

EXHIBITION REVIEW

**Sofie Berzon MacKie, 'The House', 26 December 2014–17 January 2015,
Be'eri Gallery, Israel**

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Abstract

The paper features an exhibition which recreates the artist's nostalgic portrayal of her childhood home through a series of photographic images. The artist realizes her project by focusing on impressionistic domestic interior black and white images, together with sharp coloured close-up images of specific everyday objects. The paper shows how deploying light, colour and mirrors which invoke a range of artistic styles drawn from traditions of painting and photography, combines to capture the memory of 'home' that the house preserves.

Memory journey

The interior, as an expression of individuality and as a repository of individual memories, frames the context for an exhibition of photographs by Sofie Berzon MacKie on the theme of 'Home'. In order to interpret her work, it is useful to review the origins and meanings of the concept of 'home'.

'Home', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is 'a dwelling place; a person's house or abode; the fixed residence of a family or household; the seat of domestic life and interests. But beyond a physical structure it is also 'the place where one lives or was brought up, with the reference to the feelings of belonging, comfort, etc.'

As Flanders (2014) argues, the archetypes of 'homeness', from children's drawings of detached houses with roofs and chimneys to adults' notions, endowing the home with the qualities of a nostalgic refuge, cosy, comfortable and protective, and to painters' depictions of typical Dutch homes in the Dutch Golden Age paintings, are historically recent and imaginary. In his Arcades project Walter Benjamin noted that the birth of the concept of the interior as 'home' came into being during the July Monarchy (1830–48).

Under the reign of Louis Philippe, the private individual makes his entry into history. For the private individual, places of dwelling are for the first time opposed to places of work. The former come to constitute the interior. Its complement is the office. [...] The private individual, who in the office has to deal with realities, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. [...] the phantasmagorias of the interior. [...]

The interior is not just the universe of the private individual; it is also his *etui*. Ever since the time of Louis Philippe, the bourgeois has shown a tendency to compensate for the absence of any trace of private life in the big city. He tries to do this within the four walls of his apartment. It is as if he had made it a point of honor not to allow the traces of his everyday objects and accessories to get lost.

(Benjamin 1999 [1982]: 22–23)

The process of recasting the 'interior' as 'home' was, however, part of a wider post-revolutionary process that spelled the rise of the merchant class, which fashioned bourgeois life with a principal locus in the home. In this home the queen of the domestic drama as well as the face that the house presented to outsiders was the *femme de foyer*. The conceptualization of the home as the locus of all that was stable, reliable and safe, was intrinsically linked with the feminization of its physical spaces (such as, for example, spatial privacy and the intimacy of the dressing room with its mirror, toilette table, etc.) in contrast to the parlour or the outdoors (Puri 2013).

Two features characterized the self-fashioning of the domestic interior as 'the principal theatre of moral life' (Nord 1995: 223). First, it became an expression of the self, and second, it was fashioned

in a style imitating the appearance of aristocratic abodes. But these characteristics exposed the contradictory and hence phantasmic element in the project of 'home as identity'. It was meant to express individuality, but displayed an accumulation of commercially mass-produced objects, which induced more similarity than individuality. This can be demonstrated through Atget's photographs of various *fin de siècle*, over-embellished, over-eclectic French interiors in *Intérieurs Parisiens* (1910). His photographs presented the interior as a signifier of human life, personality and individuality, while undermining such notions and exposing them as illusory. As Nesbit (1992: 120) puts it, class was encoded by the value of the objects displayed and by other material differences, thus undermining the very appeal to a non-material basis for individual subjectivities that was supposed to be reflected in the individual decor.

One of the ways to counteract the commodified nature of individuality is through a display of a collection of objects (as the collage allows individuality even if the elements are similar) and the use of materials which capture memory. Thornton (1984: 313) observed that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the material basis of domestic identity focused on collections of ornaments, but also on sumptuous upholstery and heavy drapery, and Benjamin referred to a 'marked preference for velour and plush, which preserve the imprint of all contact' (Benjamin 1999 [1982]: 23).

Benjamin observed that: 'In the style characteristic of the Second Empire, the apartment becomes a sort of cockpit. *The traces of its inhabitant are molded into the interior*' (Benjamin 1999 [1982]: 23, emphasis added). This was interpreted by Brion (2005) to mean that the 'moulding' of traces marks the emphasis on comfort and soft materials. As Hunt shows (Hunt 2014: 208), following Stallybrass (1999), this refers to the capacity of cloth in its everyday use to 'hold' information, and naturally record and preserve human imprints – and thus to become a form of memory and personalization itself.

The artist Sofie Berzon MacKie returned to her family home in London that she had left when her parents emigrated many years before, following the death of her aunt who was its last inhabitant. The memory storehouse that a 'family home' usually holds is bittersweet. In this case, it was an archive of memories of absence, of her mother who died from an illness soon after they emigrated, of her grandmother who passed away some fifteen years before, and of her aunt who died just as her niece arrived. It is also an archive of memories of presence, of the happy childhood of the artist and her brother and two sisters. Having remained intact all those years, like a time capsule, both in terms of decor, layout and the positioning of the furniture, the house that her grandmother moved into 70 years ago had acquired a museum quality, to which the family deferred. As a result, no one dared to change it in any way. Thus it preserved the spirit of the family who had inhabited it in an almost tangible way. The death of her aunt disrupted the utopian domesticity, and signalled to Berzon MacKie that she had to document the house immediately, since it would soon be emptied.

Coming to the house to take her leave, she could also reconnect with her past. Apart from the visual traces of rooms, furnishings and objects, the house held memories of touch and smell, the

noises it made, the winter light through the windows and its refractions. As Barthes observed in *Camera Lucida* (1981), the camera registers at the same time both the presence and the past. It testifies that something has-indeed-been in existence, but also that it has-already-passed. In fact, as Barthes noted, 'a photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially' (1981: 4). Berzon MacKie's attempt to recreate her childhood led her in two directions, blending several genres. One direction was that of capturing the spirit of the domestic space through atmospheric photographs in the tradition of the Flemish painters' 'Genre painting' depicting scenes from everyday life (Figure 1). Rooms and parts of rooms were photographed in black-and-white long shots. The photographic angle used for most of the images was not the frontal view, which would encompass an entire wall of the room. Rather, Berzon MacKie often used close-up shots centring upon details of furniture or decor as one would in a figure in a portrait. Those images share some features with, but also some differences from, Historic House Museum photography, and despite being indoor shots, they also recall street photography.

The other direction she took was that of shooting ordinary, small objects, reminiscent of childhood memories, in colour and with sharp images in the tradition of still life, and then arranging them into a collage (Figure 2).

To summarize, I have emphasized the mixed-genre style of the images in Berzon MacKie's memory project. The following analysis highlights a few techniques that the photographer employed as strategies for constructing memory.

House Museum photography

The house had been lived in until the moment Berzon MacKie arrived in London when her aunt's death was imminent. Her aunt was taken to a hospice and passed away two days after she arrived. The house was left just as it had been, but no one lived there anymore.

While there are no people in Berzon MacKie's photographs of the interiors, traces of the inhabitants are clearly visible, giving the appearance of a life that has been interrupted: the creases on the duvet cover, the clothes that are hung out to dry on a Victorian ceiling pulley drying rack, books and papers scattered over a desk where the chair is pulled out as if someone was about to sit on it. The electric heater is plugged in, a cup is on the table, and a stack of bedding is on an armchair. Pictures hanging above the staircase are slightly unaligned. All of these items are silent witnesses to a living presence.

Every photograph is a construction. Even if the intention is not manipulative, editorial choices of what to include and what to leave out, such as photographic angle, lighting effects and digital retouching all help to undermine documentary authenticity. Berzon MacKie's house scenes lack the sense of staged artifice that comes from having been 'propped' by a professional interior designer. The photographs focus on the house as a living and not a museum space.

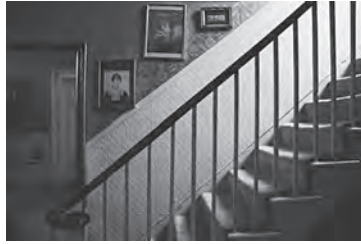
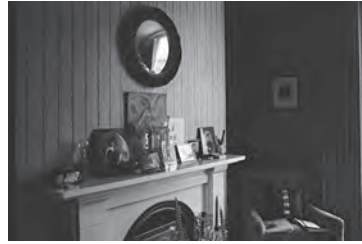
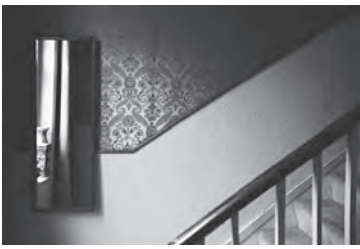


Figure 1: Image courtesy of artist Sofie Berzon MacKie.



Figure 2: Image courtesy of artist Sofie Berzon MacKie.

1. See various video interviews with the artist on *Eric Kim Street Photography Blog*: <http://erickimphotography.com/blog/>, accessed December 2014, and in an interview with *Vogue Italia* <http://www.vogue.it/en/people-are-talking-about/focus-on/2014/02/joel-meyerowitz#sthash.E2I3eHra.dpuf>.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Historic House Museum movement in the United States transformed historic domesticities into a domestic mythology of an idealized past in the belief that it could cement national identity and, at the same time, provide the *mise-en-scène* of intimate encounters with pre-modern social values and aesthetic sensibilities (Festa 2011). Berzon MacKie's family household could qualify as such a museum in that it maintained its post-war way of life, except that its material evidence did not need to be staged or restored. It is a period home whose interiority has been preserved not as a stage set for re-enacting the past, but as a living home, whose decor had not been updated in order to maintain a sense of continuity and a home-grown family tradition.

Objects and memory

Much like Goffman's (1959) notion of 'information given', and 'information given off', Barthes uses the Latin terminology to refer to the twin concepts of *studium* and *punctum*. The *studium* provides background information. It is carefully constructed information. The *punctum* is an emotion contained in information that leaks unintentionally in a detail, an incongruity in the facade, or in some other personal associations related to insignificant elements of the scenario. It could be a gesture, an item of grooming in the background or in some other object. It is, in Barthes's words, what 'takes the spectator outside its frame' (1981: 59).

Barthes also distinguishes between the 'identity' and the 'truth' or the 'essence' of a photograph. The identity is given by the *studium*, and other identifying objects that locate the subject of the photograph in time, place and culture. The 'truth' is the imperceptible essence that is unique to the subject. It is an emotion that can be generated by ordinary objects, by a colour, tone, light or mood.

Barthes in his photographic theorizing, and Joel Meyerowitz in his photographic career, make a distinction between isolated objects that are presented out of context, and allusions to objects outside the frame. Originally a street photographer, Meyerowitz, who was trained as a painter and an art historian, considered photography as poetry.¹ He defined it as the art of what is put in the frame while keeping an eye on the world off the frame. The relationship between what is included and what is left out determines the meaning. The power of the frame is to create a context by putting disparate, unrelated things together, rather than collecting singular objects isolated from their context (like 'copies of objects in space') and in photographing the relationship between things. He looks for the tacit relationship, the unspoken connection between objects thrown together.

Meyerowitz later turned to studio photography where he assembled grids of full-sized, still life images of objects in a series entitled 'The Effect of France' (featured in an exhibition in Howard Greenberg Gallery in New York, April–May 2014) (artdaily.org n.d.). Some objects came from Cézanne's studio in Provence; others were curios purchased for a friend in Tuscany. Once assembled,

these lifelike images, including objects in the *vanitas* tradition of still life representing a meditation on the transience of existence (like skulls), took on a new meaning. He arranged them in a little 'theatre space' that he created, each one photographed like a 'portrait'. Those constructed set-ups provided the stage for carefully arranged portraits of timeworn objects. Depicted in faintly lit spaces, they had the quality of paintings. Some were shot in front of the grey wall in Cézanne's studio in Provence; others in spaces where they were placed in harmony: old-fashioned interiors with dominant brown colours. 'These objects seemed to have a new life, as if once more they could express something of their character, which is a touching sentiment to give to things that have been rendered useless' (see Figure 3).

Though very different in theme and meaning, Berzon MacKie's images (Figures 1 and 2) share the philosophy underlying the photographic work of Joel Meyerowitz. Her series of domestic interior contextual photos are counterpointed by a selection of photos of stand-alone objects. The objects are almost a random selection of fragments of the 'everyday life' of the child that she was.

Printed as 25cm × 25cm images, they appear to be objects, and yet, as in Magritte's famous 1929 picture, *The Treachery of Images* (showing a realistic painting of a pipe under which the caption says 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' [this is not a pipe]) they are not the objects themselves. What contributes to their perception as 'objects' is their presentation. Personal belongings, such as a lace handkerchief, hairbrush, ballet shoes and pendant charm as well as a toy, a book, a photo and a hand-written memorial poem were laid on soft, dark-brown, velvety fabric as if they were items of precious jewellery and photographed that way. Treating them with special care signalled their priceless value despite their ordinariness, as receptacles of the memories they contained. She wanted them to feel like the little treasures they were, priceless things, even though they were ordinary objects. They were then encased in box-like frames which reinforced their jewellery connotation.

Her contextual photos resemble a theatre of interrelated elements that recreate the charm of the house, which was home to three generations of her family for nearly a century. The de-contextualized photos are not significant in themselves but they create meaning by virtue of what Meyerowitz defined as 'the tacit relationship, unspoken connection between objects thrown together' (see Figure 4).¹

Colour and light in Berzon MacKie's work

The black-and-white photographs of the house convey the nostalgic appeal of old prints. The function of light in pictorial representation to evoke emotion and subjectivity has a long pedigree. Since the early Renaissance, apart from the Flemish artists in 'Genre Paintings' depicting ordinary scenes from everyday life, it was landscape artists (Italian Chiaroscuro, Flemish Dutch Golden Age, American nineteenth-century Luminists) who used light and shadow to achieve the effect of a melodramatic or romantic mood.



Figure 3: Joel Meyerowitz, *Cézanne's Objects: 12 Grid* (2014). Image by the author. Courtesy of La Piscine-Musée d'Art et d'Industrie.



Figure 4: Sofie Berzon MacKie. A composition of individual images of everyday childhood objects. ©2014. Image courtesy of Sofie Berzon MacKie.

But it was particularly Impressionism that provided a reaction to the challenge, presented by photography, to the artist's skill in reproducing lifelike images of reality in both portrait and landscape paintings. Impressionist artists in France offered a subjective alternative to the real life precision that was the hallmark of photography: 'the one thing they could inevitably do better than the photograph – by further developing into an art form its very subjectivity in the conception of the image, the very subjectivity that photography eliminated' (Levinson 1997: 47).

Berzon MacKie does not directly reference any tradition of light effects, although her images allude to the lighting techniques of her predecessors. Interestingly, in order to achieve her own lighting effects, she does not use colour. Meyerowitz famously said that experience comes in colour and conveys feelings. 'I see the photograph as a chip of experience itself. It exists in the world. It is not a comment on the world' (Glaviano (in *Vogue Italia*) 2014). To him, black-and-white photography is an abstraction: 'Colour often brings out warmth and memories from our past – something that black and white doesn't' (Glaviano 2014). The reason why the monochrome does not capture emotions, according to him, is that, unlike colour, which is responsive to the full spectrum of visible light, and a richer band of feelings, black and white reduces the spectrum to a very narrow wavelength. Being a more 'cultivated response', it does not allow the viewer to respond to the full spectrum of feelings.

By contrast, Barthes regarded colour as an artifice, 'a coating applied *later on* to the original truth of the black-and-white photograph' (1981: 81, original emphasis). Striving for the emotional quality of Meyerowitz and sharing Barthes's view of colour, Berzon MacKie felt that colour distracted her from the mood and the light that are so important to her. Her own solution, reproduced in photography, nevertheless retains the emotional quality of colour in painting in her black-and-white pictures of the interior.

Berzon MacKie manages to combine what Stewart (1993) refers to as the 'miniature' and the 'gigantic'. The 'miniature-gigantic' dimension provides an imaginary space, which links viewing with contemplation and speculation. 'Miniature' and 'gigantic' become abstract metaphors of containment: private and public, unofficial and authorized, separate and social. This Berzon MacKie achieves by a careful construction of her shots to include a play of lights and mirrors.

The 'miniature' is part of the intimate experience of the individual: the home, rooms, soft furnishings, clothes, cupboards and drawers, and books (Hunt 2014: 215, 223). The gigantic belongs to the social realm of experience, devoid of the intimate quality of personal acquaintance with the individual.

Berzon MacKie's work transforms the house, which is a 'miniature' space, into a hybrid space of both the miniature and the gigantic. This she achieves by the combined styles of large-scale (rooms) and small-scale (memory objects) but also through the use of light and mirrors in the monochrome images that evoke a personal emotion at the same time that they add an allegorical layer.

Several objects belonging to the textile stuff (from bedding to the duvet thrown informally over the bed, to dents in the upholstery of the chair, to the wash which is hanging to dry in the kitchen) relay the 'miniature' message of textured traces and human imprints preserved upon the 'textile stuff'. However, they also signal the 'gigantic' message of encoding loss and memory in signs of absence that turns the picture from an individual instance to a museum-like evidence of absence.

Hunt makes a similar point when she interprets an art exhibit of ordinary torn shirts as belonging to the space of the 'gigantic' despite being 'textile stuff', because the shirts are anonymous and 'neither relate to a known individual or a friend, nor can we touch or smell them, and therefore they must be interpreted intellectually' (Hunt 2014: 219).

Svetlana Boym (2001) characterizes nostalgia as a 'longing' for the familiar (in contrast to the uncanny which is 'a fear of the familiar'). Berzon MacKie touches on the longing for the familiar that articulates the regret over felt loss at the same time as it idealizes the lost world. The yearning for yesterday expresses a need, says Levinas, to return to the point of origin, the home as the starting point for the self (Casey 1987: 362). It is even more than a longing that is not reducible to a specific locale. Like 'Ithaca' for Ulysses, it is about 'a world, a way of life, a mode of being-in-the-world. In being nostalgic, what we seem to miss, to lack or need, is a world as it was once established in a place' (Casey 1987: 363). It is this quality which takes the longing beyond the specific 'miniature' and into the allegorical, and the 'gigantic', despite being so personal and despite having some objects that are personally identifiable, like family photos of the artist and her sister, and an obituary note made by her aunt for her own sister, the artist's mother

Mirrors

Mirrors are a recurring element in the home photographs of Sofie Berzon MacKie.

Mirrors, begins Jonathan Miller (1998: 1),

those reflective surfaces which produce an image of objects placed in front of them, recur as a pictorial motif in the history of Western art. Painters seem to have been intrigued by the relationship between the virtual reality which spontaneously appears in a mirror and the one which they artificially create by marking an unreflective surface of plaster, paper or canvas. In both cases, the observer sees something which is not where it seems to be.

Mirrors are deceptive views of a 'virtual' beyond. Incorporating a mirror in a composition also allows the artist to see and portray angles the viewer would not normally see, thus introducing three-dimensionality and multiple viewpoints. It is also seen as a means to obtain full knowledge of the soul, a quality that was utilized in the art of self-portraiture. In Christian iconography, the

mirror could symbolize a wide range of contradictory meanings from chastity to vanity. Mirrors partake in the discourse of scientific reality as well as the discourse about reality and illusion.

In Sofie Berzon MacKie's house portraits, the mirrors are a focal point in almost every image. In the imaginary vocabulary of the artist (personal communication), the mirror motif harks back to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* where Alice is intrigued by the world on the other side of a mirror's reflection. Climbing up on the mantelpiece to look behind the mirror she discovers an alternative world which is a reflected version of her own house. The book's questioning of the boundary between dream and reality frames Berzon MacKie's own reconstruction of the magical world in which she grew up. To the house which provides a setting but no actors, she adds the mirror as a hint of the magical world that once existed on the reverse side of the stillness of the current state of the house.

This element of the constructed memory that the artist is trying to recreate returns us to the fundamental question that mirrors and representations constantly allude to: the boundaries between reality and dream, or between facts and interpretations. Pendergrast (2003) sees our use of mirrors as a measure of our own ambivalent nature.

On the one hand we want to see things as they really are, to delve into the mysteries of life. On the other hand, we want the mysteries to remain mysteries. We yearn for definitive knowledge, yet we also revel in imagination, illusion, and magic.

(Pendergrast 2003: xii)

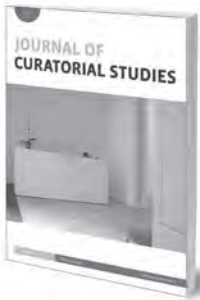
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