# FAMILY PORTRAITURE - CREATING A LENS INTO FAMILY EXPERIENCE

       The family portrait is one of the most universal images that we collect. From the historical uses of the family portrait for political or heirachical representation to the informal snapshots that we capture and collect in the modern day, family portraits encompass a wide range of media. The family portrait provides a lens into the family experience through the generations and forms a part of our rich visual heritage. In this essay I would like to explore the evolving nature of the family portrait, in all of its different forms. I will approach the way in which portraiture allows us to 'see', connect, and empathise with our ancestors in a manner that is uniquely intimate. I will use the work of artists such as Frida Kahlo and Christian Boltanski to challenge the traditional definition of a family portrait and explore how family portraiture can provide a valuable exploration of our heritage. I will also approach the more contemporary search for honesty in the family portrait, as artists increasingly strive to seek out a way to reflect the complexity of family life with candour, looking at the photography of Jo Spence and the Intimist painting movement.

PRESENTING FAMILY THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES OF OUR ANCESTORS

       The purpose of the family portrait is an ever-changing and evolving thing, but I believe at the crux of this there is a goal to preserve some sort of record of experience, the experience of a family at a particular moment in time. Indeed these ancestral experiences, that culminate in a person's heritage, are for many in the modern day, an integral part of our own identity. It seems natural therefore that the phenomena of the family portrait would hold a record of the experiences of those depicted.

       In the painting, "My Grandparents, My Parents, and I" by Frida Kahlo (figure 1), Kahlo draws on the heritage and experiences of her family to create an engaging exploration of her origins. The artist explores her own identity by doing so. The painting literally depicts the artist's family tree, laden with symbolism that approaches the juxtaposition of her Mexican and German heritage. Kahlo's mother's Mexican bloodline shown to left of the painting, with the dusty Mexican landscape and prickly pear cactus. Kahlo's father's German bloodline is off to the right, where we see the ocean, beyond which is presumably Europe. Kahlo herself is central to the painting, between her mother and father, she belongs to neither side of the landscape and holds a red ribbon, representative of her bloodline. This is a painting that does not simply record the appearance of Kahlo's ancestors, but rather, it also aims to show something of their lives and experiences. The figures within the painting are rather static and impersonal in their poses, the portrayal of Kahlo's parents based upon their wedding photographs, yet it is the introduction of the background that makes this a fascinating and
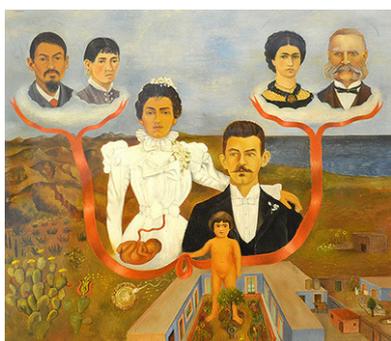
engaging family portrait.

       This idea that by presenting the experiences of our forefathers we can better connect us with our ancestry is at the centre of the exhibition "From Generation to Generation: Inherited Memory and Contemporary Art" at the Jewish Contemporary Art Museum[1]. The artist Binh Danh exhibited, explores his own ancestral connection with the conflict of the Vietnam war in the engaging collection of work titled, "Immortality: The Remnants of the Vietnam and American War". The collection consisting of leaves, bleached by the sun using glass negatives to form photographic images (figure 2). The work comments upon the horror of the war, the connotations of Agent Orange and its intended impact as a herbicide, influencing the use of the leaves. This collection of work is, in my mind, a new type of family portrait, that does not portray the ancestors

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       Figure 1

[1]The Contemporary Jewish Museum website:
https://www.thecjm.org/exhibitions/2

of the artist themselves, but rather the trauma that they suffered. In this way they operate on a level similar to that of the traditional family portrait, the pieces compel us not to view the artists ancestors through an image of them but rather, intimately through the lens of their experience. The collection working in a similar way

perhaps to Kahlo's piece "My Grandparents, My Parents, and I".

The use of the experiences of one's ancestors to explore one's own identity and heritage, also plays a key role in the work of Christian Boltanski. Boltanski is from a Jewish family, and born in 1944 he experienced the aftermath of the war as a child, an experience that deeply affected the artist. Boltanski's father forced to escape deportation in World War Two by concealing himself under the floorboards of his Paris home for over a year. The traumatic past of the family of the artist is a key influence in the work of Boltanski, themes of memory and loss prominent in his instillations. In Boltanski's 1996 piece 'Humans' (figure 3) for instance the artist alludes to the Holocaust, creating a white space lined with over 12,000 old photographs, gathered from a wide number of sources (from family portraits to police registries), and lacking context. The photographs are both illuminated and obscured by light bulbs, an almost religious, chapel like atmosphere created. We are drawn to the subjects of these photographs and captivated by them, yet at the same time the lack of context associated with each person isolates us from them. I would argue that this, like the work of Binh Danh and Kahlo, is a form of family portrait, Boltanski approaching the trauma associated with his heritage. By using these images of victims of the Holocaust, he creates a different form of family portrait, yet, instead of showing us exactly how his ancestors looked, he presents to us an insight into their experiences, hiding from the horrors of the war. He shows us the suffering of a generation, and from there we are encouraged to think of his ancestors in a far more personal way.

Figure 3

Overall therefore, I would argue that the family portrait can be considered to be a far wider genre than perhaps initially supposed, though the family portrait in the traditional sense of a literal image of a family is undoubtedly very valuable. I believe that the use of a portrayal of the experiences of our ancestors, operates in a strange way on a similar level to that of the traditional family portrait, yet is more honest, more intimate. By being presented with the experiences of an artist's ancestors, we think and connect with them in a manner that goes beyond physical appearance and immediately to empathy.

STATUS AND WEALTH - HOW DO YOU SEE US ?:

The nature of the family portrait has developed dramatically through time. Initially a privilege possessed only by the wealthy and aristocratic, the family portrait has evolved to reach the often deeply informal collections of images that we possess in the modern day.

    I will begin with a series of family portraits from the Tudor period, containing little emotional intimacy, and focused upon wealth and status, the subjects of these paintings are rigid and decked out in rich, often symbolic garments. These images were to assert lineage, and ancestral power. To pay a portrait artist to paint ones

family, was to pay for just a little immortality. The ban upon religious art asserted by Henry VIII leading to the rise of Hans Holbein as a portrait artist as the wealthy paid to be painted.

The piece "The portrait of Sir Thomas More his father's household and his descendants" By Rowland Lockey the younger, as shown above (figure 4) , was commissioned by Thomas More II, the grandson of Thomas More, and is indeed focused strikingly upon lineage. In the portrait we see that five generations of the family are presented, the culmination of a destroyed family portrait painted in around 1527 by Hans Holbein the younger, and the later painting of Lockey. The painting asserts the geneology of the family, presenting members of generations of the family together who would never have met. Elizabeth Dancey for instance (6th from the left), having died long before the men to either side of her were born. This portrait is deeply intriguing in this aspect, and is rich with symbolism, the staunch Roman Catholic stance of the family presented through the prominent portrayal of the prayer books in the hands of the sitters in the foreground of the painting, while the presence of the crests upon the back wall asserts the families identity. We see that the purpose of the portrait is very different to that of the portrait in the modern day, the goal being to symbolise the moral values of the family portrayed, rather than to create a portrayal of family life. This gathering of a collective of people separated through time together, does not present a record of the family at a point in time,

Figure 4

but rather the history of the family. It is a painting of status and blood.

    In the family portrait of Henry VII above, ('The Family of Henry VIII', 1545) we see a similar representation of lineage as a priority within the work of portraiture, the aim of this portrait being solely dynastic, the king central to the portrait, with his son and heir Edward at his side. The king's estates are presented in the background of the portrait as he is flanked by his son and heir, and wife Anne Boleyn, his daughters, Princess Mary and Elizbeth presented within the arcs on either side of the portrait, distanced from

Figure 5

the king, perhaps representative of their distance from the role of heir. This portrait is an image (like that shown previously) with a political purpose. It has the predominant goal of symbolising the power and presence of the king and the state of the succession. The image subsequently produces a far less empathetic response from the viewer, it is not an image created to connect the viewer to the subject, but rather it aims to imbue us

with sense of awe and reverence, distancing the king from the viewer.

The role of the family portrait has evolved in a vast manner since then, the changing structure of society, meaning that a widening number of people within the middle classes could afford the honour of being immortalised, while the goal of the portrait was changing. In 'The Gower Family: The Children of Granville: Second Earl Gower', (figure 6) we see that the aim of the image is different, in this image perhaps the most striking thing is the individual expressions and personalities conveyed of the children. This is not a portrait designed soley to express power, but rather to explore the family dynamic. Though highly idealised, it aims to portray the grace and innocence of those portrayed. And the viewer cannot help but connect with the subject on a more personal level. The girl dancing closest to her mother fixing us with a playful smile.

The family portrait has evolved dramatically from dynastic images of power, to the more personal yet idealised portraits such as that of the Gower family. Though a select few can gain an insight into their family and ancestry through these portraits, these images lack the raw portrayal of the family dynamic that more modern family portraits express. The definition of the family portrait today is wider, the family portrait meaning so many different things, encompassing the snapshots of our everyday lives, captured with our phones, and the old videos of family holidays that we keep on dated cameras. The need to document our lives, and our families remaining strong in this digital age.

Figure 6

SEEKING THE GENUINE - THE FAMILY DYNAMIC IN FAMILY PORTRAITURE:

Though indeed, as previously discussed, the nature of the family portrait has developed considerably from an image of political power to a more personal representation of family life, the 'honesty' of a family portrait is an idea that has been explored by a number of artists more recently. The dynamic of the family portrait is a fascinating one, though we often use the images as a record of family life, these images can be seen as static and staged, lacking the raw reality of family life, they can fail to capture the most honest and intimate elements of the family dynamic. The complexity of which, has inspired artists more recently to try and create totally representative images of family life in its entirety.

The Intimist movement of the early twentieth century, was one of the first movements towards a truly honest portrayal of family life, in all of its frequently mundane entirety. The goal of the movement was to produce intimate depictions of commonplace domestic scenes, aiming to create an emotive response. For example in 'Before Dinner' (1924) by Pierre Bonnard (figure 7), a key member of the Intinism movement, Bonnard utilises his characteristically warm palate and loose style, to present two family members, possibly sisters, waiting in the quiet moments before a family dinner. The figures appear silent and the image gives off an air of sponteneity, this quiet moment of companionship mundane and simple. This is what strikes me about

the image, it does not feel staged but rather strikingly intimate, a family presented in an inconspicuous moment, the quiet between the notable events that would characteristically be documented. Indeed Bonnard himself admitted that a familiarity of the subject formed a fundamental part of his practice as an artist,[2] he painted the familiar moments of domestic life, partially from memory born of repetition and also from life. I feel that there is a particular value to this type of family portrait, in its understated honesty, these images of

family life striking in the way on which the everyday interactions of the family are elevated.
The painting 'The Dinner, the effect of a lamp' , by Vuillard, (figure 8) one of the less well known members of the Intimist movement, is another painting that presents family life in a manner that does not feel staged for the sake of the viewer. The painting presents a family, gathered together in a meal that is clearly an everyday occurrence, in a manner, more honest, more real than the static images of the classic family portrait, this image does not serve just to document a family, but also to document the nature of the family. The moment depicted is a private one, this idea reinforced by the light of the lamp, which both illuminates the scene to the viewer, but isolates us from it, we are not at the table with the family, but rather, just behind looking on. This is a very different approach to the family portrait, the composition of the figures implying that this is not a moment that has been laid out for an observer, but rather is just a fragment of the lives of those depicted, that happens to

figure 7

have been captured.
        The dynamic of the family portrait is a fascinating one, though we often use the images as a record of family life, they can be static and staged, lacking the raw, reality of family life, they can fail to capture the most honest and intimate elements of the family dynamic. In Jo Spence's 'Beyond the Family album' (figure 9) this very idea is vividly explored. Spence rails against the limited scope of the traditional family portrait, referring to the dynamic of her own family, the conflict of which seems to juxtapose utterly the nature of these images. Referring to the feeling that her 'entire life seems to have been founded on conflict. Both within my family and through wider social contexts, it felt as if there were a continual war going on just beneath the surface,

[2] The Met Museum website:
https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bonn/hd_bonn.html

Figure 8

threatening to break out'[3] in her photography she attempts to present family life in its entirety, with all the messy bits, and the conflicts of family relations, in the manner that the traditional family portrait does not. In the words of Skye Sherwin, her goal is 'to expose photographic stereotypes of family life, sex and class' to combat 'our picture perfect fantasy of ourselves'[4]. This collection, is in the mind of the artist one of 'counter photography' an effort to combat the traditional collection of images of the family which fail to present the family dynamic in honesty, a project 'concerned with what was being screened out from family photography'. The decision to reject the set up of 'commercial' family photography, perhaps especially interesting considering

[3] The Studio Voltaire website,
 https://www.studiovoltaire.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Jo-Spence-Exhibition-Guide-web.pdf
[4] Skye Sherwin, '*Artist of the week 199: Jo Spence*', The Guardian, July 2012
 https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/jul/19/artist-of-week-199-jo-spence

that Spence had worked in her own studio in the 60's taking just such images. In the collection, she poses as a

child and world worn housewife, suspended in moments of family drudgery .

In conclusion, I believe that the genre of the family portrait encompasses a uniquely diverse and engaging collection of work. The plethora of images collected of our ancestry and families, creating a way for us to connect to the past, and develop our own sense of identity through our heritage. The general shift within family portraiture from the dynastic and political paintings of royalty to the more intimate, personal moments of family life that are increasingly being explored by artists in the modern day, also observed in the images that we

hold of our own families and lives as photography becomes more accessible than ever in the digital age. While the pursuit of an 'honest' depiction of family life, in all of its chaos and complexity continues to intrigue and inspire artists to this day.

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