



About MEMORIES OF PLACES I HAVE NEVER BEEN

In "Memories of Places I Have Never Been," Jill Goldman attempts to tell the story of her father, to construct a coherent narrative of his life and his death. This much is certain: In 1971, when she was nine years old, Goldman found her father dead in his bed. It was August 23, his mother's birthday. He had apparently shot himself in the head. An ambulance came and took him away. That night for dinner, she ate a baked potato and peas.

For almost five decades, Goldman lived with this barest of outlines. Shortly after we met as students in Paris in the early 80s, she told me about her father's suicide in a remarkably blasé tone. Jill was a brilliant, curious and intense student who could expound on everything from Madonna to Julia Kristeva in passionate and hyper-animated discourses and "blasé" was not an adjective typically used to describe her. Yet, she spoke of this seminal catastrophe in her life with zero affect and had no evident desire to uncover the circumstances that led to her father's suicide.

Almost 50 years after his suicide, Goldman was suddenly driven to flesh out this skeletal outline, to find out the story of his death, which is of course also the story of his life, and hers. This powerful and psychically probing exhibition is a visual representation of her efforts. Memories are not immutable facts but dynamic reconstructions, a form of story telling in which our past is rewritten by our present. Traumatic memory, however, exists without a coherent narrative. A piece of us is missing, not because there we have total amnesia, but because the traumatic event is dissociated from our sense of self. But trauma lives on in the body as a kind of possessing spirit, one that wrecks havoc in the form of psychogenic symptoms, inexplicable panics and obsessive repetitions. Freud credits Breuer's patient, the brilliant hysteric Anna O., for coining the term "the talking cure" to describe the healing process through which trauma is given a narration. The alternately dispassionate and poignant pieces in the show chronicle the artist's attempt to give her trauma a narration.

Goldman explicitly grapples with Freud's work on trauma in her artistic practice. This is the title of her previous exhibition at Arcane Space, as well as the title of one of her early films. It's a reference to a game Freud watched his 18-month-old grandson play in which the boy repeatedly tossed a spool tied to a string into his crib, and would exclaim "Fort!" ("Gone!") when it disappeared and "Da!" ("There!") when he reeled it back. Unlike the repetitive obsessions Freud observed in his neurotic patients, (I should mention here that when I first met Jill, she felt compelled to touch manhole covers in ritualized repetitive taps), this game allowed the child to at once dramatize and master the traumatic absences of his mother. The boy had creatively invented a game to express not only his loss but also his triumph over it.

This exhibit is in many ways another Fort/Da for Goldman, her own creative attempt to express her loss and to triumph over it. One section of the show contains photographs of artifacts that belonged to her father as well as collages of his miscellaneous memorabilia, and constructed cardboard boxes that hold the rest. Objects that belonged to the dead tell stories and can function as talismans for the living. They have almost magical powers to resurrect a presence from the overwhelming absence. Even the most mundane belongings can transform into religious relics, capable of miraculously healing our wounds. Yet, despite the artist's efforts, her father's belongings remain oddly insentient, immune to enchantment. They hold less marvelous power than the Parisian manhole covers once held for her, less incantatory magic than the cabinet cards featured in Goldman's 2018 exhibit at Arcane Space, photographs of women she never knew that nevertheless communicated their fictional recollections. Unlike Proust's madeleine, which famously unleashed a flood of memories, these possessions remain inscrutable, triggering nothing so much as absence.

Undeterred by the refusal of her father's belongings to function like Proust's madeleine, Goldman tries a prompt to write his story. Influenced by her love of Nordic noir and the ubiquitous crime boards featured in so many television police procedurals, she assumes the role of detective and creates her own crime board. Newspaper clippings, congressional reports, photographs of showgirls and mobsters are crisscrossed with insistent red lines, punctuated by post-it notes, each convoluted network manically mapping out potential plots. The story of her father's death might be written as a hard-boiled thriller, complete with gangsters in which her father is an outlaw antihero whose death is not a suicide at all, but a mob hit only made to look like one. Another storyline emerges from the labyrinth, this one a tale of noble self-sacrifice in which her father heroically takes his own life in order to preempt the murder of his wife and daughters. Or perhaps the genre is psychological realism in which her father's association with known mobsters is a relatively benign one, no different than that of anyone else who worked in Las Vegas at the time. In this story, his suicide is neither a murder, nor a protective gesture, but the sad end of a clinically depressed man. Unlike the television shows the artist likes to watch, with their reassuring narratives that establish law and order in a chaotic world, Goldman's board most emphatically does not solve the crime. The map it creates only troubles the truth by leading in too many directions.

The exhibition also contains a series of 25 photographs and a video that document Goldman's visits to the places her father once lived. In what she aptly calls a "reverse proustian exercise," she tried to create memories she never had by visiting places she had never been. These mournful and arresting photographs of empty lots and swimming pools, of houses now occupied by invisible strangers, belie their purported function as illustrations of a life. Photographs play an outsized role in shaping our autobiographical memory. Snapshots of our selves, of others, of objects and of places from our pasts are written into our memories and become part of the story of who we are now. By photographing places her father had once lived, the artist attempts to coerce memories of a past she doesn't know by writing the missing story of her missing father, to create a memorial, a remembrance. Instead of prompting memories, these images remain defiantly devoid of any paternal trace, remarkable for their beautiful and eerie emptiness.



The artist has created a limited edition sculpture of what she calls a “research box” to house the information she collected on her journey in search of her father. These multiples are hand-made from decidedly un-precious cardboard and scotch tape, with a single black and white snapshot of one of the hotels she scrutinized for clues haphazardly taped on the cover. Their function as utilitarian evidence boxes is called into question by a competing role. In the end, these humble cardboard constructions assert themselves as nothing less than disenchanting reliquaries made in effort to venerate their contents.

Nor does her video documentation of this trip provide any more clarity. These moving images of Goldman walking alone, of long stretches of flat highways and fields, of nondescript architecture, of the artist laying flowers on her dead father’s dead mother’s grave reveal everything about the futility of her quest, but nothing about the father she’s searching for. The artist tries to coax a connection by shooting the video in a retro style to the soundtrack of “Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head” and “Moon River,” songs from her dad’s era and her childhood.

“The Letter” is the most poignant, elegiac, and emotionally fraught piece in the show. In it, Goldman, sitting in her bath, reads her father’s suicide note for the first time. The viewer expects clarity, yet the note only serves to further mystify his death. He ominously writes that his doctor was right about “a coming thing,” but he also makes the extraordinary-for-a-suicide-note statement that he now “has his head in order.” At times the artist struggles to decipher her father’s handwriting. Is that word “loving” or “living?” The letter only problematizes the possibility of constructing a coherent narrative. It ends with a declaration, not about himself, but about the artist. “Take care of Jill. I know she needs help.” The second half of the video is recently discovered footage of the nine-year-old Goldman purportedly receiving that help. She is in the office of her psychoanalyst, two and half months after her father’s suicide. The nine-year-old Jill Goldman has directed herself in her own movie called Jill Goldman, with her doctor serving as her cameraman. The film is a deeply unnerving drama of identity and loss. The girl cavorts and dances on screen. Inter titles punctuate the movie and articulate her mission: “Here’s Jill herself,” reads one. And then there’s the less assured, “Pretty soon me?” In one scene, “Magic,” Jill engages in her own high-tech version of fort da. Instead of a spool on a string, she uses cinematic tricks to make objects in her analyst’s office disappear. And then, as a grand finale, she turns the trick on herself and she too disappears, only to reappear moments later.

In “Black, Red, White,” the adult Jill Goldman directs herself in yet another film. This time, it’s a video that symbolically both acknowledges her failure to give her father’s death a coherent narrative, and celebrates her triumph over this loss in a symbolic resurrection, not of her father, but of herself. While an audiobook of Proust plays in the background, “I should have assumed that this father had been a monster (...) But, after all, he had a heart of gold,” Goldman is alone in nature, stripped bare. The past, Proust reveals, is always creatively imagined, a fiction we tell ourselves. Even monsters, with the right story, have hearts of gold. In the final scene, the artist sits at the edge of the ocean, where firm ground gives way to fluidity and she rises up and dances.

-Asti Hustvedt

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