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### That Which Has No Name

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# R I T

## **That Which Has No Name**

by

Jean Marques

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Photography & Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester NY  
April 25, 2019

*Signature Page*

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## **Abstract**

### *That Which Has No Name*

BA Sustainability and the Environment, Florida International University, 2017

MFA Photography and Related Media, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2019

*That Which Has No Name* is an ongoing body of collage work about home, memory, intimacy, and family history. The photographs in these collages were made out of the process of photographing my daily experience between 2017 and 2019. Alongside them are the original family photographs that were made when my parents and I immigrated from Cuba to the United States in 1998. In these collages, expressive marks of ink, handwriting, and text are combined with photographs that are glued onto paper in order to communicate experiences and emotions. They depict a personal experience that is unique, one in which viewers can connect to, but cannot fully experience. The work seeks to use the personal as a vehicle to talk about the broader human condition. It is about making sense of life as it's unfolding, and the role in which photography plays as evidence, storytelling, or fragments of experience.



*That Which Has No Name*, Installation View, April, 2019

[www.jeanrichardmarques.com](http://www.jeanrichardmarques.com)



*Archive family photograph (Portrait of my mother and I, days after arriving from Cuba), 1998*

## Extended Artist Statement

On October 23, 1998, my mother, father, and I immigrated from Matanzas, Cuba to the United States as part of the Clinton administration's "Wet-foot, Dry-foot" policy. That policy included the Special Cuban Migration Program, a program that would allow visa lottery open sessions between the years of 1994 and 1998 for Cuban refugees. My parents were among that group of people who were granted visas. I was three years old when we left Cuba. From what my mother tells me, we arrived in Miami, FL, stayed there for three days to clear paperwork, and then transferred to Rochester, NY, where we would stay for six months before ultimately going back to Miami. I don't have a single memory of this time. The earliest memories I can recall place me in Miami. My only connection to this inaccessible moment in my life is through the stories my mother tells me and the few photographs that exist from that time.

My drive to make photographs comes from my desire to make sense of my life. It is the need to create a personal photographic archive of experience, one that cannot be erased by faulty memory. My thesis titled, *That Which Has No Name*, is a body of work about intimacy, memory, and longing through the use of collage, photography, mark-making and hand-written text. The work consists of five 22 by 30 inch collages, and two frames containing some of the original photographs from the time when my family left Cuba. The collages are untitled, having only a number assigned to them for the purpose of identification.

My practice involves using my camera as a tool for visual note taking. I photograph my surroundings, the people that I am with, and the seemingly mundane moments of everyday life. As a result, I end up taking the same type of pictures over and over again. The use of repetition is meant to reference the feeling of the passage of time. In *Untitled #1* and *Untitled #2* for example, images of my bedroom window repeat across multiple seasons and homes. The images of windows in these pieces act as a recurring motif. I use my surroundings and the spaces that I occupy to reflect aspects of my own state of mind. The external can be a metaphor for the internal.

The process of making these collages are an extension of the work that I do in my sketchbook. Much like the practice of documenting the everyday with my camera, the journal allows me to record thoughts, emotions, and experiences to create a record my life. Dan Eldon was an artist and photojournalist who made over a dozen sketchbooks over the course of his

tragically short life. These journals were filled with photographs, contact sheets, drawings, paint, and whatever materials he had on hand. Eldon never showed these journals to anyone except close friends and family members. The posthumously released book *Journey is The Destination*<sup>1</sup> is a collection of pages from these journals. The journals are intricate and beautiful expressions of Eldon's life experience. In it, a viewer can see the journey of his life and what it must have been like to see the world through his perspective. In my collage pieces, I am evoking the aesthetics of the sketchbook by constructing them with materials often used for sketchbooking such as ink, markers, charcoal, and glue. The collages are made on printmaking paper that is unmounted, pinned to the gallery wall, and floated with T-pins. By having the collages float, they give the feeling of fragility and vulnerability, since the only thing keeping them in place are small steel pins that pierce through the work, with no frame to protect it.

The text (which is almost entirely handwritten) in *That Which Has No Name* is essential to the work. It serves as both its own visual element and as an invitation into my world. The writing is often redacted, covered up, or obscured. This writing references the struggle to communicate, to share, to know what to share. From a distance the handwriting loses any sense of legibility, and instead appears as expressive marks blending into the compositions. When viewed by an audience that doesn't speak English, the same applies. In this case, the viewer can still get something out of the text, the shapes that the text makes along with its color, placement, and varying degree of obscurity still suggests content to the attentive audience. The handwriting is intended to draw the viewer into the work if they choose to read what is written. The writing could be neat and orderly, or frantic and obsessive. Either way, I want it to affect how the viewer interprets my photographic imagery.

Each collage piece is intended to function on its own while also being in conversation with the surrounding pieces. Together, the five collages form an abstract narrative. With these collages being medium-to-large in size, the work can be viewed from a distance for its aesthetic qualities and composition, while also allowing the viewer to get close and examine how the photographs relate to each other and the text. By having both large and small images collaged together, I encourage this type of back and forth viewing experience. These collages constitute of constellation of my lived experience, while at the same time are made so that the viewer can

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<sup>1</sup> Eldon, Dan. *Journey is The Destination*. Edited by Kathy Eldon. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997.



draw their own meanings and interpretations from them. I am seeking to use my own experience as a vehicle to talk about broader human emotion.

An underlying theme in this body of work is home, or more accurately, the search for a feeling of home. Much of my early childhood is fragmented. My parents divorced when I was seven and as a result, my mother and I moved from space to space many times. I have a hard time feeling like I belong anywhere. As part of my process of making photographs, I find myself photographing my surroundings in an effort to ground myself. In *Untitled #3*, I blur the distinction between past homes and my current home, between Rochester and Miami. These places are depicted, but not arranged with any sort of chronology or timeline in mind. This is done to communicate my own experience of constantly moving and uprooting, and the mental blur that goes along with that. The physicality of this collage is intended to reference that feeling of erasure and emptiness. The base paper shows sign of wear from images that have been glued on and subsequently removed. In that piece, the phrase “HOW DID WE GET HERE?” is screen printed with red ink against the murky blue background of the paper. Even that text (which is the only text in my work that is not handwritten) shows signs of fading as layers of paint have been applied and scratched off.

It has always been difficult for me to communicate my feelings and emotions with those around me. It took me until I was twenty years old to come out as bisexual to my mother (I now prefer the term pansexual for its gender inclusivity), and most of my family still do not know this about me. The year 2018 was significant to me for a number of reasons, one of which was that my partner, Yuyu, moved in with me. This was the first time that either of us have had a space for ourselves, removed from family or other people. It was our chance to for us to not only create a space that feels our own, but to also live in the way that we want to, instead of being subjected to familial pressures. Yuyu and I tend to be inaccurately perceived as a straight couple, and especially by both of our families. Our home is a space that we can occupy as our true selves, an act of mutual survival. Our identities as queer individuals, while not explicitly stated in the work, is the underlying context to this act of claiming our own spaces.

The home does not exist in a vacuum from the outside world. The external affects and extends into the private sphere. The experience of everyday life, along with the anxieties, hardships, and pains that come with it, spills over into the spaces that we occupy. It is because this, that the process of photographing these domestic spaces can communicate an internal state

of mind while also being able to talk about life and society in a broader sense. Queer families in particular face more societal pressures, as the queer home challenges long-established heteronormative constructions of what a “home” or “family” should be. Catherine Opie’s work *In and Around Home*<sup>2</sup>, is a body of work all about the queer domestic space. It consists of images of her home, portraits of her partner Julie, their son Oliver, and the surroundings of her home and community. Mixed into these images are polaroids taken off the TV of news coverages of the Bush administration, the 2004 election, Hurricane Katrina, and the Terri Schiavo case. This body of work is at once deeply personal and lyrical, while at the same time subversive and political. The work allows the viewer to experience the world through Opie’s perspective, not only as a queer individual, but also as a mother, a friend, and an active political participant. This approach has influenced my work and allowed me to think about the different ways in which my own life, and my shared life with Yuyu, can express both our specific experience and ideas of home and life in general.

*That Which Has No Name* is also about intimacy. In the past two years, Yuyu has been the person that I have photographed the most. In my collages, pictures of them (or of myself and them) are the only portraits that appear. Early on in my photographic career, I was very much inspired by Nan Goldin’s *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, a body of work about Goldin’s life, her friends, her lovers, and her experience. In her work, she is actively seeking what she considers to be true authenticity and experience. She equates the act making a photograph to natural bodily functions like eating or sex<sup>3</sup>. Although this body of work is one that I appreciate and admire, critical text by writers such as Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Liz Kotz<sup>4</sup> challenge the notion of the naturalistic or “invisible” camera. I’ve always considered the act of photographing a loved one as a gesture of affection, an act that says “I see you, and I want to preserve this”. This is true for me, as I’m sure it is for Goldin, but that gesture is complicated when the photographs are reproduced and exhibited to an audience. In Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s essay “Inside/Out”, she states “The desire for transparent, immediacy, the wish that the viewer might see with the photographer’s own eyes, is inevitably frustrated by the very mechanisms of the camera, which, despite the best intentions of the photographer, cannot penetrate beyond that

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<sup>2</sup> Opie, Catherine. 1999/*In and Around the Home*. Ridgefield, CT: The Aldrich Contemporary Art.

<sup>3</sup> Goldin, Nan. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. New York; Aperture. 1986. Page 6.

<sup>4</sup> Kotz, Liz. “Aesthetics of Intimacy” in *The Passionate Camera*. 204-215. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1998.

which is simply, stupidly there.”<sup>5</sup> To claim that photographs are objective truth, is to ignore the entire photographer, subject, and viewer relationship.

My approach is different than Goldin. I know that no matter what my intentions are when making these intimate photographs, I cannot dictate how a viewer responds to or perceives this work. It’s important for me to recognize the limits of what photography is able to communicate. I know that the totality my relationship with Yuyu can never be captured, nor can I speak about the true “essence” of them. On top of that, there is also the fact that I am representing my partner, a queer, non-binary individual. As an artist and a significant other, I have a responsibility to represent them in a way that they are comfortable with.

There is no objective realism that I’m seeking. I approach photographic intimacy in a more contemplative way. An authentic “pure” window to reality is not necessary in order to spark a mood or a feeling in my viewer. In photographing Yuyu, it’s as much about understanding myself, as it is about making a connection with them, and about the need for human connection. My photographs are altered by the images and text that surrounds them in my collages. In *Untitled #5* for example, there is a portrait of Yuyu on the upper-left side of the collage. In the image their pose feels ambivalent, and they appear to be making eye contact with the camera. Across and around the entire image is handwritten text that reads as a love letter. The color and placement of the text makes it hard to read. There is information here that the viewer cannot understand without context, and because of that, it becomes more about the act of communication rather than the image itself. The viewer can get a sense of my desire of closeness and contact.

At the time of making this work, I’ve found myself in a moment in my life that very much parallels my mother’s experience. She was 24 years old when we arrived to the United States in 98’, and at the time of writing this, I am 23. Though our motivations are different, Rochester, NY, is the place that we somehow ended up at a similar point in our lives. In the 90s, it was particularly difficult for her to have consistent communication with our families back in Cuba, as phone calls were expensive, and this was before any form of the internet communication was readily accessible to the average Cuban. As a result, the main method that my parents used to keep contact with family back home was the mail. In letters exchanged

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<sup>5</sup> Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. “Inside/Out” from *Photography After Photography: Gender, Genre, History*. Duke University Press Books. 2017 (1995).

between family members, there were often photographs that my parents would take with the intention that they be sent to Cuba. These photographs were portraits of us, and also of seemingly mundane things like our kitchen counter, the bed I slept on, the way the street looked just outside our house on Lake Ave. What I find fascinating, is that the way in which my mom used photography mirrors how I make my own artwork. In her own way, she was also using photography to create a vision of her life unfolding, and these photographs were central in that communication with family back home. Even some of the photographs resemble the kind of photograph I would make.

The final aspect to this body of work are the two frames containing some of the original family photographs sent to Cuba, which are hung alongside the five collage pieces. One frame is a 12 by 16 inch light box with six photographs, the ones that my parents made and wrote on the backs of. The illumination of the light box reveals the underlying writing. The inclusion of this piece is meant to draw parallels between my mother's experience in Rochester and my own, while also referencing memory and time. Photography's indexical nature means that many people associate photographs directly with memory. These photographs were made at a time in which I was too young to remember. This piece is more about nostalgia rather than direct memory. By making this specific selection of photographs, and placing them in a light-box outside of their original context, I am essentially re-shaping my mother's memory as my own, not as a direct reference to reality, but rather how I envision this event in my life to have looked like.

The other piece is a 9 by 7 ¼ inch frame containing a portrait of my mother and I, taken upon our first days in the United States. It is a vivid color photograph that serves as my only connection with this important moment in my life. In our faces there is this look of hope and optimism, combined with a deep sadness that feels so real and monumental. It is the most precious photograph I have, and is presented as such, by being the most carefully framed image in the exhibition. In the installation of this work, this frame is placed at the leftmost side of my wall space. Depending on how my viewer reads the work, this photograph will serve as an endpoint or a beginning. The photograph itself is an end and a beginning. For me it was a starting point, a moment that marked a significant change in my life, and one that I have no memory of. For my mother, it was a kind of end point, it was a moment of transition between two very distinct life paths. For both of us, this photograph represents hope and a yearning for a better life.

It is a photograph that I feel has a kind of aura to it: an unnameable feeling that I can only describe as *That Which Has No Name*.

The title of this body of work is, in part, an homage to Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, a book that has influenced me and this body of work. In the book, Barthes attempts to understand and analyze the nature of photography and what it means that certain images have an impact on him. In the book, Barthes talks about an image of his mother "the winter garden photograph" that not only resonates deeply with him, but also evokes feelings that are difficult for him to truly articulate. The detailed and elaborate systems of analysis that he creates are unable to explain why some photographs can move him in a certain way. In the book's final pages, Barthes exclaimed "I then realized that there was a sort of link (or knot) between photography, madness, and something whose name I did not know".<sup>6</sup> Like Barthes, I feel that photography has a kind of madness to it, the kind that (much like life itself) eludes even the most rigorous systems of description.

*That Which Has No Name* is ultimately about life, in all its joys, pains, absurdities, and complexities. I am followed by the ghost of my experience. The factors that make up who I am as a person is dictated by the life I've led. This work is the result of my attempt to make sense of it all.

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<sup>6</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981. Page 116.



*That Which Has No Name, Installation View*



*That Which Has No Name, Installation View*

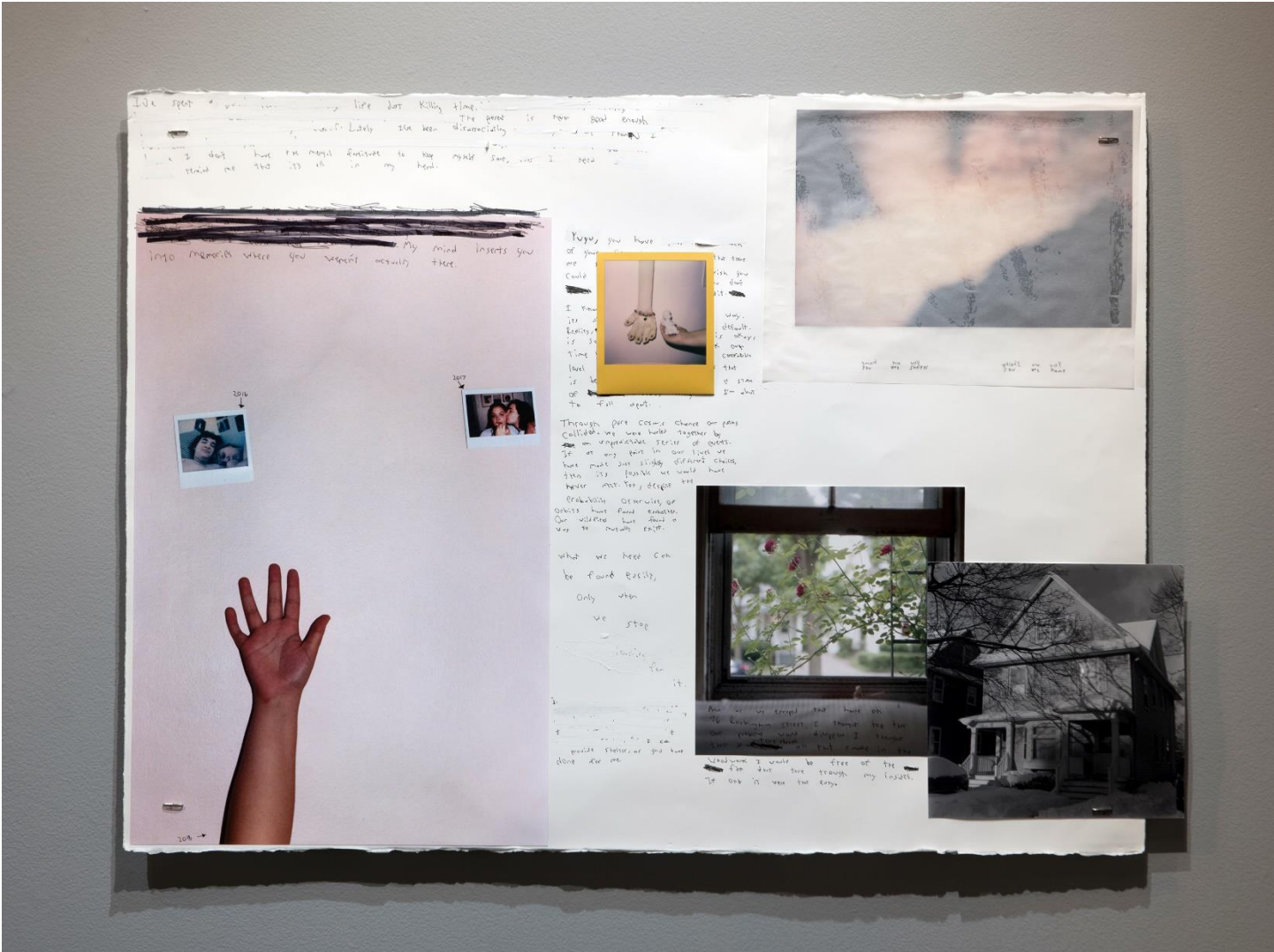


*Archive family photograph (Portrait of my mother and I, days after arriving from Cuba), 1998*





*Archive family photographs in light box, 1998*



Untitled, That Which Has No Name



*That Which Has No Name, Installation View*



I take the same picture over & over again



I want to

There is this theory of the universe called the Big Bounce. The Big Bounce is the universe imploding & exploding. This theory is called the Big Bang. I wonder if this is the end of our universe or if it's just the beginning of a new one. I wonder if we are the only ones out there. I wonder if we are the only ones who ever existed. I wonder if we are the only ones who will ever exist.

So much time spent being mad at you for shit that doesn't matter

the state of constantly looking out the window



so much time spent being mad at you for shit that doesn't matter



everything is always changing

Untitled, That Which Has No Name



*Untitled, That Which Has No Name*



*That Which Has No Name*, Installation View



*Untitled, That Which Has No Name*



*Untitled, That Which Has No Name*



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