

That which is not essentially biographical is essentially nothing.

Stanisław Brzozowski, Diary

It's natural that I think about my ancestors. I'm so close to their shadows

I'm practically one of them.

Jorge Luis Borges, Deutsches Requiem

Joanna Kobylt: In your own words your latest project, Genealogy, is a return to your roots. You examine your family stories, those that are remembered and repeated, as well as those that you discovered through your own research. What motivated you to delve into your family history?

Monika Patuszyńska: It started with an overwhelming feeling that I didn't fit in with my family somehow. I think I needed to distance myself from the narrative of victimhood passed down through our female line from generation to generation. I was so tired of this that I decided to break it down into historical facts: dates, files, names, and to put the jigsaw back together in my own way to see what else can fill the empty space that remains after the harm is gone.

Genealogy came from reflection on what we are made of, where we come from...

... On what has been passed down to us or how we have been marked. It comes out of my reflections on the strength of the intergenerational message; the roles in which, without our knowledge, will or consent, we have been placed by our relatives within the fabric of the family. I was surprised how easily consecutive generations conform to roles for which the script was written and assigned many years ago: the role of mother-in-law and son-in-law, mother, woman unhappy in her relationship, the role of a stronger sister and a vulnerable sister, although they no longer suit the times or the people to whom they were assigned.

My first association with the title is a family tree. It is a very popular way of presenting family relationships and connections. However, you decided on a completely different, non-hierarchical way of introducing your research. Why didn't you follow the model of root, stem and crown?

The traditional family tree is a rather specific form of presenting the ancestors and thus creates a very specific picture of the world. As you mentioned, it is hierarchical. It is also based on a scheme that, although obvious from the point of inheritance of property, is not so obvious when transferring information that interested me. The family tree always puts the figure of the person it was made for in the centre. As if the main focus of the whole world for hundreds of years and through dozens of generations has been ME! It's a very egocentric structure stripped of everything that does not match that picture.

I wonder where you would place yourself in such system.

I have no idea that's why I preferred not to create it at all.

So tell us about your ideas...

My Genealogy is more like a collection of mementoes and artefacts gathered on a mantelpiece; precious is mixed with cheap, beautiful with ugly, stupid with wise. It is a lively and open collection where each fragment affects the whole formation and is equally important. There is room for seemingly mismatched elements as well as for those that are yet to appear.

It's an absolutely fascinating process how random elements begin to exist as sets. Under a microscope the grains of sand are just a chaotic cluster of random shapes and colours but a dune or beach is a coherent body that would never make us question how much its constituent particles may vary. Passengers crowded on the subway during peak hours come from different environments and backgrounds, work in different professions, love differently and have different views on life; but gathered together they gain some inner group coherence. They merge, lose their otherness and become a coherent organism. Look at the phenomenon of creating collections. Just the simple act of organizing a lot of items in a particular order gives them a new significance and increases the value of the whole set in our eyes.

While compiling information for Genealogy you had to face the imperfection and bias of human memory. What process did you follow in your research?

My journey through the past was a response to the relatively recent discovery that most of my ancestors were Warsaw shoemakers. Like an embarrassing deed the thread never appeared in any of the family stories. In addition to the imperfection and selectivity of memory, I had to face denial, its intentional rejection. Memory is a very easily-influenced mechanism, it's easily swayed in various ways that match the mood of a particular moment. While we may think that we are accurately remembering, we actually interpret and reconstruct the past from scraps of recall and we supplement the missing fragments with our beliefs, suppositions or superstitions. I noticed how easy the memories of my loved ones change and how easy it is to suggest fixes that are accepted as genuine memories. And this is not only the case with emotionally troubling memories, such as the two versions of my great-grandfather's death, but also with trivial ones like the question of who actually got rid of the old Predom juicer that I remember from my childhood. That is why in my research I did not want to rely on memory as a 'family testimony' and quite quickly, both physically and emotionally, I transformed the family table into a table in the State Archives.

So you built a new story?

Yes, a story based on facts but one which I built on my own terms. Having their time and place coordinates, the birth, marriage, and death certificates contribute to a framework of various possible versions of the past but, as most reconstructed stories, they are incomplete. Filling such gaps is always a matter of choice, and I wanted to do it my way, to replace regret for the tenement house lost by my family over a century ago, with my pride for my great-grandfather, a shoemaker and the most respected stucco decorator of 18th-century Warsaw and gratefulness that everyone managed to survive the second World War and Warsaw uprising.

In addition to the family archive, the process of inheritance, manifested in the physicality and personality of your descendants, has also inspired you. How does this relate to porcelain?

I decided to look at the history of my family and use it as a kind of template that would let me set the route for my research in ceramic and re-analyze my entire creative process. The works that resulted do not recreate this story literally. Anyway, it could not be recreated, because most of the characters involved are long dead...

And even if they were alive, they probably wouldn't be able to agree on what it should look like...

In a way, I translated a story about relationships into the language of materials: it is all about adjusting, about mismatching and the difficult art of maintaining a balance. The exhibition became a record of the path I took while working on the project and consists of the results of research, of experiments and exercises, as well as completed series of work. It is a story about combining the similar with the dissimilar, matching and mismatching, transferred to objects. It is also a project about combining different aesthetic modes, materials, clashing technological or cultural DNA. There are two types of porcelain, road paint, plastic cable ties, cement and pottery clay used as an engobe for porcelain.

Why are the same fragments and elements repeated many times across different series in your works?

Instead of preparing all new plaster moulds from scratch, I decided to combine and mix together shapes and designs that I was familiar with: fragments of the moulds found in my studio and used in earlier works. I wanted to treat them as 'letters of the alphabet' which, although they are limited in number, I can use to create an unlimited number of 'words' and 'sentences'. This entire project is a kind of piecemeal, collecting together what is known, overheard, discovered and found. In this way family stories are reassembled from scraps; ceramic objects composed of different elements, and finally the exhibition itself.

You are also interested in dust as a carrier of biological and historical data. Dust is associated with the unclean, with something embarrassing, proverbially swept under the carpet. What was the significance of reaching for this seemingly repressed element of our lives?

The fascination with dust began while working on the Bastards & Orphans project when I was casting from old plaster moulds found in abandoned porcelain factories. Layers of dust, accumulated in the interiors of unused moulds, were merging into the castings to fuse together all the years into one layer of glaze through firing. The composition of the dust is very similar to the composition of ceramic glaze so that organic substances, although seemingly burning out, turn into the ash that acts as a flux, the addition of silica, i.e. sand, a glass former, stabilizes the system and various additional compounds work as colorants. Everything, even things that seem unimportant, has its place and its role to play, a small change in proportion, a small percentage of another additive or its lack can change the whole effect and balance of the system and modify the visual appearance of a glaze.

In the project one can also find some echoes of a series you worked on previously: The Debris.

I dealt with a similar topic: the role-swapping phenomenon and the change in significance following a change in context. The perception and evaluation of the elements rarely depends on the elements themselves. It primarily depends on the context in which they are placed. Debris is perceived as garbage because it does not belong to any order, because it has lost its reference system and as long as we don't know what it can be used for it remains trash. Once it fits into a larger ordered structure again and becomes part of that structure it is no longer seen as a threat. A candy wrapped in paper placed on a cake stand or in a bag with other sweets is ok. The same candy found at the bottom of a backpack among notebooks and pencils arouses a little suspicion, but still retains its comforting status as something sweet to improve one's mood in a crisis. The same candy and the same wrapper, separated and abandoned on the pavement, will only cause irritation. In our culture any element placed outside its regular, customary context, *a part without its whole*, becomes trash. What is found where it seemingly does not belong always provokes anxiety and suspicion. Meanwhile, the entire world, including ourselves, is in a constant state of disintegration, every day trillions of elements lose their 'usual' attribution and become part of completely new structures. Dust from our apartments, a mixture of our epidermis, our habits and the character of the places

where we live is our personalized contribution to this process, a portrait of our lifestyle added to the gallery of portraits of other world users.

In Genealogy the dust seems to take on the familiarity of a family member.

I used fired samples of dust from the homes of my loved ones. These are small glaze tales about the traces they leave: a summary of how they live, what they are like, who they share their lives with or if they wipe their shoes. They are moments frozen in motion from the summer of 2019, when I was preparing the exhibition.

At the exhibition there are old moulds of porcelain figurines from abandoned factories. Your previous project, Bastards & Orphans, examined the intellectual and material legacy of such sites and, like Genealogy, also bore the hallmarks of a research project. What else connects them both?

Bastards & Orphans was a project created by the last survivor of a fallen civilization because that was how I felt at the time. It was all about the end of the world that I belonged to, which I knew and with which I identified, it was a record of the process of becoming a part without its whole, *pars sine toto*. But it focused most acutely on the material remains of loss, appropriating that loss so entirely for me that there was hardly any space left for anybody else. So I began a new project about people and their stories, they are at the centre of Genealogy and it concerns them first and foremost. In this sense it is a much more intimate project but also a lot more universal than Bastards & Orphans. After all we are just a set of codes arranged in a certain order: genes, habits, patterns, that make us ourselves. In a sense we are all a bunch of hybrids made up of borrowed fragments of information, all mixed up and appearing here and there: our grandfather's ears, grandmother's chin, aunt's eyes or the love of plaster of a fourth and fifth order great grandfather. These traces, despite our mortality, are immortal and will keep indefinitely creating new combinations and joining chains of new systems. Although one project is about the immortality of matter, and the other deals with the immortality of codes, whether on the scale of a demolished industrial site or on the scale of one family, both deal with the material and immaterial traces that we leave and which we carry.

What did you get out of Genealogy for yourself? What did your research, searching and working on objects for the exhibition enrich you with?

Apart from the comfort that I'm not the first nomad of the family? I work with plaster and I was very happy to discover that I came from a line of stucco decorators. If the body can carry the trauma of previous generations, maybe through 200 years and eight generations it can also carry the touch of plaster?

Quite unexpectedly I found a new silent character who turned out to be an equally important, efficient and significant member of the family: Warsaw. Long before the stucco decorators became shoemakers, long before they settled for good and built their stone graves in Powązki cemetery where they could rest alongside later generations, it was Warsaw that attracted, magnetized and paired them together for several hundred years. Despite many years spent traveling and living in other places, I still consider Warsaw the only place I belong to. In order to be able to finalize the project I had to suspend my nomadic lifestyle, stop going on the artistic residences which recently occupied most of my time and, as my ancestors did, join in with the rhythm of everyday life in Warsaw. Do you know the inscription on the ramp in Pruszków, "Warsaw passed this way"?

I don't.

I pass it every day on my way to the studio. One evening coming home from work I realized that after the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, when the whole city was burned and destroyed, my grandparents were herded into the transit camp in Pruszków together with other Varsovians and inside they had to create their own city, they became their own Warsaw.

On a purely personal level I also think I managed to dispel several 'founding myths of misery' explaining the history of our family failures, the beliefs condemning its members to passivity and depriving them of their agency. Success or failure in the face of the over-200-year roller coaster of acquiring and losing wealth and property are just different peaks of the same sine wave, both inseparably connected, one leads to and results from the other.

And now when you see the exhibition what do you think?

Initially I was sure I was working on a project about relations and memory. When all the work was set up in the gallery and I was able to see it all together for the first time, I discovered that Genealogy is a tale about contrasts that unite rather than divide. And that is a pretty cool result, I believe.

June 2019