of family as the central focus of artistic practice, remain vitally interesting.

Selections from Tracey Moffatt's photo-and-text series "Scarred for Life" present a picture of the family as a site of psychic damage, violence and abuse. Thomas Struth's family portraits adopt an opposite strategy, presenting the viewer with blank-faced groups in which no dirty secrets are revealed. Nonetheless, his photograph of "The Richter Family 1, Cologne" from 2002 presents a fascinating image of the famed septuagenarian painter Gerhard Richter with his third wife, the painter Sabine Moritz, and their two young children.

Freud, of course, was the great family theorist. Some of his famous concepts, including family romance, regression and projection, are explored by Janine Antoni, Patty Chang and Gillian Wearing. Ms. Antoni's photographs of her parents dressed as each other and transformed with makeup, wigs and prosthetics offer a sly, grown-up commentary on the gender identifications and confusions children experience via their parents. Ms. Wearing suggests a creepy regression by remaking old family photos. Her "Self-Portrait at Three Years Old" from 2004 is a fascinating attempt to reclaim lost youth by donning a latex mask and wig and posing as "herself." Ms. Chang's video diptych "In Love," which runs in reverse and depicts her sharing an onion with each of her parents, their eyes half closed and mouths uncomfortably close, is an unmistakably erotic exercise in which eating becomes a stand-in for other taboos.

A characteristically eerie nocturnal photograph by Gregory Crewdson depicting a family lounging outside their mobile home carries vague Freudian overtones — mostly to the uncanny — although Mr. Crewdson's work feels more like a serviceable inclusion here than an essential one. While his photographs often feature bits and pieces of families, their real subjects tend to be suburban and exurban alienation and malaise.

Contemporary debates over what constitutes a family are reflected in photographs by Catherine Opie and Nan Goldin. Ms. Opie's powerful "Self-Portrait/Nursing" from 2004 echoes images of the Madonna and Child, only here the mother is a large, tattooed lesbian. A closer look reveals the word "pervert" scratched onto the artist's bare chest in elaborate gothic script.

Ms. Goldin's photo of "Gilles and Gotscho at home, Paris" from 1992, in which Gotscho, the companion of Ms. Goldin's Paris art dealer at the time, Gilles Dusein, wears a woman's camisole, also challenges the notion of a family as a dual-gendered unit. (A well-known photo from a year later by Ms. Goldin, not in this exhibition, captures Gotscho leaning over to kiss an emaciated, AIDS-stricken Gilles.)

One of the great things about "Family Pictures" is the presence of a large number of female creators, an antidote to the recent spate of gallery and museum shows that have regressed to exhibiting predominantly men. The downside is that women have always been viewed as keepers of hearth and home, even in their art. In the 19th century artists like Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot painted their families because they didn't have access to racy cafes, absinthe drinkers and prostitutes. With this in mind, "Family Pictures" is one show in which a few more men and their perspectives would be welcome.

"Family Pictures" continues through April 16 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street, (212) 423-3500.

Correction: February 22, 2007

A picture caption on Tuesday with an art review of "Family Pictures," at the Guggenheim Museum, referred incompletely to the photograph described as "Mom and Dad," by Janine Antoni. The image shown is part of a triptych entitled "Mom and Dad"; it is not the complete work.