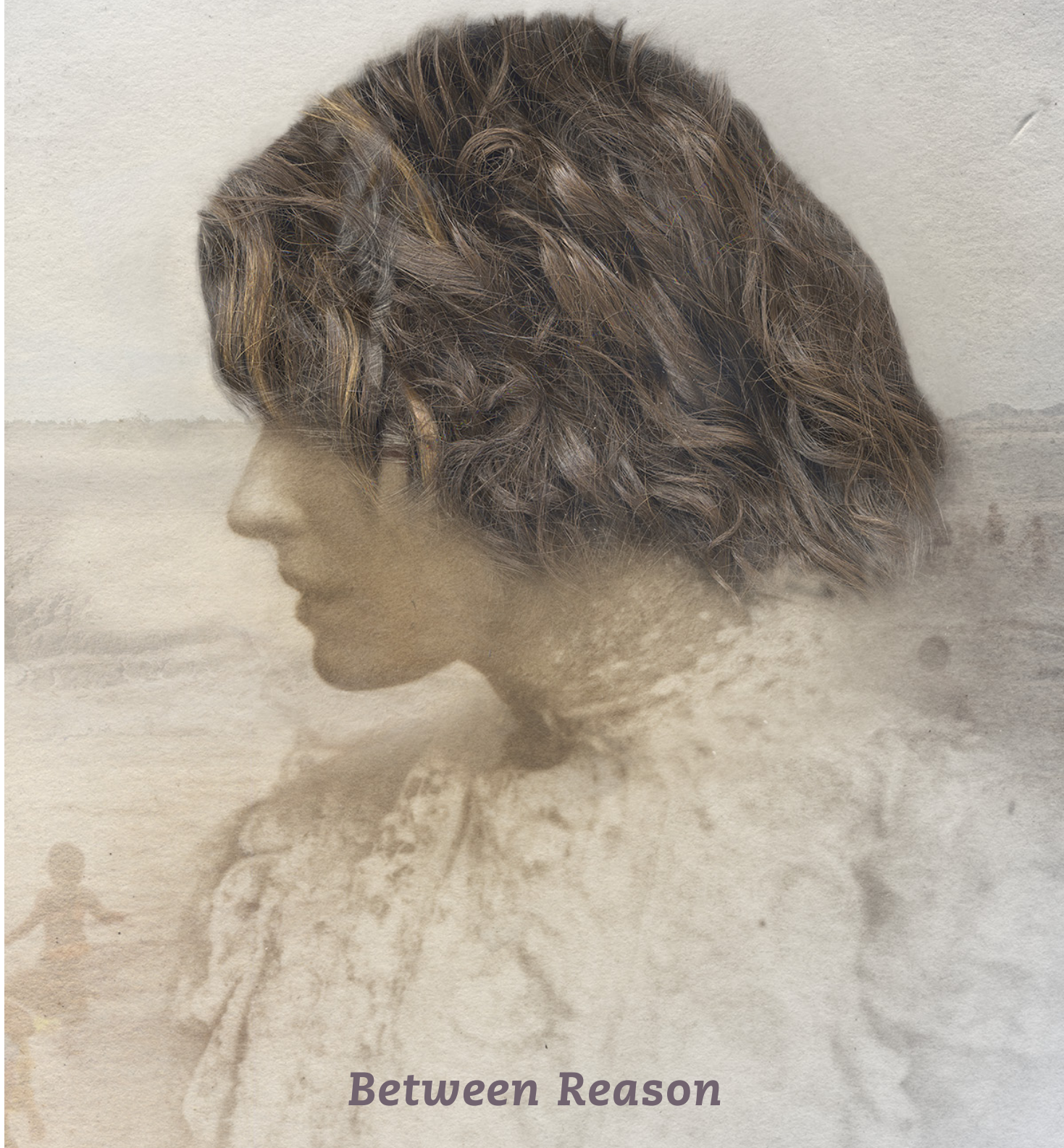


Notre Dame Center for Arts and Culture
THE CROSSROADS GALLERY FOR CONTEMPORARY ART



Between Reason

MARTINA LOPEZ

"Humility"

*I see the silent dreams,
I accept the final days,
and also the origins, and also the memories
like an eyelid atrociously and forcibly uplifted
I am looking.*

— Pablo Neruda

Poets search for a sensation and the words with which to voice it. Likewise, Martina Lopez seeks a vision in images of things more easily felt than seen: memories, origins, final days, and dreams. She creates a world of her own through the photographs that memories and origins are made of. Hers is a statement with a story of her personal journey and also of her medium. In photography's early days, the French poet Charles Baudelaire thought that the new medium was cheapening the work of painters. He wrote that it was encouraging artists "given to painting not what he dreams but what he sees."² The camera's fact-of-nature picture was cold, exact, and immaculate of the essential sensibility of the artist—that ability to see the world through a temperament. Baudelaire believed such creativity was inaccessible to optical apparatus and capture by chemicals. But the mechanical, dispassionate eye set on recording an inventory of the world and its human faces was fast becoming the rage and the norm. It has taken a long time to overcome his characterization. Martina Lopez's story is more personal. Although she grew up in Seattle, her parents were from Ysleta, Texas, and came to the Northwest via military assignments. She began exploring the theme of loss and change at the age of twenty-four following the death of her father in 1986. Photographs had been her substitutes for other missing parts within her family when she discovered pictures of her eldest brother, who was killed in Vietnam when she was only four. Other family pictures of vacations or road trips taken by her father became part of her search for her origins. They formed fill-in patches of a story, surrogates for memories she could not have experienced. Photographs also filled in other gaps. Her three sisters, all much shorter and of darker complexion, used to tease her that she was adopted until her mother showed her a photograph of Aunt Clara who was tall and fair skinned. Seeing the photograph made her feel that she belonged within the family story and its lineage. Through the digital photography she was studying at the University of Washington, she invented a way to address her place in the world. She accomplished this by layering her family's portraits into a photographically constructed landscape, creating her own visual diary of a supposed heritage and the feeling she was developing of her present self. She transferred these first successes using her family photographs in the larger realm of the shared experience of an American culture that had survived the changes of the twentieth century yet felt displaced from its future. Finding old snapshot portraits and late nineteenth cabinet cards of strangers, formally posed with serious, settled faces, carried her thoughts

"Awakening"



away from the changing, frenzied present to a remote stillness, perhaps to a serenity that our time-obsessed world can imagine glowing with everything it thought it had left behind. She saw silenced life stories frozen in the past moments of other people's family photographs, now relegated to second-hand stores. She found a vast neglected pictorial history of the most important personal things—births, relationships, weddings, friends, and places they called home—that rarely had a single name or annotation. They possessed the vivid inexactness of dreams, the illusive element that Baudelaire felt only painters and poets could capture and possess. She instinctively knew which ones of the hundreds of discarded portraits still had a voice that could speak for her within her compositions. She saw what was absent in the studio background and supplanted its placelessness with digital photographic collages of landscapes. Rather than seeking backgrounds that recreated the past, she made contrasting elements in a generic story of remembrance and displacement. This proved to be not a restoration, but a reconstitution, a new idea, a different telling of what the poetic mind might mean by “final days.” That was the work that brought her to national notice and to her first museum exhibition at The Art Institute of Chicago in 1995. Now it acts as a background to her present work. Other experiences intervened in her life story: marriage, children, age, and illness. Her figures are no longer isolated in strange or forbidding landscapes searching for a sense of belonging. The calm that was resident in the old abandoned photographs has finally taken over. The world is still compelling in its immediacy and its past, but, as an artist, she has gained power over both. Or, at least, she has found a way to deal with them. Her present digital ink jet prints are different from her former prints, which were an elaborate process involving assembling the collage of images on the computer screen, and then transforming them into a set of exposure instructions that produced a color positive used to make a conventional color photographic print. Part of her new procedure is due to the improved technology of digital printers. She also has the desire to match like production to like output. A change has also

“Remembrance and origin are no longer founded on missing persons or events, but on a life lived.”

come about for the viewer of her recent work. She now prints her digital images on hand-made Japanese rice paper. Each one is waxed individually to a translucency that gains vibrancy through careful back lighting. The image becomes an object and, at the same time, a delicate, ethereal scrim of light. The sensation is similar to seeing one of the perfect paper negatives by the first masters of the calotype process of the 1850s. An esoteric experience, it echoes the appreciation of luminosity that caused the early practitioners to display their paper negatives as works of art in and of themselves. As her prints have gained unity, her subjects now seem more settled in their places, but she and they can still feel displaced at times. This is a recurring human trait that comes with self-reflection and a glimpse of one's own mortality. One thing has changed for good. Remembrance and origin are no longer founded on missing persons or events, but on a life lived.

Martina Lopez has found what every artist seeks: a way to possess her subject. From photographs that once served as borrowed identity, she has created a method of insinuating herself and her family into discarded portraits, giving back to the lost lives in those found images a heritage they lack in their anonymity. Look closely at the unknown in her work. Look into

their eyes. Their eyes are not their own, but hers and those of her own immediate family. Substituting her eyes for theirs bestows on them a heritage in the way your parents' faces inhabit your own. Now she and they look out at the surrounding scene and at us. Things cohere, at last. The "final days" seem blessed. They also seem touchingly unreal. As the new images are formed, the old curiosity appears. Who is who and where is where? The cycle returns.

— David Travis



"Wander"

DAVID TRAVIS

David Travis is the retired Curator of Photography at the Art Institute of Chicago where he directed photography exhibitions, programs, and acquisitions from 1972 until 2008. He was the founding curator of the Department of Photography in 1975, and directed and designed the major state-of-the-art renovation of the galleries, study room, laboratory, and vaults in 1982.

A specialist in the modernist period, he has organized a number of significant shows and contributed scholarly essays to their catalogues, including *Starting With Atget: Photographs from the Julien Levy Collection* (1977), *Photography Rediscovered: American Photographs 1900-1930* (1979), *André Kertész: Of Paris and New York* (1985), *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography* (1989), *Edward Weston: The Last Years in Carmel* (2001), *Taken By Design: Photography from the Institute of Design 1937-1971* (2002), *Yousuf Karsh: Regarding Heroes* (2008), and *Karsh: Beyond the Camera* (2012).

Although he has organized and presented over 125 exhibitions of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, he has also been active as a guest curator. His exhibitions have been shown at the National Gallery of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art in Osaka, and for the Patrimoine photographique of the French Ministry of Culture, which inducted him as a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1987. In December of 2002, he was named a "Chicagoan of the Year" by the Chicago Tribune Arts critics. A book of his lectures and essays was issued in 2003 by David R. Godine Publisher under the title: *At the Edge of the Light: Thoughts on Photographers and Photography, on Talent and Genius*.