

Review of Bertha Alyce: Mother exPosed

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Originally published in SPOT (cover), Spring 2004

Book Info:

Bertha Alyce: Mother exPosed

Gay Block

Essays by Kathleen Stewart Howe and Eugenia Parry

292 pages with DVD: Bertha Alyce

University of New Mexico Press, 2003

\$ 39.95

This is a velvet brick of a book - gorgeous on its surface, making a well considered case from within. It's a scrupulously honest family album - beautiful and moving, creepy and incendiary.

It's about many things: faith in tenacity, in story telling, and in truths that a camera can tell. It's about gilded cages, witchy mothers, and favored brothers. It's about princesses, princes, kings and queens; about being Jewish, prominent and wealthy in the South. It's about a mother, a daughter and a private journey made public. It's about a battle that's defined at birth. It's about a bone deep desire to get at truths that are unquestionably sad and implausibly redemptive. And it's about the way that photography, film, words and design can tell a complex story in a new way.

It concerns two smart women. Each is ambitious - and each uses all the tools she can lay her hands on to shape her life. One of them happens to be a remarkable photographer and writer and the other never quite grew up - a narcissist's narcissist.

It's as if Diane Arbus had gone inward and photographed the Nemerovs; or if she had been born into Lartigue's family, and the Lartigue family had been from Houston and overseen by a mother worthy of the oddest corners of Edward Albee's brain.

Or something.... It's quite a story.

Bertha Alyce: Mother exPosed shares as much with recent memoirs (Mary Carr, Ian Frazier, Alice Sebold, etc.) as it does with contemporary photography. And it moves photography into literary narrative in new ways. But it is a family album, and like all family albums, its story is its own. The main thread involves Gay Block and her mother.

The book feels much like a novel - physically. It's small in size (for a photo book) and it reads, in a mix of words and images the way an R rated children's book might read. Image to word, word to image - through chapters, through color changes, through time, through Gay Block's photographic career and life, and through the oddness of her mother's self-centeredness and philanthropy. It bounces around a bit with introductions - a general disclaimer by two of Bertha Alyce's best friends; photographs of mothers that Block would have preferred, and then moves quickly onto a time line that follows Block and

her family from her grandparent's generation to her mother's death and beyond.

I've looked at Gay Block's work now for over twenty years, and much of it resolves in this book (and DVD - for there's a documentary film enclosed that brings these characters to life). Gay has said that no matter who she photographs, that the person she actually confronts is her mother. And it seems to be the truth. If a direct connection is not apparent, then at least the spectre of Bertha Alyce seems to float in the background.

Bertha Alyce Masur was born in Monroe, Louisiana. As Block says, she always wanted to be a Southern Belle, and she came about as close to being one as a Jew might. She was brought up rich by a father beloved in his town, and a mother with problems; she traveled, went to Sophie Newcomb College; she was, if not conventionally beautiful, striking, and she was flirtatious and charming in a captivating way. She loved men and she loved their attention and after careful consideration, married Irvin Shlenker a bright man, who she took on more for his financial prospects than for love. (She had been jilted by the man she did love.) And it quickly becomes apparent that she had no great use for children - beyond a decoration of sorts for the idealized life that she imagined. (In her afterword Eugenia Parry writes a brief but compelling psychological analysis of Bertha Alyce that examines her parents - particularly her mother who had a nervous breakdown and was removed from the home at a vulnerable time in Bertha Alyce's young life.)

The Shlenkers moved to Houston, Irvin became a banker and was quite successful. The couple ascended the social ladder, and arrived at a place of apparent royalty. They had two children, Sidney and Gay, ran their large home with hired help, attended important events, ultimately became philanthropists, and helped to shape the city. Sidney went on to run the Astrodome, own the Denver Nuggets, and build the Memphis pyramid among other things. And Gay, after a rocky childhood, married, had two kids of her own, began to photograph seriously, left her husband, recognized herself as lesbian, and eventually, with her partner, Rabbi Malka Drucker, left town, first for Los Angeles and then for Santa Fe.

Her work, over the past twenty-five years, has been both personal and political (a project on Holocaust survivors/protectors was shown at MOMA). But since her first photos (as a child) her work has involved her family and the Jewish community - both in Houston and in the wider world.

In the book, she has used not only the camera (in every conceivable format), but also video, tape recordings and interviews as ways to understand where she, her mother and her community came from. Initially, her Houston work seemed very critically edged to me, and Gay herself speaks of what she thought of as a superficiality that she hated. But time and understanding soften one's response and the photographs now, particularly in the context of this book seem much more sympathetic. And Block's current acceptance of this community is palpable.

(Gay in her youth seems like the child one often gets a glimpse of in French films - the boy or a girl who photographs behind the scenes at family

events - capturing all the embarrassing stuff that no one wants acknowledged, much less revealed. This young photographer then becomes the director of the movie you're watching. I can see Gay as a kid in this role, seething at the hypocrisy around her, snapping away with pleasure and spite...)

But time moves on. And this book is about her attempt at reconciliation with her mother. And this is not easy...

Bertha Alyce was a mother to contend with. From Block's portrait, she seems to have done whatever she wanted to do. Money was never scarce, nor were affairs, and the social scene was what mattered most. Her life centered on men, parties, friends, fund raisers and the temple. It did not center on her children, and it particularly did not settle on Gay who was taught from an early age to think of herself as fat, ugly and stupid. The double whammy was that Sidney, her brother, could do no wrong.

So Gay picked up a camera and used it as a means of self protection and definition. She had talent from the start. Some of the early Brownie shots are reminiscent of, and as good as early Eggleston's. She had an innate eye for color, for composition, for time and for implied story. And she had found her subject matter.

Bertha Alyce: Mother exPosed is innovatively designed and beautifully printed (one of the most difficult jobs of design, given the diversity of materials that one could imagine) and Cynthia Madansky, the art director, should be commended. The layout and the way the story unfolds is natural. The mix of old family pictures, black and white shots of Houston, color from Miami and elsewhere, arranged photographs of jewelry and furs, a series on Bertha Alyce's face lift, footage from old movies and video, and even a Duane Michaels/Jules Feifferish series that concerns Gay's relationship with Malka are all thrown together... Quite a mix, but the flow is easy, entertaining, salacious in a low key way - a story well told.

There are two fine essays that follow Gay's work, a short appreciation and explication of Gay's portraiture by Kathleen Stewart Howe and a lengthy ruminative psycho-historical essay by Eugenia Parry. As much as I enjoyed each, I have questions about their inclusion. I think Bertha Alyce: Mother exPosed stands on its own, needing no immediate commentary. Good books don't need buttressing, and this one, as filled with words and explanation as it is, particularly doesn't. Parry's essay does explore history that is not otherwise covered... but even so, I'd just as soon have had the whole story told from within the family.

This is finally a photography book, and the photographs fill it - black and white, color, arranged studio shots, old family portraits, girls at camp, snaps at parties etc. etc. etc. The book is jammed with them and their resonance and seriousness and comprehensiveness is close to overwhelming. One is enveloped in the imagery of family - and narratives, implied or otherwise spin off each page in jangled ways. One brief example: Gay's mother collected jewelry, jewelry that Gay did not particularly like, but jewelry that was expensive. And Gay inherited it all. Gay also, it seems, has bought a lot of jewelry over the years, but of a very different sort. In a flash of recognition she sees the

parallel and the difference in taste - along with the love that her mother gave to things - a love that might have gone elsewhere. And she lays out page after comparative page of rings, earrings, bracelets and the like. The different life styles but the shared need for adornment is oddly sweet. Some she poses in juxtaposition with the cakes, pies and desserts that she consumed in the same comforting way, when she was a child. And ultimately the care with which both sets are arranged seems filled with both love and regret.

This book is a testament to tenacity. It's been fifty or more years in the making and now that it's done, it will be interesting to see what Gay Block does. The ability to photograph well in both color and black and white, to write coherently and to film and edit as she does is rare.

Oddly, after all the bitter news conveyed by the book, the impression one is left with from the DVD, is of some sympathy for Gay's mom. And the even handedness with which Bertha Alyce is approached in the video gives the viewer/reader a sense of trust in the evidence gathered in the book. There are no cheap shots. Granted, Bertha Alyce, in most of the sessions is old, and some of the more self-reflective comments come after she has suffered a stroke. But she still comes across as struggling: a woman near the end of her life, trying with not a little confusion, to understand the ramifications of that life, and her relationship with the daughter who questions her.

If there's hope here and new life, then so be it. We see and we hear this story somewhat voyeuristically, but all of us have mothers and fathers, and each of us, in a different way has navigated the lived pages of a similar family book... and in our individual ways, we each share Gay's conflicted but enduring understanding of love.