

## ARTFORUM

APRIL 2006

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## Bertien van Manen

YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY

In *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag characterizes photographs as melancholy objects that "state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction." Implying Sigmund Freud's idea of melancholia as unresolved mourning, photography here enacts an analogous drive toward death. But in partaking of nostalgia, even if preemptorily, the fascination with death that photographs exercise is, as Sontag cautions, "also an invitation to sentimentality." No one knew this better than Roland Barthes, who found the premonitory suggestion of an open wound in every indexical mechanical trace. His own *Camera Lucida* (1980) is a meditation on absence, compounded by his decision to withhold publication of the very photograph at the core of his musings (his deceased mother as a child in a winter garden).

Sentimentality might be too cloying a word to use in reference to Bertien van Manen's recent show at Yancey Richardson Gallery, but it isn't too wide of the mark. Originally commissioned by the Swiss Ministry for Foreign Affairs to photograph immigrants in the suburbs of Paris, van Manen extended her project to Greece, Lithuania, Moldova, Germany, Italy, Austria, Bulgaria, and Holland, among other places; she also broadened her focus to family photography in general. The resulting series, "Give Me Your Image," completed between 2002 and 2005, is unremittingly intimate. Yet it is as sweeping as it is specific, inadvertently tracing European history from Auschwitz to the last years of Franco's rule to close to the present day.

Views of domestic interiors reveal family snapshots propped on doilies, slotted amid collectibles, nestled among teacups, tucked into mirror or window frames, or hung on walls. In their tight cropping and off-kilter compositions, they imply a happenstance methodology that belies van Manen's often staged reconfigurations. Her choreography is evident in *Prague*, 2004, where we see a framed snapshot, itself depicting a '60s-chic, headband-wearing young woman, propped rather incongruously on the seat of a velour armchair. In *West Yorkshire New Sharlston*, 2004, a small-scale black-and-white group photo of coal miners is juxtaposed not only with diminutive ceramic shoes and a figurine of a winged fairy, but also with a color television playing a show about mining. Like the soot-covered miners, the televised protagonist has a darkened face, clearly the result of stage makeup rather than subterranean dust.



If some of van Manen's equations are patent, they still manage to be oddly ineffable even as they occasionally resonate by treading perilously close to cliché, as in the case of *München*, 2004, which shows a pristine portrait of a German officer amid the family's yellowing silver. The burden of remembering, usually repressed, here uncannily returns. More genuinely disquieting, though, is *Barcelona*, 2004: Three women pose for the camera in lacy frocks, coy smiles playing across their lightly pursed lips. Leaning against a balcony rail, bracing themselves in photographic apprehension, their sanguinity and youthful optimism are, well, poignant. It turns out that one lived through an unpleasant divorce and another committed suicide.

Van Manen's contingent photographs of photographs get at why snapshots are ubiquitous, despite their incapacity to arrest temporality or forestall mortality. They are, in many cases, all we have, whether we keep them or throw them away or hide them in the closet. Resisting the sentimental even as she invokes it is van Manen's quiet triumph. She suggests that our history, and our History, is only paper-thin.

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