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Drawing On The Past

Darice Polo At Raw & Co Gallery

By Douglas Max Utter

Drawing is like casting a shadow — but slowly.

The paper gradually fills with varying thicknesses of graphite, controlled by an intense collaboration of hand and eye that amounts almost to magic, rebuilding the darks and lights of retinal perception. Kent State drawing instructor Darice Polo's subtle use of this material speaks of the infinite range of human touch as she engages with essential moments of her own family history. Polo's drawings contrive to resemble enlargements of several of her family's 1950's-era, black-and-white snapshots as closely as possible, reaching deep into memory and photograph alike to revive times lost.

The artist grew up in New York, and two of the photographs she's adapted show outdoor scenes there, on Prospect Avenue and an elevated subway platform in the Bronx. Both feature her mother as a central figure, who is included in all the works in the show, adding an underlying note of elegiac intensity and personal focus.

Walking Down Prospect Avenue 1953 (2005) is 18.5-by-11 inches and took Polo three months to complete (the largest work here is just 26-by-11 inches and was in process off and on for two years). Apparently the original shot was slightly overexposed and out-of-focus, but Polo's patient drawing polishes those qualities, elevating them to almost visionary heights. Tall and slim in a long pale skirt, Polo's mother is a young woman, reaching down to hold a toddler's hand. This is the artist's older brother, about two years of age and dressed in white shoes, socks, shorts and shirt.

Above the waist Mrs. Polo wears a dark short-sleeved blouse; her neck is slightly bent as she looks down at her son. Though she stands on a 20th-century city street, a vintage auto visible beyond the blur of her left arm, the figure seems to be removed from history, bracketed by Polo's acts of attention and translation. The woman who once stood on Prospect Avenue could now almost be a dancer on the walls of Knossos.

This mythic effect is present to some extent in all of Polo's works at raw & co., but Theresa 1948 (2001) is definitely more anecdotal both in tone and execution. Where much of the force of Walking is bound up in a tentative, almost smoke-like trembling of edges, Polo here renders the family photo in a solid grisaille. Her mother again is depicted standing, but this time on the planks of the Prospect Station elevated platform. A subway car approaches on her left, while to her right and a few steps behind a man in a baggy dark suit and fedora eyes her appreciatively. As in the 1953 photo, Theresa is dressed for some special occasion. She carries a satin clutch in one white-gloved hand, a piece of paper — perhaps a program? — in the other as she stares straight into the camera. Partially shading her face, a hat's broad hemisphere increases the visual gravity of her head and echoes her smile.

Each drawing consists of increments of graphite built on the scaffolding (later erased) of a guiding grid. "Otherwise," Polo observes dryly, "they would have taken even longer." She uses graphite points clamped in an architectural rendering tool, constantly comparing the emerging work to the much enlarged original. At first it's very hard to tell that these drawings on Bristol paper aren't in fact photographs of some kind, but the knowledge that they're handmade changes everything. The largest, titled Fela's Visit 1952 (2006), appears at first to be a highly professional product of darkroom technique. But whether because one knows it is not, or because of hints the eye gathers on closer scrutiny, it soon becomes almost alive. Three women of the Polo clan gather around her infant brother and cousin, while her mother's head peeks out from the darkness of the background. Polo's all but Vermeer-like modeling of faces and fabrics combines with the dynamic visual structure of the piece (accidental though it may be) in a quietly profound tour-de-force.

Six small oil paintings on linen collectively titled Sunday Sequence explore a muted color range as they find ways to portray interrupted motion. The source materials for these depictions are segments of 8mm film, transferred first to tape, then to DVD, finally being sampled and cropped in an Adobe application. Deliberately less iconic than the drawings that hang across from them in raw & co.'s tiny gallery space, each shows a frieze-like streak of faces and heads. Again these are family members, including Theresa, engaged in lively conversation. Shadowy overlapping arcs and vectors of glaze (derived from incidents in the computer printout process rather than the original film) add drama and a contemporary flair.

These constitute another phase in Polo's ongoing attempt to breathe life into images trapped and limited by their original medium. Whether still or moving, family photographs tend to be packed with characteristic gestures, expressions and cultural features ranging from hair cuts and hats to headlights and fenders, that have the power to abridge time and move across generations. It has long been a truism that drawings based on photographs lack the spontaneity and élan of those done from life. But it is also no secret that the hand has learned a lot from the lens over the past two centuries. Searching for the authentic lineage of past moments, Polo's photographic sources are made to open onto present perception.

Her compositions might also be considered self-portraits in a special sense, composed not only from snapshots but from the deep impressions of earliest childhood. It is important that Polo herself is not depicted anywhere. But it may be that one eight-inch square oil on panel study of her mother comes close. Sketched in grays, *Applying Lipstick 1948* (2005), shows Theresa as she raises her hand to her mouth; and again the artist conjures a mythic moment, this time almost casually. The face could belong to some classical Nike, long absent from an archaic torso. Unhurriedly, Polo's drawings finally consider the shape and press of life that brought her into being, touching on the mystery of her own absence.

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