

On Marilyn Monroe, Aunt Greta and an Artist's Dress of Many Colors

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September 14, 2010

According to the MoMA website, Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe screen-print series challenged "the concept of the unique art work by repeating the same mechanically produced image until it appeared to be drained of all meaning."

It's tempting to cite Warhol's Marilyns as the inspiration for the 18 screen prints in Miriam Mörsel Nathan's "Greta" series, each of which shows a different colored version of the same dress.

But whereas Warhol used redundancy to emphasize triviality, Mörsel Nathan's series is intentionally repetitive, leaving no color palette untried in its search for the answer to a particular question.

Leafing through pre-World War II photographs, Mörsel Nathan, former director of the Washington Jewish Film Festival, discovered a picture of her aunt Greta, whom she had never met. When she started making prints based on the image, she realized she had no idea what color to use for her aunt's dress.

"The series of screen prints is of the same dress but in many different colors, as if to say to my aunt Greta, 'Which of these do you like?'" says Mörsel Nathan in a wall text at the exhibit "Memory of a time I did not know..." which opens tonight at the Washington D.C. JCC's Bronfman Gallery. "There is little that I know about my aunt... These walls of many dresses remind me of what I don't know."



©"?Which one??" by Miriam Mörsel Nathan, 2009. Photo by Gregory Staley.

Other works in the show, which use techniques like gum transfers, literally obscure the photos Mörsel Nathan found. A box encases the photo in "Elegy" (2009), and try as the viewer might, it is impossible to get a good glimpse of the image. Several works depicting the wedding of the artist's Uncle Josef are covered by veils.

Just as second-generation Holocaust survivors like Mörsel Nathan grapple with the vagueness of postmemory, the artist literally obscures her works to ensure that viewers have trouble deciphering the photographs.

"All of us have a desire to tell our story," writes Steven Cushner, who curated the exhibit. Those who don't have living relatives to tell them tales of the past have to improvise and "complete the story," which ends up being "part truth, part memory and part fiction."

It would be easy to dismiss Mörsel Nathan's "memories" as random guesses. Greta's dress was either green or blue or pink, or another color. It certainly wasn't Joseph's coat of many colors. But to critique Mörsel Nathan's history is to miss the point.

Tim O'Brien famously argued in "The Things They Carried" that the most honest war stories are often real, but not true. Mörsel Nathan's Greta is probably not true, but in her absence, she influenced the artist's life, which allows her to take on a reality of her own.