

Family Remade, review in Source Magazine, issue 40

by Edward Welch

In her new show, Trish Morrissey embarks on an exploration of every day life, and the small-scale drams and tensions which constitute it. Three separate pieces of work investigate the nature of family life, and the workings of the domestic sphere. A large part of the show is given over to a series of images entitled *Seven Years*. The photos resemble those we might find in any family album, and record the various events which mark the unfolding of family life: birthday parties, holidays by the sea, the birth of a child. While the captions suggest that the events depicted take place at different times during the 60s 70s and 80s, each photo is in fact an elaborately constructed tableau featuring Morrissey and her elder sister: the title of the series refers to the age gap between them.

Morrissey uses period props and clothes to recreate scenes from an imagined family life, scenes which are nevertheless familiar to us all. She quotes the conventions and signs of family photography (fingers which find their way in front of the lens, for example) to give them the ring of authenticity. Her reconstructions are at once playful and intricate. Her attention to detail offers us the pleasure of recognition as we spot a Chopper bike lying in the foreground, or a shell-suited character from the 1980s. Recreating the past in this way reminds us of how the family album serves as an archive of the fashions and tastes of a period. More substantially, creating scenes from different eras also highlights the album's function as a repository of family memory and history. Her work draws attention to the role of the album in offering a certain narrative of the family unit, and in pointing to the conventions of the family photo (the poses we choose to adopt, the scenes we consider worth recording), explores the impressions they help the family to project, both to itself and the outside world.

In reminding us of the conventionality of the family album, though, Morrissey is also intent on examining the dramas and tensions which lurk within them, and which we attempt to disguise behind the image of the 'happy family'. In this sense, her work resonates clearly with that of recent practitioners and theorists such as Jo Spence and Marianne Hirsch. Morrissey is interested in the ways in which feelings and emotions are betrayed by body language, or 'leak into the body', as she herself puts it. Our attention is drawn constantly in these photos to gestures and poses, and in particular to facial expressions, gazes and glances – whether it be the ones they address to the camera or to each other. We are invited to imagine the narratives to which they point: what are we to make of the look directed by the young mother to the proud father, for example (*April 16th, 1967*), or the bored antagonism of the girl standing with her smiling mother (*September 20th 1985*)? In this intriguing set of images, then, Morrissey succeeds in making us reflect on how families are constructed, and how they present themselves for consumption.

In the second piece, a video installation entitled *Eighteen and Forty-Five*, Morrissey homes in on the relationship between mother and daughter, and the role of the women in the family and the domestic sphere. Two women dance one after the other, wearing the same white wedding dress, to the sound of Glen Miller's *Moonlight Serenade*; but they do

so among the laundry hanging in a back yard, against the backdrop of a grey pebble-dashed wall. Morrissey films the women from the shoulders down, and as the image fades from one to the other, we notice the more awkward movements of an older woman replacing the freer style of someone younger. The two women are Morrissey and her mother, wearing the dress in which they both 'came of age', Morrissey's mother when she married in 1945 and Morrissey herself when she wore the same dress to a ball marking the end of her school days at the age of 18.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the piece is incongruity between the dance and its setting. It is a bold image, which articulates powerfully the problematic place of women in the domestic sphere. As we watch the women dance, seemingly oblivious to their surroundings, we recognise the disjunction between the dream or myth of liberation suggested by the notion of 'coming of age' and the realities with which they are confronted in their daily lives, symbolised by the abrasive backdrop of the pebble-dashed wall and the containment it figures.

The final piece comes as a disappointment after the other two works. Another video installation entitled *Eleven and Three Quarters*, it shows a child pursuing a brown rabbit round a suburban garden. Despite her efforts, the rabbit always slips out of her grasp and eludes capture. While it can be seen as a visual metaphor for anticipation and disappointment, both for the girl and the viewer, it does not quite work. This is due largely to the fact that the slowness with which the rabbit lollops round the garden should make its capture all too easy and gives the girl's failure to do so a rather contrived air. Nevertheless, this piece aside, Morrissey's show is a stimulation exploration of some vital and universal issues, and should enhance further her fast-growing reputation.

Trish Morrissey