

Family portraits

The mysterious worlds of Jennifer Brommer's photographs

Virtually everyone I know carries around a phone with a camera that can instantly process and publish images on a potentially worldwide scale. The documentation of any random moment as it occurs has become almost a reflex action, and to absorb the constant infusion of personal images posted uncurated to social media often has a dulling effect on my appreciation of photography.

by
Carey Wilson

Review:
Jennifer Brommer's
*Selections from
Memphis and The
Wechsers* shows
through March 15.

1078 Gallery
1710 Park Ave.
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1078gallery.org

That being the case, I welcomed the chance to explore the more deliberately conceived and executed work of Portland-based fine art photographer Jennifer Brommer, whose portraits are currently on exhibit at the 1078 Gallery. For her show *Selections from Memphis and The Wechsers*, Brommer chose images from two series that reflect on her own interesting family dynamic and history. She grew up in a split family, moving back and forth between her mother's New York life in a "world of seedy and gloomy hotels—The Chelsea among them" and her "grandmother's world of country clubs, maids and chauffeurs" in Memphis, Tenn.

As she says in her artist statement, the images in the *Memphis* series "developed when I explored my discomfort in the world of my grandmother. I became intrigued with the importance my Memphis family placed on projecting wealth and social grace. Their notion that home, car, and appearance are of the utmost significance drew me to photograph people in their homes with special attention made to their choices of personal objects."

The resulting photos are fascinating and somewhat surreal glimpses into the sumptuous sterility of people living out lives of innocent grandeur. "Darmy, CCC,"

"Darmy, CCC," by
Jennifer Brommer



shows an older woman in a dark bathing suit reclining in a folding lounge chair set on a decorative aggregate patio surrounded by a low red-brick wall and lush shrubbery. Rising from behind the scene is an enigmatic building that sports an ornate CCC logo.

One of my favorite pieces is "Granny on the Floor," featuring the artist's grandmother posed sitting on the floor with a book in her lap, next to a couch in an elegant living room. The room is in tones of analogous shades of pink and beige, with grandmother in a pale-blue dress as the lone complement to the color scheme. Almost lost in the fairly monochromatic background is a portrait painting of a blonde woman in faded pink and pale blue.

The photos in *The Wechsers* are more whimsical, intimate and, in some cases, more overtly humorous. As Brommer writes, the series was inspired by her discovery of "a listing for 'Wechsers,' my maternal ancestors, in the registry of the Tenement Museum in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. I realized I had only the vaguest understanding of my family's immigrant experience. I imagined—and then photographed—a Jewish family from the late 19th century with all members played by myself."

With her willowy figure, high forehead and stoic expression as the focal point of the self-portrait characterizations, Brommer placed herself in 19th-century period costumes and settings depicting characters of both genders. A blank-faced young lady sits contemplatively in a bed, her lap draped in a yellow blanket, an enameled chamber pot beneath the bed. A man with a long white beard stands next to a wooden barrel displaying an array of fish parts nailed to a board.

Brommer's documentation and social commentary are striking and finely tuned, and her sense of humor and history make for an engaging gallery experience and a fine opportunity to leave the smartphone in the pocket and reengage with the photograph as a form of art. □

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