Intermediate Impossibles

Alvira Ferreira

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Fig 3. *Family Gathering*

Introduction

In my body of work, Intermediate Impossibles, I have used painting to explore the unspoken dialogue that exists between the different generations within my family over a long period. I recently came across old photographs of my maternal family. Some of these photographs are more than one hundred years old and go back five generations. As I looked through these images I found myself comparing my generation to the older generations. It became clear to me that the function and context of photography have changed over the last century.

The photograph

My generation live very different lives from previous generations, the difference becoming markedly greater as the years between the generations increase. Considering attitudes towards photography, the most obvious differences can be seen in dress, attitude towards the camera, and the function of the photograph. Five generations back the taking of a photograph was a formal occasion. The composition was carefully planned and the best clothes were worn. A photograph was meant as a document of a living memory for future generations so that those persons represented in the photograph would be saved from oblivion (Berger 1980: 52, 54).

This page:
Fig 4-6. *Family Gathering* (details)
Opposite page:
Fig 7. *Family Table I*
(old family photograph)

This page:
Fig 8, 9. *Family Gathering* (details)
Opposite page:
Fig 10. *Family Table I* (new family photgraph)

Fig 11. *Family Outing*

In contrast, my generation take photos whenever we feel like, wherever we are, whatever we are wearing and upload and share them on the internet, alter or delete them as we see fit. We are no longer reliant on a handful of photographs to document our existence for the future. Once a photo has been shown to those we wish to view it or put on Facebook, it loses its value. Photographs are so prevalent that it is almost unnecessary for us to form memories and remember people (Berger 1980: 55).

Creative process

In my creative process, I imagined what it would be like to know and interact with the previous generations in the photographs. I formed liminal spaces by digitally collaging together old family and digital or Facebook photographs to create scenes in which my sister and maternal cousins interact with old family members. As a metaphor for warped time and the coming and going of generations, I incorporated floral backgrounds. Flowers were often used in seventeenth century Dutch paintings, called vanitas paintings, to speak about the fragility of man, the inevitability of death, and the temporality of human life (Miegroet 2013). In my work these flowers serve as an altered reality context and as a reminder of the temporality of each generation.

This page:
Fig 12. *Family Outing* (detail)
Opposite page:
Fig 13. *Family Table III* (old family photograph)

This page:
Fig 14. *Family Outing* (detail)
Opposite page:
Fig 15. *Family Table III* (new family photograph)

Fig 16. *Family Line*

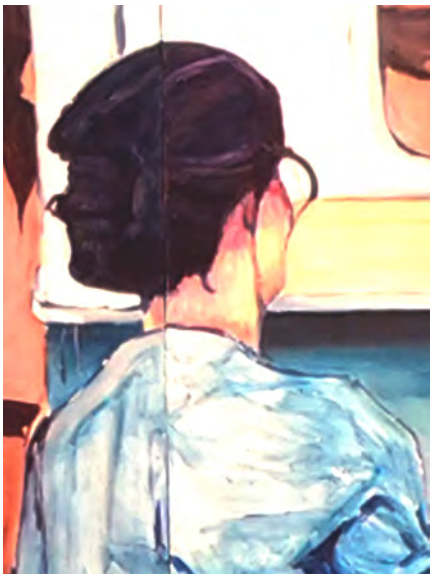
Painting

These collages I reworked into large scale, multi-panelled paintings with the purpose of recontextualizing the photographs. Painting makes the viewer aware of the subject and mediated nature of the image (Preller 2010: 231,232). With photographs we are aware that the people represented in them have over time changed, gone far away, or are dead. Inherent absence and loss are implied in them. The paintings, on the other hand, do not fragment in this way. They are not exact representations of the past, or of the present, but suspend the images in an altered time and place, making them perpetual in a way that photographs cannot (Preller 2010: 232, 234). Also, paintings are not so easy to discard as photographs. They have more physical value and presence. Thus, the reading of the photographic images is shifted in my work (Preller 2010: 232).

Who, what, were

In Family Gathering (fig 3) I have combined a photograph of my grandmother, her little brother and her father under a pepper tree on the family farm where my grandmother grew up(fig 7), with a photograph of my sister with our two oldest nephews (fig 10). For Family Outing (fig 11)I have used a photograph of my uncle and a friend when they were boys playing with toy rifles (fig 13), to construct tension, so that it looks as if they are aiming at my two oldest nephews (my uncle's sons) kneeling sympathetically in front of a deer (fig 15). Family Line (fig 16) shows my sister and again our two oldest nephews, standing in line waiting to be served (fig 22) against the backdrop of a photograph of my grandfather as a child and his brothers posing for the photograph in a line from the oldest to the youngest (fig 18). Family Suspicion (fig 23) juxtaposes a photograph of my great grandfather (also shown in Family Gathering) sitting on a bench with his dog (fig 25), with a photograph of my oldest nephew, holding a bow in his hands (fig 27). In Family Wit (fig 28), a very formal photo of my great, great, great grandmother (fig 29) is combined with a photograph of my youngest nephew goofing around (fig 30).

This page:
Fig 17. *Family Line* (detail)
Opposite page:
Fig 18. *Family Table I* (old family photograph)



This page:
Fig 19-21. *Family Line* (detail)
Opposite page:
Fig 22. *Family Table III* (new family photograph)

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Fig 23. *Family Suspicion*

Formal aspects

I glazed over the old photo parts of the paintings with a sepia colour to give them an old look. In general, I used loose brush strokes in these works because my goal was to create an impression of these assembled scenes rather than an exact representation. To strengthen the idea of an altered or liminal reality, I have suspended my paintings a few centimetres away from the wall.

Ian Grose

I have been inspired by the work of Ian Grose. His paintings, like my work, recontextualises images to create new meaning (Stevenson gallery, 2013). He too reworks internet images and personal photographs into paintings and his focus is on the interpretation, rather than on the reproduction of photographs into paintings (Stevenson gallery, 2013).

Intermediate impossibles

The resulting images can be described as surreal narratives in which time is warped. My work oscillates between the past and the present. I have combined elements that could never come together in the real world to create "intermediate impossibles", ideas that are defined by the merging of juxtapositional elements (Bedroom Studio: 2012). "Intermediate impossibles" is a term or tool that was developed by Edward de Bono1 as a way of setting aside assumptions in order to transition from one idea to another (Bedroom Studio: 2012). My paintings portray impossible situations as they intervene in my family history, allowing me to set aside what I know about the past and the present and form new links and ways of thinking.

This page:
Fig 24. *Family Suspicion* (detail)
Opposite page:
Fig 25. *Family Table II* (new family photograph)

This page:
Fig 26. *Family Suspicion* (detail)
Opposite page:
Fig 27. *Family Table II* (new family photograph)

Opposite page:
Fig 28. *Family Wit*
This page:
Fig 29. *Family Table III* (old family photographs)
Fig 30. *Family Table III* (new family photographs)

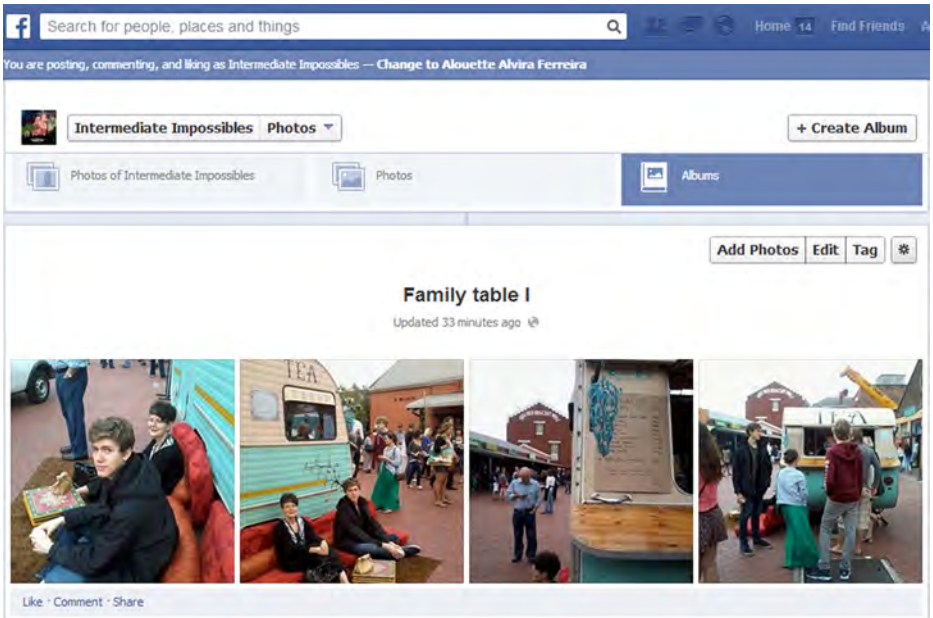


Fig 31. *Family Table I* (installation view)
Fig 32. *Family Table I* (Facebook screen capture)
Fig 33. *Family Table I* (mobile tag)

Family Tables

For the exhibition I have constructed three groupings of photographs that contain the old and the new photographs I have used for my paintings in addition to others I could have used. The old photographs I display horizontally suspended from the ceiling between Perspex's sheets in three "family tables" (Family Table I, Family Table II, Family Table III) (fig 31, 34 and 39). In all three I have included a mobile tag (fig 33, 36 and 39) that links to one of three albums on the Facebook page of this body of work (fig 32, 35 and 38). These tables help the viewer understand where the paintings come from.

Linda Fregni Nagler

An artist that also looks extensively at how the anthropological and historical context of a photograph influences its perception, is Linda Fregni Nagler (Nagler 2012:2). Her work, which focuses on the act of collecting found photographs, seeks social or aesthetic coherence within a given era (time or culture) of the representation of reality. She appropriates, re-photographs, and re-creates these photographs in order to warp time and shift aesthetic perception in order to create "a contemporary version of the original, somehow and 'impossible' photograph" (Nagler 2012:2). Similar to my family tables, she has displayed hundreds of old photographs in a display case in her work The Hidden Mother2 at the Venice Biennale 2013 (Nicolao 2013).

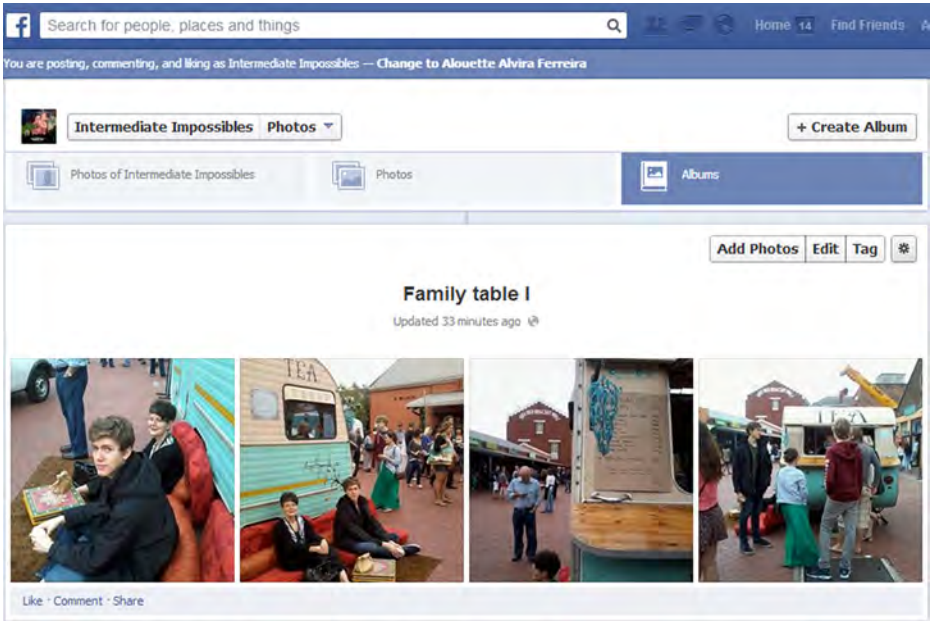


Fig 34. *Family Table II* (installation view)
Fig 35. *Family Table II* (Facebook screen capture)
Fig 36. *Family Table II* (mobile tag)

Surrealism

In art terms, intermediate impossibles translate as surrealism.In Surrealism, the artist's role is to take the familiar, in my case old photos, contemporary photos and flowers, to create a fantastical or strange world (Gunn 1984: 27). Making strange gives a fresh perspective to an image and lengthens perception (Gunn 1984: 28). Cultural theorist, David Foster Wallace wrote that, "realism made the strange familiar...when darn near everything presents itself as familiar—it's not a surprise that some of today's most ambitious 'realistic' fiction is going about trying to make the familiar strange" (Wallace, 1993).

Narrative

The paintings in my body of work form open-ended narratives. Viewers are free to make up the story for themselves. According to narrative studies, when viewers see an image or scene showing an isolated moment of a narrative, they construct unique personal narratives in their minds, imagining their own time sequence and relational connections (Kafalenos 2001:139, 141). The viewer's narrative will be informed by visual cues within the image and their own contexts; in turn, the narratives they make up, inform how they view the image (Kafalenos 2001:141). These narratives form new intermediate impossibles which help the viewer bridge the gap between the old and the new photographs.

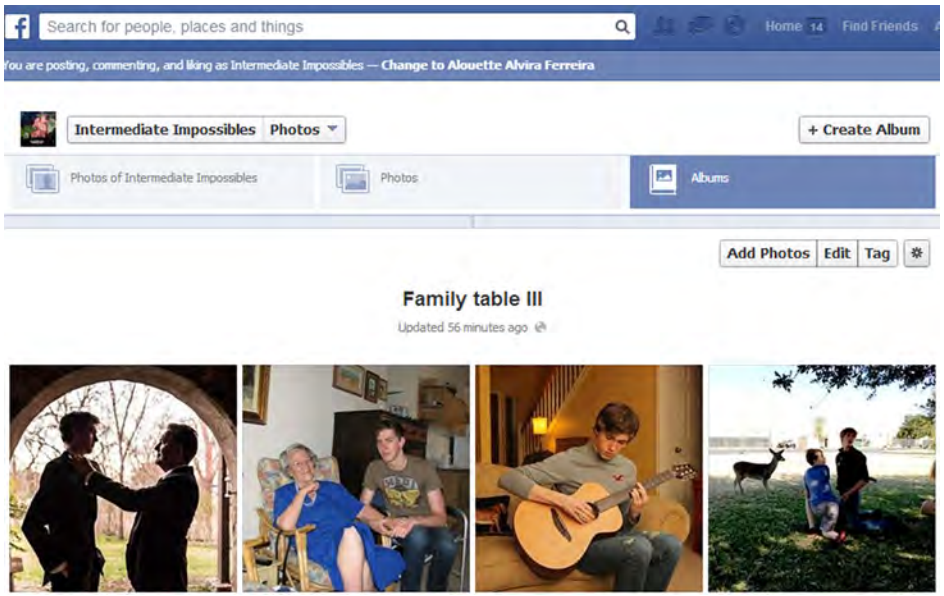


Fig 37. *Family Table III* (installation view)
Fig 38. *Family Table III* (Facebook screen capture)
Fig 39. *Family Table III* (mobile tag)

Relevance

My body of work correlates with the present tendencies in contemporary culture and art to oscillate "with and between future, present and past, here and there and somewhere; with and between ideals, mind-sets, and positions" (Notes on Metamodernism 2010). This construct is gradually replacing postmodernism. It reimagines the world and often suggests alternative realities presenting the ordinary as mysterious and the familiar as subliminal (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010:7,8).

Conclusion

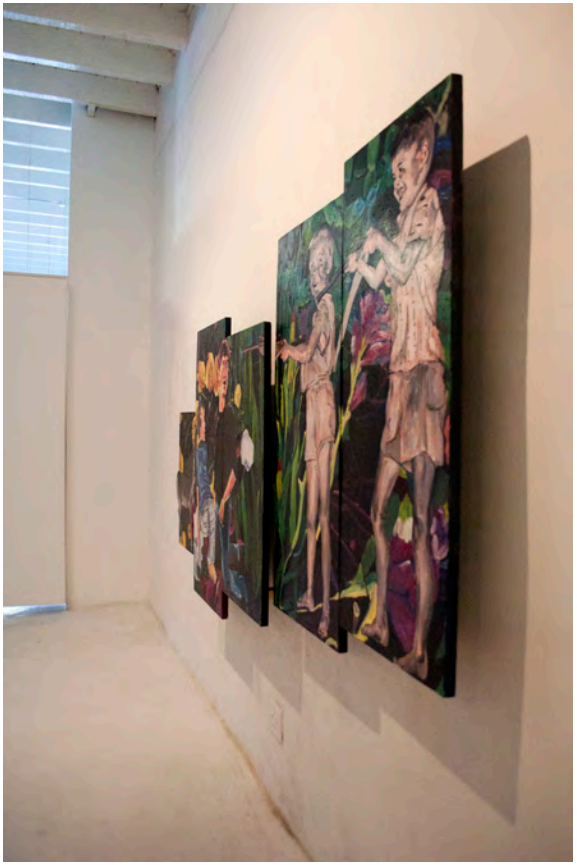
In conclusion, my work creates intermediate possible narratives in order to explore how social attitudes towards photography have changed over the past century. The oscillation that occurs between different time zones creates new worlds which hover between fact and fiction. Aspects that are touched on include generational differences, surrealism, visual narratives and liminal spaces. Viewers are encouraged to form their own conclusions to the narratives and perhaps develop some intermediate impossibles of their own.

Endnotes

1. De Bono, who is known for his development of the concept of lateral thinking, is a pioneer in constructive and creative thinking (http://www.edwdebono.com/biograph.htm)

2. Linda Fregni Nagler, The Hidden Mother (2006 -13). 997 found daguerreotypes, tintypes, albumen prints, gelatin silver prints displayed in 9 meter long display case. Venice Biennale Arsenale, Venice. (Cooke 2013)(Nicolao 2013)

40, 41. *Intermediate Impossibles* (Installation view)



42. *Intermediate Impossibles* (Installation view)
43. *Intermediate Impossibles* (Installation view: showing viewers how to scan the mobile tags)

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Curriculum vitae

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Fig 45. *Family Outing* (detail)