

Looking at the overlooked – the work of Rosy Martin by Camilla Brown



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I enjoyed the process and opportunity to select an artist's work from Uncertain States Open Call 2015. I spent time with work familiar and unfamiliar to me. One artist instantly stood out – Rosy Martin. Other than loving the work itself, which I will discuss further, I was keen to champion Rosy Martin's work as I feel she suffers from a peculiarly feminine art historical disease. Her contribution to contemporary and British photography over the past 40 years has been curiously overlooked, something I and I know many others, would like to change.

To set that in context it is wonderful, although much overdue, that there seems signs that Jo Spence's work is finally getting more art world and museum attention. I hope to see many more shows, publications and books on her practice. I have had to revise quite a few lectures after seeing her work on display at Frieze Masters last year, a gem of a show curated by a private

gallery. Of course her work stood its ground amongst her peers. However Rosy Martin's collaboration in this process seemed to be resigned to a footnote.

It is interesting that Spence's work is being embraced by the art market. Certainly the feminist performance artists of the 1970s have seen a massive surge of museum and collector interest over the last 20 years. I am thinking here of our American sisters and the work of Hannah Wilke; VALIE EXPORT; Yoko Ono to name a few.

But the nature of this often politically engaged practice provides conundrums for those with commercial interest in mind. There often is no one author for works that grow from movements. How do we apportion credit to an idea that grew from a discussion? Where in a truly collaborative process does authorship lie? This I assume is one reason why Martin sits in an awkward position, as we all know that she was at the heart of the development of re-enactment phototherapy and deserves more credit for that contribution.

This may be one reason for Martin being overlooked but another factor maybe more gender specific. We are not good as a nation at acknowledging our female pioneers. Perhaps at a moment when more women than ever are taking up and studying photography and women curators and arts professionals outnumber their male peers, it may be time to address this. The contemporary relevance of her work with Jo Spence is clear and I find myself almost constantly referring students and aspiring photographers to look at their work.

The two series *In Situ* (2006 – 1938/9) and *Acts of Reparation* (2008/9) included in this submission are a selection from an ongoing and extremely tender series of work that explores Martin's relationship with her parents mediated through photography. Photography and bereavement have an almost inextricable link which extends far beyond Roland Barthes musings about his mother. So many people in so many ways use photography to help them deal with illness and death. It has enormous cathartic, bordering on healing, properties. A case could be made that photography's history almost grew alongside its connection to death.

Photographs help us deal with death and also memorialise lives lived. Here Martin uses found images and photographs of her family alongside her re-enactments. As she puts on her father's suit she adopts, as a method actor, his way of holding himself his mannerisms and habits. She becomes, if only briefly, him. We see the photographic record of what we presume was an emotional event. She describes this process saying the following about her father:

"The so smart, stylish, very skilful tailor and creative man he had been, his sadness and frustrations too. I stand gazing into the dining room mirror, cigarette in hand, in the room he had created, his paintings reflected in the background: frowning a little."

The work is all made in her parents' home that Martin lived in after their death, spending time with their belongings which hold such emotional resonance.

Many photography projects grow from documenting deceased houses almost archiving family memorabilia. In a fog of loss it is hard to distinguish the important from the trivial. The presence of that person seems to be held in hairs left on a brush, in photographs taken in their youth, on furniture shaped by their weight and on clothes imbued with their scent.

If the empty home becomes the museum then Martin in this work uses it as an exhibition space. She projects work and images onto the walls of the house which she has then photographed in situ. This layering of images on objects turns the domestic space into an art installation. It is affective, simple and powerful.

Much of this work is about Martin's mother. Martin took on the role as her carer in her later years when she suffered from Dementia. It is meaningful that through Martin's support, her mother was able to stay in her own home. Something many people do not get to do. This seems an apt and perhaps unwritten element of this work and its legacy to Martin's relationship to her aging parents. We are not looking at the anonymous space of a retirement home but the space where their lives were lived and their memories were created.

Given the commonality of death and the experience of parental loss, which most of us will inevitably face over time, it feels like this work would connect to a wide audience. Perhaps the platform of Uncertain States and this Open Call 2015 will contribute to introducing more people to the work of Rosy Martin and to ensure she is no longer overlooked for her contribution to photography.

With thanks to Fiona Yaron-Field.