

BERTIEN VAN MANEN
Yancey Richardson Gallery
535 West 22nd Street
Through February 18

FAMILY JEWELS

BY LESLIE CAMHI

The French writer and critic Roland Barthes lived near or with his mother for most of his life. In his brilliant last book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, written in the brief interval between her death in 1977 and his own in 1980, he tells of searching through some photographs of her and finding them all imperfect, until he came across an image which alone for him conveyed "the truth of the face I had loved."

That picture of his mother at age five, standing with her brother in the winter garden of their childhood home, is not among his book's many illustrations. Its significance was perhaps too personal, its worth too deep for him. But in its highly charged absence, it comes to stand for the medium's most precious ability—to capture the uniqueness of a beloved being, to provide a vital link between the living and the dead.

The weight of family photographs, their capacity to telegraph unspecified meanings and emotions, lies at the heart of Bertien van Manen's new project. This Dutch photographer, born in 1942, was commissioned three years ago by the Swiss Ministry for Foreign Affairs to photograph immigrants in the suburbs of Paris. Some of those same neighborhoods were aflame with riots last fall that shook the French nation and struck fear into the heart of Europe.

But van Manen, an accomplished documentarian who has produced book-length photographic essays on societies in transition, including post-Soviet Russia and contemporary China, looked beneath the surface of the *banlieues*, with their evident social problems. She was interested in the visual relics of home that these migrants had borne with them, the people and lands they'd left behind surviving in a kind of semi-imaginary afterlife. Penetrating their modest apartments, she found faded sepia prints and color snapshots of old people, newlyweds, or children in ceremonial garb, stuck into mirror frames, hidden in boxes, or tucked among the teacups.

Van Manen's focus soon widened. The pictures in "Give Me Your Image," her current show at Yancey Richardson Gallery (drawn from her eponymous monograph forthcoming from Steidl), are the fruit of three years spent mining a continent's pictorial memories. (A somewhat different selection lent gravity to the Museum of Modern Art's sketchy "New Photography"

exhibition last fall.) From Madrid to Estonia, with stops in Rome, Belgrade, Vilnius, and across the Channel in West Yorkshire, van Manen took pictures of other people's family photographs.

Sometimes she depicted them in situ, the solemn faces of forebears framed and hanging on luminous green walls or posed with dignity upon doily-covered bedside tables. At other times she's positioned them herself: The portrait of a Prague beauty, circa 1968, occupies an overstuffed armchair, her anxious modernity at odds with the sedentary promise of its brown velour form; or the photograph of a handsome S.S. officer, brought out (presumably from hiding) and propped amid the family silver in Munich.

The history of 20th-century Europe is woven into these images, which show somebody's grandfather as a monarchist soldier in the Spanish Civil War, for example, or a Hungarian uncle's "graduation" photograph from the class of Auschwitz, 1945. (The former prisoners' bodies have filled out a bit, but their shorn heads are still cast down, recalling Primo Levi's description of the strange sudden shame that attended Liberation.) What personal meaning lies hidden in these pictures? Van Manen identifies them only by their current location, leaving the rest to our imagination.



Yancey Richardson Gallery

Visual relics of home: München, 2004

This is not the work of a young photographer, though there's something almost grab-baggy about van Manen's casual framing in color of what are often formal, black-and-white studio portraits, her layering of kitsch figurines, coal miners, and Moroccan wedding couples, as if to suggest that we are living today through the ruins of history. We are all migrants, she implies, from an ancestral past we half carry with us, and from a secret land hidden deep within the self.

The current ubiquity of digital images, their endless proliferation and dissemination, induces a kind of forgetting. The printed photograph, van Manen reminds us, has a life of its own, aging the way our body does, precious because it's vulnerable. (And not entirely trustworthy—I recall, in the days following my father's death, my distinct impression that a photograph of him smiling jauntily, which was propped up for the display mourning in his living room, was already beginning to crowd out my other memories of his body and person.) Van Manen has preserved the curious second life of these images, in a moment when they are threatened with extinction.