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# You Define Me.

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# YOU DEFINE ME

by

NICOLE ANN KLEIN

Under the Direction of Nancy Floyd

## ABSTRACT

The work I created in conjunction with this paper is a representation of myself and my family, both individually and as a unit. The work was spawned by a search for my identity at my current age of 25. The outcome is an installation of photographs that focus on my heritage and family work ethic and a series of altar-like tables highlighting the personalities of my grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, and sister when they were experiencing life at my stage. I believe that this work culminates in defining me. Every element, every individual, reflects a part of myself in the people I love. The following paper explores the elements that come into play in the creation of this work.

INDEX WORDS: Matzo, Sugar, Mourning, Installation, Photography, Heritage



YOU DEFINE ME

by

NICOLE ANN KLEIN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013



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Nicole Ann Klein  
2013

YOU DEFINE ME

by

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Georgia State University

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Upon entering the graduate program, it became clear how little I understood about myself, both personally and artistically. In reflecting upon my character, I think back to my childhood, where it occurs to me (as I am sure it has occurred to many other Americans) that the personal history of my individual family members was a mystery. My inability to define myself was a direct result of my failure to understand my family. A project began to take root. I began to collect research in an attempt to find a common thread among my family and myself; to deepen my overall understanding of my heritage, and to solidify my own self-identity.

Twenty- five seems to have been an integral time for me and acts as a point of departure when examining the lives of my immediate family and remaining grandparents. Since entering graduate school I have been on a quest to define myself and to form myself as an individual and an artist. The integration of family into this definition has led me to the conclusion that much of what defined my family members at the age of 25 and continues to define them today deals with their heritage.

## 2 REPRESENTING A FAMILY

“My dearest Harriet, don’t worry about me, I’m safe. My time spent in Seoul has been quite nice so far, and my skills as a draftsman have significantly grown. The people here are competent, every need is met, with the exception of you. My only hope is that when I return I will be able to meet your every passion. Until then, my dashing good looks should hold you over. Enclosed is a photograph to ensure you that my appearance has not faded. One of the men I am stationed with is quite the artist. He took a photograph of you and rendered the most beautiful drawing; on the cool and quiet evenings it takes me back to you. I miss you, deeply. Leon.”

The above paragraph is the audio from one of the altar-like table tops constructed to represent my grandfather, Leon Klein. The monologue streams from a dark green ammunition box filled with shiny, omnipresent, black rocks. The box sits upon a portion of an elevated end table, covered in a world map dating back to the Soviet Era and is etched with compass marks that transform into sacred geometry patterns.

Each of these elements, including the audio track, is derived from interviews I conducted with my grandfather. At the age of 25, he was involved in the Korean War and was parted from my grandmother, Harriet, with whom he was already madly in love. The ammunition box and compass marks denote his role as a draftsman in the war, whereas the world map alludes to both his military exposure and subsequent world travel with my grandmother. Black rocks fill the ammunition box to signify my grandfather’s total love for her, and his proper Jewish mourning after her death.



Figure 1 *Leon Klein 1952*

*You Define Me* includes five tabletop pieces, one for my paternal grandfather, maternal grandmother, father, mother, and sister. Each tabletop consists of a box with an audio track, that is created independently, based upon the individual it represented. However, the results are anything but incongruous. While a strong visual thread ties the tabletops together, a slight division is revealed when examining the females' installations in relation to the males. The tables of the males are treated more sparingly, relying on muted colors and circular motifs whereas the female tables have bright patinas that create linear patterns.



Figure 2 Female Tables



Figure 3 Male Tables

Although the tables were initially constructed to provide insight into each individual of my family unit, what ultimately is conveyed is the love that drove their lives. My grandmother, Alicia, showed great love for her children. Her table surface is treated with yarn and is topped with a jewelry box filled with gift bows. Due to the lack of commercial goods in Cuba where she

raised her children, Alicia made many of their clothes. Although she had already made a life for herself in Cuba, Alicia left her husband to shepherd her children to the United States, where they would be granted greater opportunity. The audio track that accompanies her box is the only one I did not write. Whereas all the other tracks are scripted in English and are 45 seconds to one minute in length, my grandmother's piece is a reading of a famous work by treasured Cuban poet, Jose Marti, entitled *Los Zapaticos de Rosa*. The poem tells a story of a wealthy little girl who gives up her new and most treasured shoes to an ill girl who is much less fortunate, despite the repercussion of returning home without them. This type of giving is the embodiment of my grandmother.

Alicia's daughter, Mercy, is my mother. Her table is treated with alternating yellow and green beads and topped with an antique Japanese music box filled with turbinado sugar. Despite having relocated to the United States, my mother ferociously holds onto her Cuban heritage and continues to practice the popular Cuban religion of Santeria. The green and yellow beads on her table represent this practice in the form of the patron saint, Obatala. In Christianity, Obatala is generally equivocated with either Saint Lazarus or Our Lady of Mercy (my mother's American name). My mother's time working in the sugar cane fields of Cuba were replaced with a sweeter life in America, where she developed an affinity for the finer things, as well as for Eastern culture.



Figure 4 *Mercy Klein 1986, detail*

Upon coming to the states my mother married my father, Nathan Klein. He was a rough-around-the-edges guy who loved fishing and the outdoors. His table reflects these interests with the fishing line and braided branches that coat the surface. His box is a tackle box filled with live, fragrant, lilies that represent the lilies he gave to Mercy every week in order to demonstrate his love for her. My father was a hot-headed, brash, party animal in his twenties, but he was a business man as well. These elements of his personality are portrayed in the audio component of his installation.

My older sister, Eileen came to fall in love and marry in her early twenties as well. She cooked a hot meal for her husband every night. Yet, although love existed between them, Eileen ultimately decided that she could not lose her own identity for love. As a result, she became stronger and more beautiful, like the nail polish that coats her table. The audio accompanying



her piece speaks of her frustration with her failing marriage. Eileen embodies the same work-hard, play-hard mentality of my father; high heels and a timberland box occupy her table as a result.



Figure 5 *Nathan Klein 1983*



Figure 6 *Eileen Romano 2011, detail*

Boxes serve as a containment device because it is my belief that everyone has a box in which they store small treasures (and perhaps secrets?). An end table supports the presentation of the box, further reinforcing character roles and alluding to domesticity. I define these individuals largely on how their domestic lives define them. The audio track, which is a reenactment or simulation of the individual, is the only thing that gives them public voice. In other words, I give them public voice based upon my perception of them.

## 2.1 INFLUENCES

Another artist who works with boxes is the well-known mixed-media artist Lucas Samaras. His 1988 *Boxes and Mirrored Cell* exhibition at the Pace Gallery included box work containing fishing lures, beads, yarn, and rainbow colored pencils. Each box features an image of Samaras, often prominently placed. Although the boxes frequently resemble a sort of endless cos-

mic chasm, they are often self-referential. This notion is reinforced by the implementation of biological diagrams and religious figures. The elements Samaras combines interest me. His use of everyday items, combination of lens based media, and prominent placing of scientific and religious figures are elements that I examined in the construction of my boxes. Yet, the interweaving of these elements takes on a different role in my pieces, aiming to reconcile the past and present, myself with my family, and my family with their heritage.

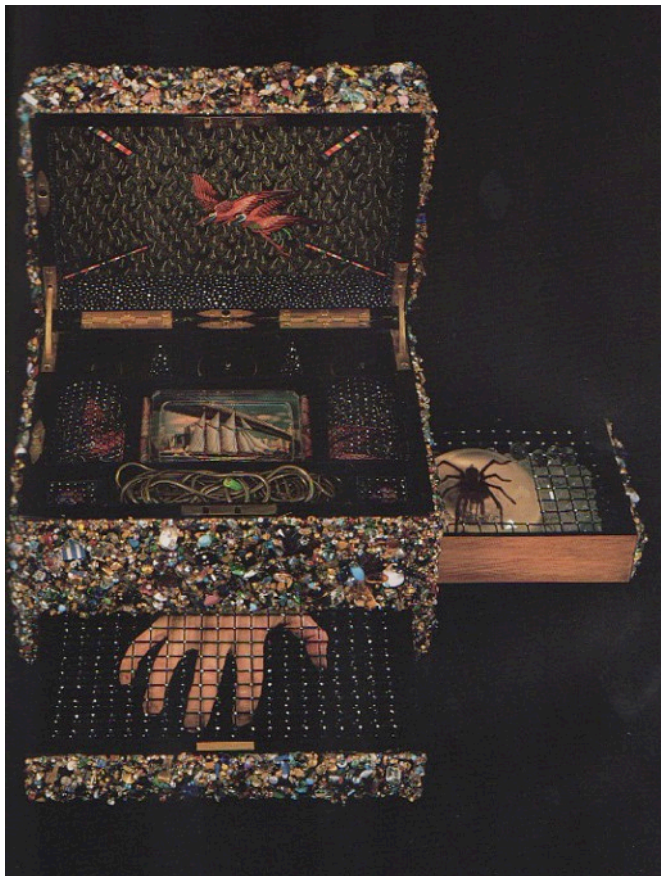


Figure 7 Lucas Samaras, *Box #124*, 1988, mixed media

I choose to use lens-based media in my installations, displaying photographs along side the tables. The photographs consist of three elements: shoes, sugar, and matzo. After examining my family members individually and defining them primarily through their love, I created photographs as a unifying thread to comment on my family's heritage and work ethic. Sneakers in



the photographs represent the work-hard mentality of certain family members, whereas high heels represent both the product of their toils and the play-hard mindset. We are defined by our labors. My mother signifies her success through the purchase of shoes: she has amassed a hundred pairs she still deems fashionable. My father's shoes chosen for a purpose: a pair to work, a pair to fish, to keep warm in the cold weather, to protect his feet while swimming.

Sugar and Matzo in the photographs allude to Cuban and Jewish heritage respectively, and to the idea of labor. Sugar is one of Cuba's primary exports, and many citizens produce cane. The cane is frequently partially processed into turbinado sugar, a sugar that lies somewhere between white and brown. It is mixed, much like my background. The Cuban people often depend on this crop to repay the country's foreign debts and have toiled in the past to try and make it so. The fable of the Jewish people's plight from the wrath of the Egyptian pharaoh speaks of unleavened bread's role in keeping them fed while wandering in the desert. While the photographs I created are of individuals' shoes, they are masked with either matzo or complimented with sugar.



Figure 8 Left to Right: *Mercy Klein, The Family, Nicole Klein*



Figure 9 *Leon Klein and Eileen Klein*

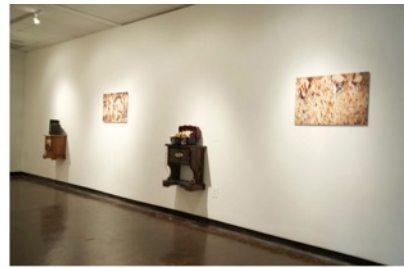
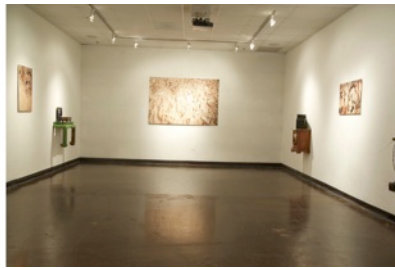
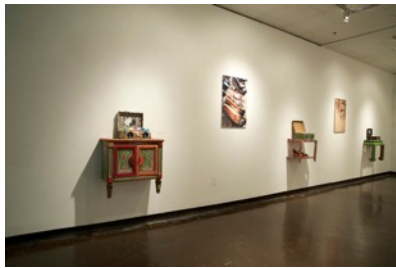


Figure 10 Installation View

### 3 ON MOURNING, MEMORY, AND PERCEPTION

Geoffrey Batchen's book, *Forget Me Not*, deals with the immortalization of images and their arrangement with other items. In his writing, he speaks of timelines intersecting in the construction of lockets and other such mementos. There is the time that the photographs were taken, the time of each objects manufacture, the time in which these objects were combined, and the time that it is being viewed. *You Define Me* adopts this complex weaving of time and raises questions about the subject's past in relation to my present.

In commenting on photographic lockets, Batchen states, "... a photograph by itself was not enough to alleviate the fear of mortality to which the object is surely dedicated" (p. 61). In a sense, *You Define Me* stands as a shrine that express both my fear of mortality, while granting my family member's everlasting life. As the void in my family history fills, I feel myself creating these works in a state of pre-mourning. Annette Kuhn suggests that the act of taking a photograph implies the death of that moment and, arguably the death of that moment's memory. It is my impression that false memories can be created in this fashion as well. Through the use of story and image, the memories of my subjects become open to my interpretation. Kuhn observes, "the memories promised by the family photography industry are characterized by pleasure and held-off closure – happy beginnings, happy middles, and no endings to all the family stories" (p. 477). My work is forced to function in a similar fashion. I represent my family somewhere in the middle of their lives, keeping my impressions of their characters in perpetual limbo.

Orhan Pamuk is a Nobel Prize award winning writer who put items that related to his 2008 novel, "Museum of Innocence" on permanent display in Istanbul. The Museum seeks to provide visual support to his story. It is highly nostalgic and houses a plethora of items, including over 4,200 cigarettes that were smoked by his love (Kennedy). They are used to reinforce the

narrative and to strengthen the viewer's perception of the individual as well as to invoke nostalgia.

Pamuk's Museum not only creates a story for his lover Fusin, but also speaks of the historical state of Turkey. He weaves elements of the era into his displays, from tricycles to images of scandalous women in the newspaper. The struggle Turkey experiences with regards to the push toward and pull against westernization is prevalent. Similarly, Cuba has struggled with the embrace of "western" culture. Its geographic presence implies that it should mimic the United States in some way, yet it does the opposite. History takes precedence over capitalism. Country resides over all.

Lastly, Pamuk incorporates sounds into his museum. Vanessa Larson of the Washington Post notes that, "soft music, the whirl of a machine, running water or the twittering of birds — are occasionally used to help set the scene". Like Pamuk, I use sound as a primary element in my boxes, to tell you the stories and of my family. Individual voices speak about their experiences as youths. Failed marriages, mental ailments, drug use, and child bearing all come into play as visual cues imply the complexity of these situations. Pamuk states that "this is a museum about daily life" (Larson, 2). Yet, it is about the daily life of Pamuk as well. The book and museum are both drawn from experiences with people he loved, in a place he was familiar. He gathered the supplies he needed to represent his loved ones individually, as well as in the context of a culture, much as I attempt to do in *You Define Me*.





Figure 11 Image from inside Orhan Pamuk's Museum, Istanbul, Photo Credit: Reuters



## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Gustavo Perez Firmat, author of *Life on the Hyphen*, calls individuals who immigrated to this country as adolescents the 1½ generation. This generation consists of individuals having migrated from Cuba after having been raised there. He cites the likes of Desi Arnaz and Gloria Estefan in this group and goes on to quote Rubert Rumbaut:

“These refugee youth must cope with two crisis-producing and identity-defining transitions: (1) adolescence and the task of managing the transition from childhood to adulthood, and (2) acculturation and the task of managing the transition from one sociocultural environment to another.”

Although I am not personally part of the 1½ generation, I believe that I am currently undergoing some of these transitions in that I am transitioning into adulthood after having been transplanted from the Northeastern United States to Atlanta, GA. Although these locations are in the same country, the difference is staggering. I experience limbo between the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation that I am and the 1½ generation that I want to represent.

*You Define Me* was created to explore and configure myself in the context of my family. The resulting installation provides insight into the transitions required of 1½ within the framework of my family unit. Each individual had undergone transitions from adolescence to adulthood and though the changes did not necessarily result in a sense of displacement, each would have been dramatically displaced without the presence of family.

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