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Women's Work: Peggy Levison Nolan at Dina Mitrani Gallery

By David Rohn

The current exhibition of Peggy Levison Nolan's photography entitled *People Places Things* at Dina Mitrani Gallery offers an extended view of things that may have become so familiar that we scarcely notice them anymore. And this artist's distilled sensibility instills these images with the power to reveal meaning and beauty that is so often borne in the simplest of our surroundings.

A housewife, mother of seven and tutor of Photography at Florida International University, Nolan has been photographing her own home environment for years. And this show, which presents apparently mundane images of motherhood imbued with a mystical recollection and tenderness, couldn't be further removed from the ironic, sometimes angry work of women artists who have previously used objects such as stove tops, dresses made of raw meat and the degradation of stereotypically female chores – for example mopping the floor with their hair – to reject the demeaning role foisted upon women (by men).

In Western culture it has come to pass that many families now rely on the income provided by women and even middle class mothers of young children are usually needed as additional breadwinners. Nolan's familiar images of bathing a toddler, or a rag draped over a kitchen faucet nostalgically reference a time when women rebelled at the prospect of being made to stay at home to take care of the kids; something that may look, at least in a child's earliest years, like a lost luxury nowadays.

However, in Nolan's work there is nothing to suggest an ideological stance. Instead this grouping of photographs seem more like a transcendent look at a reality that all children who grew up in kitchens, bathrooms and backyards know well; one that recalls all the subtle messages of learning with siblings, guided by working adults. A common denominator of love and caring; something so fundamental to social cohesion that maybe it too got lost somewhere among the Puts and Calls, Pension Plans and car payments.

As if oblivious to Feminist and Post-Feminist art constructs these photographs often deal with a spatial language that transcends the seeming banal images; and this richness compounds the depth of their message.

The photograph of the bicycle leaning against the wall, for example, outwardly appears to recall the casual way a child parks a bike, but moreover the image suggests that something as banal as a wall, which defines a secure space and provides support to a structure, is fundamental to the socio-emotional environments that communities and families require to engender the basic confidence needed to nurture the next generation. The leaning instead of locking the bike is in turn endemic to the sense of trust we want children to have; even if as adults the action often seems ill-advised.

Another photograph of a couple buried in the Sunday Paper in bed features an infant between them acts as if they too can read the paper. The image seems to appeal to the humorous behavior of children in particular their aping of adults, but the real event here is the one we have all known and been so comfortable in that we don't even think about it: the event of familial or communal serenity experienced when we spend time in separate tasks but in proximity to fellow tribe members – such as reading separate sections of a newspaper. The look of contented engagement on the child's face confirms that she doesn't even have to know how to read to feel a part of what's going on.

Another, of a toddler being given a bath, with her face just above water, surrounded by floating letters of the alphabet, bespeaks the nurtured emergence of life, of intelligence, of consciousness and an emerging growing body

too. All rendered safe, all carefully guided by a caring parent, a guardian whose presence is confirmed by the fact of the camera's presence.

In fact, the presence of the camera, monitoring quiet domestic scenes, winds up suggesting a vigilant presence; and this implied presence seems a metaphor parenthood itself; not to record something unusual or unexpected, but simply to confirm that security and serenity rule the roost.

The objects and spaces, even the faces in the pictures are shopworn, careworn in a way that constantly reminds us that our survival, beyond oxygen and water, but well before BMW's (or even ballet lessons), is based on caring. Maybe what gives these photographs their power is that they are about the caring of parenting and belonging to a community; things that seem to have lost their emphasis as we all pursue our individual goals, inadvertently replacing communality with competition.

There was a time when some said that caring and nurturing were talents to which many women were better suited, but those days are long gone. In that sense maybe these photographs are reminders that caring and nurturing are qualities that people of all ages and genders need to be able to give and to receive. Part of the message certainly seems to be that childhood needs don't necessarily go away when we become adults, they just go unrecognized.

Whether these photographs suggest a rejection of contemporary interest in surprise or shock, or a rejection of a perceived 'status-quo' they do stand out. Perhaps this is because they traffic in a common denominator of accessibility, with no prior knowledge of contemporary art processes or assumptions required, to virtually everyone who had some kind of childhood. So unlike a lot of contemporary art that suggests we discover something new, these pictures seem to ask the viewer to go back and take another look at what they already know[.]

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