

# Near Conscious

Daniella Talmor

**Noga Shtainer's** exhibition "Near Conscious" presents memories and impressions originating in the artist's family history. Parts of this history were not known to her until she actually experienced them through the camera, and others remained unknown. Shtainer filled in the blanks in the continuity with the aid of her power of invention, so that her works wander on the boundary between private history and fantasy, between description of reality and trips into the world of imagination.

The series "Near Conscious", "Father Mother Ann (my father's wife) and the children", present photographs of the family, whereas the series "Home for Special Children" comprises pictures taken at a dormitory in the Ukraine. All were photographed during the last decade and are the result of careful planning, which often included preparatory drawings, even though at the stage of actual placing and staging there was always an element of spontaneous change.

The divorce of Shtainer's parents when she was still a young girl left her without many childhood experiences. She recounts how she keeps almost no memories of her childhood, and the few she has are based on old pictures she saw in her parents' house and on stories she was told. In her photographs she deals with her missing childhood and with her family's life. She builds situations that reinvent her childhood, shifting the strips of reality that she captures with her camera to a different place. The power of photography helps her construct pictures which establish a correspondence with a new reality and with her childhood, but that at the same time deliver a universal social message. The truth in her work resides in the naturalness and innocence of the photographed children, whereas the actual photographing supplies the element of fiction, whose source is imagination.

At the beginning of her career Shtainer photographed only her sister, and from there she went on to take pictures of members of the whole extended family. All the pictures were in black and white, except the last ones which were photographed in warm monochromatic shades.

The pictures of her sister as a child, as a youngster and as a woman show the changes she went through with the years, and perpetuate the exotic development process of an adolescent girl. The choice of her sister as an object to be photographed, at first due to reasons of availability, with the passing of the years became a true obsession. Photograph ceremonies were held every Saturday, during which, almost without words, the work took its course as if by itself. The photograph sessions enraptured both sisters in a fantasy which allowed them to return to childhood, which Shtainer spent periodically going from her father's to

her mother's home, both in the same village. Her sister, who was born in her father's home, seemed to fill up the space left void at the time by the artist when she left the house where she had been born and raised, the house in which her furniture and belongings were left behind as she moved into her mother's home. The bed, the desk and the mirror that hung above her bed were slowly suffused with the aroma of the mysterious, bashful girl, her new sister living there. The photographic works bring forth her innocent, tranquil beauty, captured from the artist's charged perspective, and from the confusion in which she presents their mutual biography. As the younger sister surrenders herself to the camera and to her sister the photographer, both reconstruct the

artist's lost, forgotten childhood.

The photographs of the extended family, which present the two families that became a large one, offer the artist an additional way to become reconciled with her past. The imaginative pictures tell a story of dual lives, which on one hand try to reconstruct experiences and feelings of childhood past, but on the other hand it is fictitious, based on a traditional photographic iconography. The place in those works is any place, and the time is any time, but the characters are always members of the family. The photographs express the search for beauty existing side by side with gloom and the perpetually haunting family secrets.

An additional series, "Home for Special Children", is named after a dormitory in the city of Rovno, Ukraine, which represents, in Shtainer's view, a microcosm of Eastern European culture. The children living in the institute suffer from various degrees of invalidity, and experience a missing childhood, which reminded the artist of her own. The children in this series have been photographed in full beautiful colour, which helps give some light to the sad reality in which they live. In her meeting with the children, whose language, body gestures and mentality were strange to the artist, the camera became the sole means of communication, and photograph-taking sessions became private, intimate and very special moments. Photographing the children, separated from their families, allowed the artist to analyze her own metaphoric orphanhood.

Noga Shtainer's fascinating work comes to show a private world, presenting the photographed object intimately, without blurring its disadvantages and its weaknesses. Her photographed moment is not a private occurrence, but an opening to deal with human fragility in any manifestation, to fall in love with the photographed object and to become assimilated with it until it becomes a part of her, and of the story she wishes to tell.

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