

# THESIS IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Maria Baker + Katie Loewen

*Text by Elan Marchinko*

*"[Words and] images are like shells, no less integral parts of nature than the substances they cover, but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation... Nothing arises in nature for the sake of anything else; all these phases and products are involved equally in the round of existence..." — George Santayana*

The truth as we know it is often a product of the flux of human praxis. Nowhere is this more evident than within the institution of the family. Emerging artists Maria Baker and Katie Loewen present brave new works that employ the camera as a tool with which to extract and interrogate notions of truth regarding the family.

Susan Sontag contends that the photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency. In her work, Katie Loewen isolates the family photograph as one such example. Loewen asserts, "The family photograph is a record of the performances that unconsciously promote the myth of a happy family". It is worth noting that the word "family" originally meant a band of slaves. Even after the word came to apply to people affiliated by blood and marriage, for most

the notion of family continued to refer to authority relations rather than loved ones. The sentimentalization of 'family' into its current form is the construct of an accumulation of political, economic, legal, and religious ideologies. Thus the family photograph serves as an omnipresent device to sustain and naturalize the nuclear family—typically a two-parent, hetero-patriarchal institution—as the fundamental building block of societal nomenclature.

Loewen's juxtaposition of family life with a series of performances illuminates dramaturgical analysis as a key component of her photographic practice. States Loewen, "Families, including my own, have a tendency to represent themselves as the idyllic version of what we desire to be, instead of what we really are". Looking at any formal, North American family portrait it is no mere coincidence that its members tend to occupy specific positions and comportment that continues to produce their roles in relation to each other as father, mother, son, or daughter that are immediately discernable to the outside eye. Therefore it is also no mere historical accident that the word *person*, in its first meaning, is a *mask*. As articulated by Erving Goffman in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our true self, the self we would like to be. In the end our understanding of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons. Nowhere is this recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role more blatantly illustrated than within the bounded frame of the family photograph.

Loewen's current body of work, *transition*, was born out of her desire to explore the evolution of her family's dynamics as her and three brothers entered the realm of young adulthood. While *transition* is itself a construct in that Loewen ultimately chooses what to reveal and what to hide this does not compromise the integrity of the work. She resists the impulse to portray an idealized version of the family, a bold venture considering it is her own kin probed by the



Katie Loewen, Glasses

camera lens. Awkward and unflattering, Loewen's images are intimate and telling of the growing pains and discrepancies that arise between our impulsive, human selves and our socialized selves. Play with light and shadow evokes a heightened sense of ambiguity. Tulips overlap with skis. One brother emerges from behind the nose of the other, a visual reminder of the clouded meanings that plague familial relations. An arm punctuates the center of a print, perhaps to shield an out-of-character moment from the camera's intrusions. Loewen suspends and amplifies the moments of personal flux her family members struggle to suppress as they grapple to make sense of their changing roles.

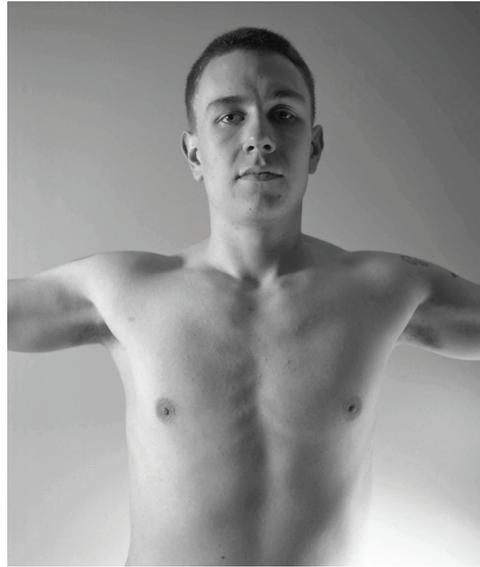
While the family operates as a shock absorber, a comforting environment from which its members may regain their bearings, the family as a social institution may also constitute its own battleground. Where *transition* serves to disassemble the seemingly essentialist constructs surrounding the nuclear family, Maria Baker's thesis series *Thanks For Every Nothing* employs portraits of individual family members to reassemble a cohesive definition of 'family', a concept

that has long sustained fractures within the recess of her own biography. Photographing her relatives in the physical spaces they inhabit, such as their places of work and domesticity, Baker's images aid in defining her relatives as well as her photographic practice, which, in turn, generates her own self-knowledge. Baker contends, "As singular images, the photos function as portraits of the individual, but as a group, the photos are more akin to a self portrait".

In conjunction with *Thanks For Every Nothing* Baker also presents a series of images of her friends and comrades from the military. Having served in the US Military for nine years, both series are inextricably linked in Baker's construction of family. Like the American flag lurking behind the blinds in her Pappi's portrait it is clear that Baker's experiences in a military-oriented family and in the institution itself constitute much of the mindscape that informs her photography.

Arms outstretched, the five military personnel evoke the image of a paper concertina, endless simulacrum of *gemeinschaft*. However, Baker's amputation of their lower upper arms serves to elevate the individual from within the macrocosm. Baker's breach of the rules of classical portraiture allows the four men and one woman to emerge from their frames as real, tactile beings. Stripped of their uniform, itself a form of armour, this amplifies their vulnerability as well as their stoicism, and grit. Baker's manipulation of light and shadow upon the body's ridges of bone, and contours of flesh evokes the notion of the human body as its own frontier; a site of conflict between society's needs and one's own, personal solidarity. Thus the five individuals abstracted by Baker's lens represent unique human beings yet embody the universal humanity they serve to protect.

Susan Sontag observes that to photograph means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge and, therefore, like power. Thus photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire. Whether fractured by Loewen or stitched together



Maria Baker, Robbie

by Baker, the images reconfigure and promote richer, more complex truths with which to frame the family. In our increasingly globalized, image-based society it is steadily more difficult to separate reality from fiction. The photographic practices of Baker and Loewen reclaim the image as a means to break through the clutter of illusion and generate alternative definitions of family. While each artist offers their own distinct, phenomenological experience their work is sewn with a common thread; despite one's socio-economic status every family has its own pathology, quirks, and dynamics that lurk behind the fictive scrim of the family photograph.

The thesis works of Maria Baker and Katie Loewen exemplify the camera's ability to abstract a greater understanding of family as well as one's own self-knowledge. In the words of Robert Ezra Park, *it is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves*.

[ Elan Marchinko ]

After high school, **Maria Baker** went directly into the US Air Force and was honorably discharged in 2003. Prior to moving to Manitoba, she studied advertising at the University of Oklahoma. In 2008, she received her Bachelors of Fine Arts (Thesis in Photography), First Class Honours from the University of Manitoba.

**Katie Loewen** has recently completed her Bachelors of Fine Art (Thesis in Photography) at the University of Manitoba. She currently lives and works in Winnipeg and plans to pursue graduate studies in the near future.

**Elan Marchinko** is a fourth-year student at the University of Winnipeg where she is working on undergraduate degrees in Art History and Sociology. An active member of Winnipeg's dance community she has trained with The School of Contemporary Dancers' Professional Program. Last year Elan was invited to Toronto to perform in the modern dance show Stacked Crooked in conjunction with the Over The Top Music Festival. As well as presenting her own solo choreography, she collaborated with independent choreographer Maytal Kowalski who created a dance piece based on Elan's original written text stratosfear. This summer Elan will be touring and performing in several major Canadian cities with the Sarah Sommer Chai Folk Ensemble, of which she is currently a member.

#### RECEPTION

7 PM Friday, 16 May 2008

#### EXHIBITION

Friday, 16 May – Saturday, 31 May 2008

#### WORKS SHOWN

##### MARIA BAKER

*Makenna*, 2008. c-print, 30" x 24" (Cover, left)

*Robbie*, 2008. c-print, 30" x 24" (Inside, right)

##### KATIE LOEWEN

*Tongs*, 2007. c-print, 30" x 24" (Cover, right)

*Glasses*, 2004. c-print, 30" x 24" (Inside, left)

PLATFORM would like to thank Manitoba Arts Council, Winnipeg Arts Council, The Winnipeg Foundation, and Canada Council for the Arts, for their continued support.



 **PLATFORM**  
centre for photographic + digital arts

121-100 Arthur Street (Artspace), Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 1H3  
204.942.8183 FAX 204.942.1555 info@platformgallery.org www.platformgallery.org