

Obscuring and Celebrating

Caitlin Lamb, 2006

This work is about family and place. I chose to work from family photographs, most of which were inherited through my paternal grandparents, partially because I wanted to make paintings and drawings that my parents would have a response to and partially because it has been on my mind. My dad's side of the family is from Michigan City, North Dakota, which is an incredibly small town. There are only about two hundred people living there now. Like many small Midwestern towns it has been suffering a gradual economic collapse. I have witnessed this deterioration since I was a child. It culminated for me with the death of my grandfather, seven years ago. Deaths in the family and in some sense the death of the town have preoccupied me for a while, I even wrote an essay on it for my application to Earlham. But I have a hard time being articulate about emotional matters and writing about it was never satisfying. Once I got the idea to make it the subject of paintings and drawings I felt like that would be very fulfilling and perhaps disconnect my persistent fixation.

When I first looked at the photographs a couple years ago I was completely fascinated. I was struck by this conflicting sense of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Seeing older relatives as children, people I did not know but resembled my cousins, and the same small town, only younger and more full of life. I was struck also by a sense of sadness at the impermanence of things, as well as a feeling of dispossession. I tried to bring some of these thoughts into the work for the senior show. But of course, I also responded to a sense of familial connection. For me the works are also an affirmation and a celebration; a reconstruction of a family narrative.

I do not have an overly conceptual approach to things. If a work can be easily explained, I feel like that can render the work itself somewhat pointless. Of course I have these ideas that I work with, but another part of it is emotional response and expression. This year I became conscious of something that I think Mark has been trying to impress on us. I think the best mindset to have when you are trying to make a painting is to endeavor to make work that is important to you; that you think of yourself as the audience first, rather than thinking of your goal as making something “great.”

I worked with different mediums, painting, drawing and encaustic, and etching and monotypes because I really enjoy each one and I want to develop greater proficiency in each medium. The freedom we were given in painting class to experiment with different mediums and pursue our own ideas was very beneficial to me. I chose to make relatively small paintings and drawings because I like the intimacy of that scale and I feel that I am more accomplished in smaller works. I think that seeing the small works in Mark’s show for the Richmond Art Museum also impacted me. Additionally in painting I always felt that the hour painting assignment, doing fifteen small paintings in fifteen hours, was the most satisfying and that I learned the most from that assignment. There is also, of course, less pressure associated with a small work. Working from photographs also lends itself the creation of pieces of a lesser size. Furthermore I like it that people might feel impelled to get close to the works, peer into them rather than at them. I hope people will be engaged.

I embedded scans of the photographs themselves into my encaustic paintings. I felt that reproducing them myself would not be enough. I liked the idea of painting right on them; directly responding, adding and obscuring, and even obliterating. I was also so

fond of the photographs that I really wanted to use them. In some cases I felt that incorporating them into drawings and paintings, interpreting and reproducing was not necessary.

I think of the encaustic pieces as elegies. They are expressions of sorrow, but they are tributes. I try to have a specific person in mind when I make them. They are in some ways a raw emotional response to what I will never know and what I do know about loved ones. They personify fading memories, the erosion of time. The encaustic wax really lends itself to the building up of layers as well as easy removal of them. But as much as I obscure, I feel that in a way I am trying also to preserve. I think that the work is in some ways about the fragility of things. It is fragmented narrative but at the same time it is a sort of reflection of the effort to conserve and commemorate these memories and people. I worked with an encaustic painter, Rachel Friedberg, when I was on the New York Arts Program last year. She worked intuitively, responding emotionally to the work as it progressed, but she also made conscious aesthetic decisions that were equally important for her. I think without realizing it, her methodology has rubbed off on me in some ways. I think I tend to approach the encaustic pieces the same way.

In a similar vein, I painted over and obscured the etchings. The etching felt incomplete to me on its own and I was never entirely happy with it. Painting over it was gratifying and I think it made the piece work better. Perhaps because paintings is a more familiar medium for me, there was something comfortable about its addition. There was also something gratifying in being able to alter the relatively rigid medium of etching with the much more flexible medium of painting.

My color palette was relatively limited in the encaustic pieces because I liked the idea of them looking somewhat muted. I think that obscuring and using few colors lends itself to personifying the impression of unfamiliarity; that it added a ghostly and maybe aged element. Additionally the photographs I worked into the paintings were black and white and so I felt that it would be better and easier to integrate them into the composition if I only used a few colors in each piece.

I can see how it may be hard to reconcile the more abstract encaustic pieces with the more representational paintings and drawings. I think I tread in both areas, but in my mind I do not really draw a distinction between them, although I can definitely understand how one would. But I hope it is not a great leap to connect them. I think it is analogous to my affinity for different mediums. I have an interest in both and would like to develop greater facility in both. I tried to use whatever method I responded to given the specific subject. I think there is a similar sense of touch in each; I generally used thick layers of paint. Some of the oil paintings were mistaken for encaustic, for example. And of course they are all concerned with the same ideas, places and people.

For the drawings and paintings I worked directly from photographs. In some of them I worked from two or more photographs, incorporating them into one work. I liked the idea of putting together these different figures and places, some of which have become sort of familial mythic symbols. I think that it is true to say of most families that certain people, after they die, can take on this sort of legendary status, and are frequently brought up in conversation. Likewise certain places can invoke a sort of nostalgic reverence. I think that I and others in my family tend to be overly sentimental about such

things. But I made an effort to make things less nostalgic in the clichéd sense of the word and more reflective and thoughtful.

I worked from photographs but I did not want the work to look exactly like a photograph; I wanted them to look like paintings and drawings, as those are the mediums that I feel closer to. But moreover I always respond to works that show their faults and present insight into the artistic process. I liked leaving edges and stray marks, as well as leaving the encaustic edges unframed. There is an organic aspect to leaving these things as they are that I am partial to. I remember Kurt Vonnegut wrote in one of his novels that when you are making art, during the whole process, from start to finish, you are always happiest in the middle; that having an excellent end product is great but you are never more satisfied with a work than when you are at the peak of creating.

I think that overall the work is united, and I hope that people perceive this. I think that there is a similar aesthetic and consistent mood to all the works. I liked the idea of exploring different mediums in this project, and I am very glad that I was able to do that> For me the work is ultimately about love of family and grief at the fragility of things. It is a celebration of a connection to the past.