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On Not Looking Jewish: Visualising submerged memories and appearances

Annebella Pollen in conversation with Barbara Loftus

Abstract:

For more than 25 years, artist Barbara Loftus, born 1946, has developed a substantial body of work, across figurative painting, book works and creative documentary film, rooted in her experience as a second-generation Holocaust survivor. Loftus's mother, Hildegard Basch [1917–2007], was born into an assimilated middle-class Jewish family but the securities of her comfortable life in Berlin were devastated by the catastrophic events of Nazi Germany. While Hildegard was able to take refuge in England in 1939, the rest of her family - Loftus's grandparents Sigismund and Herta, and her uncle Heinz - were transported to Auschwitz Birkenau in 1942 and perished in the camp. In August 2021, cultural historian Annabella Pollen visited Loftus's studio in Brighton, UK, to discuss the enduring themes of her artistic practice and, particularly, Loftus's use of photographs and dress as sources and methods for exploring Jewish identity and post-memory.

Keywords: Photography, fashion, history, Jewish identity, memory, postmemory, painting, film.

AP: Can you begin, please, by describing how you embarked on the series that has been your focus for more than two decades?

BL: The trigger was my mother's testimony, which she shared, unprompted, later in life, having previously barely spoken of her early life in Germany. It emerged as a sudden repressed memory when she was in her eighties. It was triggered by the sight of a glass-fronted china cabinet in my home. She started to talk about when the Nazis came, unannounced, to her family house in 1938, a

few days after Kristallnacht, with a government document that entitled them to confiscate valuables. The memory focused on her mother's china cabinet. She recalled how two uniformed SA men had come, with a tea chest, and carefully wrapped and stole the family porcelain and silver.

This revelation permitted me to go to places that I'd always avoided with my mother because I didn't want to open old wounds. Following this, my mother became open to sharing experiences that she'd previously withheld. I learned about her childhood, her education, and the family over the course of around two years, before her health and memory declined. I recorded what I could but there were a lot of gaps and lots of questions I wish I had asked. My mother's aunt died around this time, too, and we received a package of family letters from the 1930s, although these were quite limited in their discussions as they had to get through the censors; I had to do a lot of reading between the lines. After my mother's death, among her few belongings, I also found an exercise book where she had briefly recorded further memories. My artistic work draws on these resources and, particularly, a collection of about eleven photographs that my mother brought with her when she fled Germany.

AP: In each of the bodies of work that you have produced, you have used a range of creative methods to create powerful insights into the intersections between personal memory and public history. For example, in the 2013 exhibition and book that display your artistic interpretations of your mother's memory of the SA theft, *The Bureaucracy of Terror: An Exhumation*, you combine meticulous historic research into archives – including the 100 pages of files relating to the expropriation of Basch family furniture in the Brandenburg State Archive – with site visits to your family's former Berlin home and other German sites in your family history, and in particular what you have called visual re-enactments. This practice – involving photographing costumed actors performing your mother's memories, dressed in period costume – provides a fascinating dramaturgical restaging that forms the groundwork for your artistic interpretations (in this case, large-scale sequential narrative paintings). It would be good to hear more about this approach, which shares characteristics with what Marianne Hirsch (1997) has called postmemory practices.

How does it enable you to travel to what you have described as your mother's 'submerged hinterland' (Loftus 2013, 21)?

BL: For many of my artistic works, I have restaged choreographed scenes and poses, using actors, models and myself, sometimes dressed in hired costume (in the case of the SA guards) or in historic items I have purchased from vintage clothes shops (for the clothes my mother's family might have worn). I then photograph these bodies, gestures and scenes, which become the basis for the final artworks, whether that is drawings, paintings, graphic silhouette sequences or film. I have long been interested in sequential images and even before I began exploring my mother's memories my paintings would take the same situation and see it at different times of day or night. I was interested in exploring stages of movement and I'd take incidents from my own life and animate them into sequences. Until the 1990s I hadn't had time to explore my own work in depth because I needed to earn a living as an art teacher. After my mother's revelations, my circumstances changed. I was able to explore her memories in my art in a more intense way. My work involves a lot of historical research and my mother's experiences gave me a very particular period, culture, class and milieu to investigate. This is very important to me. I don't invent things. I always base my choice of subject on actuality.

AP: I find this very intriguing. While your paintings are based in real events and are naturalistic and figurative in style, they are also highly imaginative. You mentioned the evidence that your mother provided via her brief testimony, the hesitant family letters and the few photographs that travelled with her, but there are a lot of gaps to fill. Your paintings inhabit those spaces. Your use of historic photographs is of particular fascination to me, because this handful of tiny black and white fragments, kept by your mother, is all that remains of your extended family. I find it very affecting that you have taken these pocket-sized prints – each is smaller than postcard size – and you have scaled them up into very large-scale painterly interpretations that are seven feet high. You've imagined the dramatic scenes around them and invested them with monumental significance.

BL: In a strange way, it suits me artistically that the evidence – I think of it in forensic terms – is very thin. I have to fill in what is missing. I need to bring other elements. For example, most recently I've been working with photographs of my great-grandfather Felix and his wife, my great-grandmother Franziska – extracted from a surviving photograph of the wider extended family from my mother's collection – as the basis for a new painting, entitled *The Grandparents' Visit*. The photograph I draw on shows a large family ensemble, arranged for the camera, formally dressed in an elegant domestic room in Dresden in around 1930. My mother numbered this photograph in blue ink later in her life, to annotate for later generations who was who.

Felix, my great-grandfather, was a successful business man who had a hat factory in Elbing, an Eastern Baltic town in Prussia; he was a pillar of the local Jewish community and employed about 100 people, mostly women, in his factory. In my studies for *The Grandparents' Visit*, I explore his patriarchal gestures – typically male in photography of the period – taking up space with his physical bulk, seated with spread legs and a hands-on-hips attitude, with a square-on gaze, in immaculate formal dress with a stiff collar. I posed myself in a chair, sitting as he sat, and I also drew inspiration from a famous painted portrait by Ingres of Louis-Francois Bertin from 1832 who had a similar authoritative pose and penetrating gaze.

Franziska, my great-grandmother, is in middle age in the photograph. She is a well-dressed and well-kept wealthy woman, dressed in a typical early 1920s-style of loose-fitting draping clothes. She has something of the air of a Roman matriarch and in imagining her body – not fully visible in the surviving photograph - I took inspiration from a British Museum draped and seated classical sculpture. Even Franziska's controlled hairdo, the Marcel waves so fashionable at the time, seemed rather sculptural and she became almost as if a mother goddess to me.

Looking in detail at these photographs – I had to work on them in Photoshop to single them out and lighten them to really scrutinise them – brought me also to the gesture of my great-grandmother's clenched fists in her lap. This reminded me so much of my mother, who always had a very tense grip

whenever she held my hand. It brought me close to her. I also had a model sit for me who had a similar body shape to my great-grandmother, and one of my neighbours had a pug, which I wanted to introduce into the scene as one of their relatives had a lapdog. The dress Franziska is wearing in the final painting was adapted from another image of the family. The final composite, via a bit of creative taxidermy, brings together a range of elements, from historic portraiture and sculpture, surviving family photographs and present-day life models, to create the studies on which I base the painting.

AP: The fashionable dress worn in the extended family photograph is interesting. You've said previously that your family wanted to convey a Berlin bourgeois respectability and not Jewish identity in particular.

BL: Yes, that was very typical of Jewish assimilated life in Germany, France and Austria.

AP: In your artists' book, *German Landscape with Wandervogel* (2000), where you explore your mother's time in the outdoor youth movement, prior to its dissolution and appropriation under Nazi rule, you include a direct quote from her memories, recorded in 1999. She reflected, 'I thought of myself as German, my Jewishness seemed less important, in fact I was pleased that I didn't look Jewish, not like the orthodox working-class Jews who lived in the poorer parts of the city and spoke Yiddish, which was frowned upon by assimilated middle-class Jews. My family was bourgeois and comfortable, we lived in a good part of Berlin, near the Tiergarten. All my friends were Gentiles, we didn't have Jewish friends.'

BL: My mother was forbidden to have anything to do with working-class Orthodox Jews with their black hats and side locks. She was told by her family not to go to the parts of the city where they lived and worked. She was also chastened when she sympathised with the labour undertaken by the family's domestic servants; my grandmother angrily called her a Bolshevik for encouraging the maid 'not to work so hard'! This preservation of social distance was partly about class aspiration, but it was also based in anxiety about the family's precarious situation. Antisemitism was always there in

the background, long before Hitler. There was a brief period in the late nineteenth century where there was integration in Germany; Jews were allowed to practice as lawyers and even politicians, but this did not hold. My mother's family wanted to be German. They gave their family Teutonic rather than Hebrew names: Heinz, Hildegard, Sigismund. Ironically, this marked them out, as these names were not so popular with non-Jewish Germans.

My mother's friends were largely Gentiles, but this became a problem after the 1935 Nuremberg Race Laws. Hildegard, for example, had a relationship with an Aryan boy called Ernst in her late teens or early twenties. Poignantly, a picture of him is among the few photographs that she brought with her from Germany. Sometime after 1935, Ernst's mother wrote to my grandmother and said, 'This relationship is now illegal. You must return all the letters that have been sent.' My mother was pregnant at the time with Ernst's child, but it had become a criminal act to have sex with a Jew. My mother had to have an abortion; it was heart-breaking. She not only lost her boyfriend but her unborn baby as a result of these antisemitic laws.

AP: The small collection also includes photographs of your mother as a child, aged around five, wearing an enormous bow in her hair and, in two different photographs, large fancy lace collars extending almost to the elbow. Although you have included photographs of your mother as a young woman in your paintings, the image of your mother as a child, wearing this huge bow, has become a visual leitmotif across many of your paintings, particularly in the series of paintings you exhibited at the Freud Museum in 2011, *Sigismund's Watch: A Tiny Catastrophe*.

In that series, you explore your mother's early memory of playing with her dolls under the living room table while her parents had an explosive row. Their argument about money, ultimately caused by German hyperinflation, culminated in your grandmother snatching your grandfather's gold pocket watch and smashing it underfoot in a fury of frustration and emasculation. Your mother, wearing this gigantic bow in her bobbed hair, becomes a witness in your paintings to a scene that is simultaneously personal and inextricably linked to its historic and economic place and time.

I'm intrigued by how you have used these child photographs of your mother and particularly how you have combined them with other, similar, photographs found in Berlin flea markets, which show anonymous children from a similar period. Berlin flea markets are full of what might be called orphaned pre-war family photographs. While family photographs of all kinds enter second hand markets as a result of end-of-life house clearances, the catastrophic events that devastated the German Jewish population under Nazi rule mean that family photographs uprooted from their origins in German flea markets have a particular poignancy. Their meanings become open-ended as they are unmoored from their origins; they can be reinterpreted in multiple ways, as other artists such as Christian Boltanski (1991) have shown. How do so-called found photographs feature in your work?

BL: I have spent hours looking through photographs in Berlin flea markets for children posed formally in photographic studios; several resemble my mother in their dressed style. I use studio photographs from the period to inform the poses that I imagine for my mother in my paintings. I have tried using children as life models, but somehow contemporary children do not seem to hold themselves in the right way. It may be partly related to the informality and flexibility of modern-day dress. The formal poses produced in historic studio photographs come closer to what I need. For *The Grandparents' Visit*, for example, I located a studio photograph of a young girl holding a book in the 1920s, which seemed to capture the gesture that I needed. I used other found photographs to help me visualise my mother's legs and feet as a child, dressed in short white socks and polished leather bar sandals. The final result is pieced together from a range of photographic sources.

AP: I'm also interested in how you use other historical materials. In your studio, you are surrounded by primary sources, including a wide range of historical ephemera and German material culture. A German toy catalogue from 1925-26, for example, shows the kinds of toys that your mother might have played with and, interestingly, includes a range of dolls that also feature enormous decorative hair bows similar to your mothers'. Sometimes the bow is almost half the height of the doll! It

suggests to me contemporary attitudes to the bourgeois child as a decorative object and perhaps also fashion practices redolent of those Thorstein Veblen (1899) discussed in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*. The impracticalities of the large bow would, in his terms, signal a very class-based form of conspicuous leisure that removes the wearer from any kind of association with manual labour. I'm also reminded of what dress historian Clare Rose (2010) has written about in another context – in relation to British children in Dr Barnardo's Victorian before-and-after photographs - where the white collar was the supreme sign of respectability in child fashion.

BL: My mother's hairstyle in her child photographs – the blunt bob cut known in German as the *bubikopf* – also carries Jewish associations. In antisemitic literature that illustrates Jewish appearances, it figures symbolically as a way of distinguishing the Aryan girls (blonde, with plaits) from the Jewish girls (dark, with bobs). You can see this, for example, in a popular 1936 children's book by Elvira Bauer, entitled *Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud auf seinem Eid* [*Trust No Fox on his Green Heath and No Jew on his Oath*]. In one drawing, Bauer illustrates the expulsion of Jewish children from a German classroom; their dark bobbed hair is among their distinguishing features.

The bob was a fashionable style of the period but as Jews were associated with modernism and Aryan Germans with traditionalism in Nazi thinking, modern styles in art and design became tainted with Jewish associations. The fashion historian Uwe Westphal gives an excellent exploration of this in his 2019 book, *Fashion Metropolis Berlin 1836-1939: The Story of the Rise and Destruction of the Jewish Fashion Industry*. This, too, was a world in which my mother moved. She was employed, as a young woman, by a fashion magazine based in the Hausvogteiplatz area of Berlin, the fashion district at the heart of what was, until the war, the city's largest industry.

AP: You've noted how Nazi propaganda discussed modern Berlin Jews' appearances as a 'deception' to be exposed. For example, the antisemitic 1940 film, *Der ewige Jude* [*The Eternal Jew*], produced by the Germany Ministry of Propaganda, posits that Jews alter their physical appearance – their hair

and beards and their caftans and hats, which are said to be readily recognisable Jewish styles - to enable their 'infiltration' into Western European cultures. This is especially argued to be the case amongst what the film describes as culturally sophisticated Jews in Berlin, where, it claims, 'assimilation has reached its zenith'. In their modern fashionable clothes, Berlin Jews, the film's narrator claims, 'act like the host people' through 'mimicry', meaning that they are not 'outwardly noticeable' as Jews. This is 'the enormous danger', the horrible message runs: 'regardless of appearances', they remain 'foreign bodies' (Hippler 1940).

You've observed that the need to become indistinguishable from the wider population by not looking Jewish was ingrained in your family as a protective strategy. You wrote in *The Bureaucracy of Terror*, for example, 'As a child I was always puzzled when my mother would ask me if I thought someone she saw "looked Jewish". How would I know?' (Loftus 2013, 23). Looking Jewish, to your mother's family, was a matter of great sensitivity and even mortal risk. Art historian Carol Zemel (2015) has reflected on this aspect of Jewish identity in a modern diasporic context, where prominent Jewish visibility can be marked by ambivalence, anxiety and uncertainty.

BL: My mother's furtiveness about appearances is something I don't share. As an artist, I'm always the voyeur. Yet I am safely behind the wall of a different time.

AP: Through your artistic work, you have brought to visibility a missing family and a destroyed world. Through costumed restaging and meticulous research in archives and ephemera, you have reconfigured the visual and material culture of your family's lost life in pre-war Germany. As a daughter, grand-daughter and great-grand-daughter, through close investigation of what was lost and stolen, and through what remains and endures, your paintings powerfully visualise and reconstitute, through post-memorial imagination, Jewish experiences and appearances.

BL: The journal's title – *Textile* – is particularly apt in the context of my practice. In my 2019 film, *Across the Land and the Water: The Two Journeys of the Family Basch*, I describe my work, of giving form to my lost family, as my Orphic journey. It is a process of repetition and, like Penelope's

tapestry - a shroud – it is stitched and unpicked repeatedly, waiting for the return of Odysseus. The past, of which I cannot let go, and in which the dead advance and grow to mythic status, is sealed behind a woven screen of post-memory that is both porous and impenetrable.



1] Barbara Loftus. *The Grandparents' Visit*. 2020. Oil on canvas. 213cm x 152cm x 167cm.



2] The Basch family, Dresden, c.1930. Photograph. 17cm x 12cm.



3] Hildegard Basch with brother Heinz, Berlin, c.1925. Photograph. 12.5cm x 7cm.



4] Preparatory materials for *The Grandparents' Visit*: Grandmother Franziska.

a] top left: Adjusted detail from Basch family photograph.

b] top right: Detail from Elgin Marbles. c.447-438 BCE. British Museum.

c] bottom left: Digital photograph of model by Barbara Loftus, 2020.

d] bottom right: Digital composite photograph by Barbara Loftus, 2020.



- 5] Preparatory materials for *The Grandparents' Visit*: Hildegard.
- a) top left: Found photograph from Berlin flea market: girl with book, c. 1930.
 - b) top centre: Found photograph of girl with book composite with Hildegard's face.
 - c) top right: Drawing created from composite photograph by Barbara Loftus, 2020.
 - d) bottom: Found photograph of girls' legs, c.1930.



6] Preparatory materials for *The Grandparents' Visit*: Grandfather Felix.

a) top left: Adjusted detail from Basch family photograph of Felix and Franziska Berlowitz, the maternal great grandparents of Barbara Loftus.

b) top right: Digital photograph of Barbara Loftus in pose for Felix, 2020.

c) bottom left: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Portrait of Louis-Francois Bertin*. 1832. Oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, 116cm x 94.9cm.

d) bottom right: Studio photograph of Felix and Franziska Berlowitz, Elbing, East Prussia, c. 1930. 17cm x 12cm.



7) *Der Universal Spielwaren-Katalog* [German toy catalogue], 1924-1926, sample page of dolls.

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