Who's looking at the family, now?

Who's looking at the family, now? is an exhibition that engages with some fundamental questions about family life, its dynamics and complexity, as represented by a group of contemporary photographers and artists working in the UK and internationally. 2019 marks twenty-five years since British curator Val Williams' seminal exhibition, *Who's looking at the family?* which opened at the Barbican in 1994, offering the opportunity to consider the multifarious changes, both to notions of the family and photography, that have taken place during this time.

Ranging from documentary modes and found photography to conceptual approaches to the medium, and bringing together forms of construction or performative acts as well as sculptural interventions, the exhibited works meditate on what might constitute, or in some cases deconstruct, a family photograph. Many demonstrate the way images embark on a journey from a point of origin in the private sphere to enter the public gaze. Furthermore, boundaries between internal and external worlds become blurred to create part-spectacle, part socio-historical testimonies that provide windows onto issues of class, race and identity.

Typically, these visual representations depict family members or domestic environments, characterised by an idiosyncratic sense of scene and a focus on keenly-observed behaviour. For nearly thirty years, Matt Finn collaborated with his mother, Jean, on the series simply titled *Mother*. Black and white portraits depict everyday rituals set within her home in Leeds through to the time she spent in residential care at the end of her life. In the parallel project, *Uncle*, the camera follows Finn's uncle, Des, recording the mundane habits and quirks that we recognise in ourselves and the way we utilise our space. Léonie Hampton's project *In The Shadow of Things* explores her family's attempts to clear her mother's cluttered house, documenting the process of unpacking and sorting an avalanche of objects loaded with personal significance and memories. The work exposes the emotional toll that obsessive-compulsive disorder can have, not only on the sufferer, but also on the immediate family, and offers a personal study of the fraught but tender relationship between mother and daughter, and between a mother and her possessions.

Louis Quail's body of work, entitled *Big Brother*, distils his brother Justin's daily struggle with schizophrenia into an intimate photographic portrait without flinching or resorting to sensationalism, creating, like the other artists, a dialogue between agency and objectification. Another intimate universe is portrayed in Mar Sáez's

Vera Y Victoria, a visual diary centring on a love story in which one of the individuals confessed she was transsexual, bringing to light new facets of a relationship and cohabitation. For Trish Morrissey's *Front*, the artist travelled to beaches across the UK and Melbourne, Australia, asking if she could temporarily become part of their family, often assuming the role and the position of the mother figure by standing in and borrowing their clothes. These highly-theatrical photographs perform memory and identity, shaped by chance encounters with strangers.

Who's looking at the family, now? also brings together works that reflect on issues of loss and absence as a means to examine personal, cultural and collective memory. Erik Kessels' *My Sister* is a stretched and repeated replay of a Super 8 film from 1970s, showing Kessels playing ping-pong with his younger sister. As the film unfolds, we are slowly confronted with the reality that his sister was killed shortly afterwards in a hit-and-run accident. Mariela Sancari's project *Moises* offers a meditation on her father who committed suicide when she and her twin sister were fourteen years old, and how he might look and behave if he was still alive. In the local press, she advertised for men that would have been the same age and appearance as her father, who then became her models for studio re-enactment. Alba Zari's *The Y* is an investigation-turned-visual study into the identity and whereabouts of her missing father. The puzzle comes together through attempts, failures and discoveries explored via photographic languages including scientific reports, archival images, film negatives, personal artefacts, mugshots and 3D facial construction. Elsewhere, in *ISIS Mothers*, Poulomi Basu portrays the lives, stories and environments of a number of women across Europe, whose children have embraced extreme versions of Islam and travelled to Syria to join ISIS, in many cases never to return.

Another key theme is the importance of context and the remediation of photography through archives in relation to how the family is perceived and how we connect to the past. Jonny Briggs' interdisciplinary practice, formed of photo-sculptures, collage and staged photography, embarks on journeys into lost parts of his childhood through adult eyes. Re-photographed images, often cut, reconstructed and combined with objects from the home, seek to examine his relationship with deception and the constructed reality of the family in an attempt to question the boundaries between Briggs and his parents, but also between child and adult, self and other, nature and culture, reality and fantasy. Thom Bridge's *One Ear & Both Eyes (2 of 2), T. Bridge (Theo & Thom Bridge)* is a pair of photographs exhibited so that they cannot be seen simultaneously, a restaging of the time he and his twin brother had their photographs taken in the UK for Swedish

passports in 2002, aged fourteen.

Lebohang Kganye's film *Ke Sale Teng* frames an important point: that family photographs are more than just documentation of an event that has occurred, and are also a space for us to project what we can recall, or even to reinvent histories and newly-negotiated meanings. Through the use of silhouette cut-outs of family members and other props in a diorama, the film confronts the conflicting stories that are told in multiple ways, even by the same person. Amak Mahmoodian's *Neghab* series draws on her Iranian heritage. Using historical photographs taken during the Qajar period, which she sourced from Golestan Archives in central Tehran, she creates masks for her relatives to pose with, concealing identities and mystifying the push and pull of absence and presence of individuals close to her that she misses now that she lives in exile. Finally, David Moore's *Lisa and John Project* is an installation that comprises scale maquettes showing the photographer at the scene from a 360-degree perspective while he made the famed *Pictures from the Real World* series on a Derby housing estate during the 1980s.