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Cynthia Greig & Richard H. Smith

Lyla Rye

Of Kith and Kin

GALLERY

44

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Opening Reception

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visual record of the family's time together will constitute that family's history. What will Evans's records reveal about this family's daily reality, the off-camera moments that so often give the lie to images in a family album?

Detroit-based partners Cynthia Greig and Richard H. Smith use video to explore these questions in a very intimate way. Where *Saga* is generic, the video installation *Black Box: This Is Not My Father* (2003) is painfully specific; it stands as the sole moving record of Cynthia Greig's father, who died in a plane crash two years later, on a voyage decided upon at the time the footage was taken. Both installations nonetheless confront the same devastating prospect: the loss of a meaningful family history. Taken on its own, the brief footage Cynthia Greig recorded of her father singing seems woefully inadequate. It depicts a performance before a camera lens. The information it offers is scant: the easy-going nature of Greig's father; the closeness between her father and a friend; the men's trust of the person holding the camera; the unsteady camera movement suggesting informality or spontaneity.

Greig and Smith's manipulation of this footage emphasizes the fragility of the history that these images embody. Slowed down or edited with an audio track, the footage begins to acquire new meanings. A plane, waves, a reenactment of the plane's black box recording found after the crash — with these fragments, viewers can assemble a narrative about Greig's father. This narrative becomes more transitory with each repetition of the video footage. Because the black box reenactment is longer than the video itself, audio meets visual at slightly different intervals. Meanings accumulate, are reinforced, shift.

Presented as a continuous loop, *Black Box* does not bring us any closer to an understanding of who Greig's father was or what father-daughter relations were really like. Nor does this portrait of Greig's father somehow predict what his relationship to Smith could have been, given more time. By virtue of its medium, *Black Box* can literally move away from the still, silent image of the family portrait. But like formal photographs or snapshots preserved in family albums, it may reveal more about those who make, keep, and view it than it does about its human subject. As its title suggests, the video is *not* Greig's father. Rather, it is a powerful tribute to a father's life that suggests the importance of having visual traces to help order and understand familial relations, no matter how imperfect or incomplete both happen to be.

Making and examining visual traces of familial relations has engrossed Toronto artist Lyla Rye since the birth of her first child in 1999. Like such earlier works as *Byte* (2002) and *Carnal* (2003), Rye's installation *Young Girl at an Open Window* (2004) features her own daughter. A feeling of loss suffuses this family portrait, too, for Rye is aware how quickly her daughter passes through life stages, and how unrecoverable they are. As she documents and deals with this loss, Rye confronts the different ways that she and her daughter experience the world, and probes the nature of perception.

Rye's daughter is both everywhere and nowhere in *Young Girl at an Open Window*. Though she appears in each component of the installation, she constantly eludes the eyes of the camera and viewer as well as the windows' frames. An effect of the girl's Houdini-like quality is that it suggests she both conforms to the structures of the adult world and is able to work outside of them. She plays with a dollhouse 'constructed' from traditional values and mimics the roles and behaviours that its domestic setting encourages. At the same time, her



Lyla Rye. *Young Girl at an Open Window.*
2004, Lambda print, 53.3 x 50.8 cm (vitrines).

version of the dollhouse includes frogs on the floor and dogs on the sofa. And though small and uniform, her dollhouse windows will allow the passage of tongue, hand, and eye.

Rye's use of window motifs in each component of *Young Girl at an Open Window* strengthens a dual reading of the child's relationship to the adult world. As their eyes scan across the vitrines' surfaces, viewers are constantly asked to look through, to gaze at the young girl as one might regard Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665-6), whose imagery Rye evokes. At every turn, Rye confounds a clear sightline. The dollhouse acts one of many screens. In her still images, Rye leaves some forms indistinct; and in the video, she disperses her daughter's unified image much like mirrors in a kaleidoscope, challenging the viewer's perception of both depth and time. Somewhat disoriented, viewers may feel that they themselves are "at an open window" looking at the girl and being watched by her as she impishly moves behind the dollhouse walls.

Though it is too early to proclaim Rye's daughter a future Adivad, it is tempting to imagine her growing conscious of the values and roles that she cannot now perceive. Most certainly, she will witness technological changes in the ways that family portraits are created and preserved. What will surely *not* change is the importance of representing family in an effort to define how (and to whom) one belongs.