



Untitled (waits)

Terry Kurgan



Untitled (floats II)



Untitled (floats I)



Untitled (red edge)

My practise is characterised by a productive negotiation between the studio and public space. It's often tricky making the crossing, and this group of drawings began very far away from where they have ended.

Underpinning much of my work is a preoccupation with family photographs, particularly the way in which they mediate our experience of ourselves. I am interested in the complex negotiation that occurs in the making of a photographic image: there is in each of my projects, whether public or private, an attempt to reach under the opaque, two-dimensional surface.

For the last ten years, every time I start preparing for an exhibition, I haul out a precious portfolio of about thirty black and white photographs, produced by a studio photographer named Menashe Golashevsky. He came out to South Africa from Lithuania in 1928 on the same ship as my grandfather, and worked out of a shop front in Salt River, Cape Town. The images are very poignant, combining layer upon layer of personal, cultural and social history. I began drawing from these photographs but quickly decided (again!) that a different sort of project lies in waiting in this material.

At the same time, I was editing several hundreds of photo-booth photographs produced by participants in "Hotel Yeoville", a public realm project I had run out of the Yeoville Library through 2010. Each person shot a series of self-portraits, and, looking at them now en masse, I love how fugitive many of these images seem.

With this in mind, I shot a small series of photographs and turned back to making drawings for *Still, life*. The first part of the process is the preparation of the paper, which I prime with rabbit skin glue. I love how this surface resists my drawing materials: they slide off the page, leaving faint traces, enabling me to draw and remove repeatedly, building the drawing in many thin layers, and leaving the paper with a memory of an image built cumulatively. There's also a search for the image through repetition: drawing the same image over and over again, moving it around, sometimes allowing it to slip out of the frame.

As I draw, I begin to leave the photographic reference behind; getting involved with the materials and marks. The formal profile pose evokes a sense of traditional still life painting and I add flowers with their obvious reference to time passing linking them to that powerful human impulse to hold onto the present.

But in the end, it's the drawing that is at the front, and the sheer pleasure of working with the unpredictability of the materials I am using and the interaction of all of these with my surface.



Untitled (floats II) detail

Terry Kurgan lives in Johannesburg, and works across a diverse range of media. She holds a BAFA degree from the California College of Art, San Francisco and an MFA from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town. She has been awarded many prizes and grants, and exhibited and published broadly in South Africa, and internationally. Currently, her work is included on *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography at the V & A Museum*, London (April – July 2011), and she is working on the book publication of her digital, interactive *Hotel Yeoville* project being published by Fourthwall Books later this year.

Untitled (waits) and *Untitled (floats I)*: 2011, charcoal, pencil on Fabriano paper primed with rabbit-skin glue mixed with gouache, 1000 x 700 mm
Untitled (floats II): 2011, charcoal, pastel, pencil on Fabriano paper primed with rabbit-skin glue mixed with gouache, 1000 x 700 mm
Untitled (red edge): 2011, charcoal, pencil, beeswax, oil on Fabriano paper primed with rabbit-skin glue mixed with gouache, 1000 x 700 mm



Recently, I've been scanning old family photographs – sometimes creased and scuffed, often ambered by time and light – in an attempt to constitute a digital archive. I've thought about such photographs as time capsules: amulets against oblivion and loss, their particular arrest holding a vanished moment. As much as I myself am a profligate digital snapper of everyday life, I am (perhaps nostalgically) intrigued by the time when a single photograph staunchly or tenderly memorialised an event. Family members marshalled to pose and smile in speckled sunlight, a still life of fruit casually resplendent upon a table; a dog long dead lending its quirky humour to the scene.

It is a commonplace that our individual recollections are both sustained and constructed by family photographs. The older photos, those that precede our personal historical time, join one another to constitute small clusters of collective memory (and collective amnesia); the more recent ones in which we ourselves appear wanly from another time, serve as mnemonics: these stills become prompts and then, more securely, 'memories.'

The reverse side of each photograph tells its own story. Where now, we pay scant attention to the reproducible materiality of digital prints, these old photographs are intriguing as physical objects. Their mottled surfaces are exquisite, painterly abstractions in shades of malt; the torn, map-shaped black blotches remnants and reminders of an earlier existence in an album. And the words, in scripts we no longer use; names, dates, dedications...

I began to draw from these photographs in a blind bid to understand something about their poise and formality, their distilled tenderness. They dated from different periods, but such differences were flattened and negated by my use of a single drawing implement: the pencil. My first renderings were quick, faint and linear, as if I were abashed to be drawing so directly from a photographic source. As I worked, I became more interested in the suffused light and pools of shadow through which the images gained visibility.

As I try to capture something of the photograph, the affect I have invested in these images is itself put on standby. In concentrating on the surface rather than trying to dig out any meaning that might be buried within the photograph, I have found myself thinking repeatedly that a photo reveals nothing of the temporal substance it ostensibly captures. Offering itself as intractable surface, it tells us little of the mysteries of people's passage through time and how it is that, now old or buried, the child gazes back at us from sepia in all innocence. I want to explore again what happens when that most direct of all forms of graphic capture – pencil on paper – meets the unyielding strangeness of the photograph.



(detail)

Born in Israel, Ruth Rosengarten lived and studied in Johannesburg and London before moving to Portugal, where she worked for twenty years as an artist and art historian. She completed a PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, and has, for the past ten years, been living in England. Her studio practice currently revolves around drawing and photography. She has curated several shows, lectured in various continents, and exhibited and published widely.

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Still, life at GALLERY AOP, Johannesburg, 7 – 28 May 2011

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