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Turning Family Snaps Into True Art

By Jemma Buckley

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The artist's style was born after she took a dislike to her wedding photos.

Maggie Cardelus' exhibit "Total Environment" explores the concept of the home and family through a mix of slideshows, collages and delicate paper sculptures.

Cardelus' family photo archives, which contain tens of thousands of photographs, form the basis of her creations. She releases the photographs from their flat and static state by cutting them into strips, from which she creates elaborate patterns and delicate paper sculptures.

Today, Cardelus' three young children are at the heart of her very personal work, their faces and bodies prominently displayed, mostly naked. Her creations, three-dimensional layers crafted from family photographs, are attached or scrawled over her children's images.

One of the most striking shots is a floor-to-ceiling photograph of Cardelus' toddler daughter, Laura. She is naked in the photograph, with a belt of exploding flowers crafted from strips cut out of family photographs, which stick out of her stomach.

The creation is part of a larger collection of works called "Laura's Inheritance." Another photo has a swirl of images around her own pregnant belly.

"Since I don't want my own desires or what I have for her to inherit to be a burden, to weigh her down, to oppress her — I want her to be free — I turned all of these things into art," Cardelus said at the opening of the exhibition.

"I turned [Laura] into a vase and put all of the things that I care about into her like flowers," she said. "The piece is about how what is important to me may not be important to her. Here she preserves everything without needing to worry about it in real life."

Cardelus said she works as an artist and as a mother and believes that the dual role helps to keep both worlds thriving.

"I create art, and at the same time I draw out family problems and recognize tensions that would otherwise go unnoticed," she said.

Her interest in transforming personal photographs began after her wedding. She didn't think the photographs taken that day reflected the essence of the event or her relationship toward her husband, so she took a pair of scissors and began to cut out the images.

Part of the exhibition is a video that flicks through 20,000 family photographs taken over a 10-year period. The photographs are reshuffled and presented in different combinations, providing different memories.

If played continually, the video would take 10 years to watch. The exhibit finishes Sunday, so no one is going to manage that feat.

"Total Environment" runs at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art on Tverskoi Bulvar till Sunday. Metro Pushkinskaya or Tverskaya. 495-694-2890. www.mmoma.ru/en.

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