

Memory/Reference:
The Digital Photography of
Martina Lopez, The Art
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Editor's Note: Martina Lopez's exhibition "Generations of the Family" was shown in HCP's Gallery X in April/May, 1992. Her work is also represented in "Metamorphoses: Photography in the Electronic Age."

Seven large-scale photographs by Martina Lopez fill the David C. and Sarajejan Ruttenberg Gallery of The Art Institute of Chicago. The hues are striking, intense and somewhat discordant—sienna, sepia, green, blue, black, and white. A visitor in a nervous defensive voice blurts out, "the color juxtaposition bothers me." She may also be responding to the evocative and haunting images. Vast, layered landscapes that stretch beyond the imposing dark clouds on the horizon both forbidding and foreboding. Unknown ancestors wander aimlessly in desolate terrain and old cemeteries like the "un-dead" with self-absorbed stares and actions. Martina Lopez crafts densely layered images of the sublime and romantic, slightly surrealistic yet subtly jaded and folksy. The tableaux form an imagined nostalgia in a gothic arcadia where nineteenth century literature and landscape painting meet twentieth century surrealism and the suburban tourist.

Lopez has created digitally-assisted images since 1986. Spurred by the death of her father and perhaps the memories surfacing after the loss of a loved one, her first montages combined snapshots from family photo albums. Lopez wished to reconstruct images from her own memories. Since then she has broadened her sources to include photographic portraits of unidentified people from the turn-of-the-century collected from second-hand stores. For Lopez, the resulting works are "a way to create a collective history, one that would allow people to bring their own memories to my work." The scenes are far too anonymous and distant to recall an individual's specific memories but this is not where the intriguing and resonating aspects of her work lie.

One aspect of Lopez's "collective history" involves imagined nostalgia for the life of ancestors and a life at one with nature. In landscapes with few reminders of human impact, the figures seem to be lamenting and longing for a relationship with their surroundings. Lopez's figures are formally dressed—ready for rituals (weddings, parties, and the like) not in overalls, boots, aprons, and bonnets. Nature as religious renewal has long been a preoccupation with the post-industrial world especially in the United States. Even Thomas Jefferson's ideal of "agrarian life" ascribed the benefit of a closer relationship with God as a result of working the land.¹ However, in a recent *New York Times Magazine* article, "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon contends "(we) pretend our real home is in the wilderness... Ever since the nineteenth century, celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for well-to-do city folks. Country people generally know far too much about working the land to regard unworked land as their

IMAGINED NOSTALGIA IN A *Gothic Arcadia*



Martinez Lopez, *In View of the Heart, 1, 1995*, original in color

ideal."² Furthering this sense of imagined nostalgia is the time period Lopez's figures represent—late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For many people today these are not people we would have ever met as they appear in the images. The memory and nostalgia springs from seeing similar photographs not from being a participant in the time period. Cronon astutely explains this phenomenon of imagined nostalgia, "as we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own longing and desires."³

This imagined nostalgia is also heightened by other devices. Through her use of dark clouds, cemeteries and black-and-white images of people from another age, Lopez appropriately thrusts the viewer into a bathetic gothic novel in order to further stir emotions of sentimentality, pity and fear. She plays on fears of the unknown, the "un-dead," and the possible price paid in the afterlife for earthly sins. Have Lopez's landscapes been desolated by humans? Are the figures actually specters giving warning? Have souls been bartered? Art Institute Curator of Photography, Sylvia Wolf seems to concur, "All of her characters are on hold, suspended in a purgatory where desire is contained by starch and whalebones and where romance is overshadowed by death."⁴ With a combination of strangeness of images and a wonder that digital imagery and technology often evokes, Lopez's work produces a thrill not uncommon to tales of terror in the sensational gothic tradition. The work's sincerity as well as its gentle, refined tone thankfully saves it from any comparison to the B-movie renditions of these tales.

Additionally, Lopez's work is rooted in traditions of nineteenth century Romanticist painting. For Lopez's purposes Romanticism lends itself perfectly to the concepts of Arcadian landscape myth and imagined nostalgia. Visually she finds kindred spirits in nineteenth century landscape painting especially with *Cloister Graveyard, in the Snow*, c. 1817-19 by Caspar David Friedrich. Art historian Frederick Hartt's evaluation of the nineteenth century painter and his work could easily describe Lopez's work. He writes, "Friedrich was by inclination melancholy, even pessimistic, and his landscapes are always concerned with an immense and impersonal world, responsive to no

human emotion save sadness."⁵ In Lopez's work only cemeteries have lush green flora and though figures are associated by proximity they do not interact. Many figures seem like lost souls as in *Promising the Past, 1, 1995* where a woman in a distant graveyard seems to have stopped dead in her tracks, holds her hand to her chest and appears to look out into the distance dazed and alone. Again, the Arcadian landscape myth resurfaces. Making a connection with nature means making a connection with each other. Humans are of nature. The figure's gaze and gestures are concerned with personal lamentation and loss for others. Here there is a longing to know another, perhaps to know parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, friends. Thus a connection to the land is also a connection to ourselves and others.

Hartt states that Friedrich's sense of alienation and clarity of technique foreshadows Surrealism.⁶ The past, even in art history, follows Lopez like a shadow. From the nineteenth century landscape painters such as Friedrich, to the photographic montages of Henry Peach Robinson (especially *Fading Away*, 1858) and paintings by surrealists Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dali to the photographs of Jerry Uelsmann there is long line of connections. Andy Grundberg and Kathleen Gauss's assessment of the importance of surrealism is particularly applicable to Lopez's work. "...Surrealism offered a means. This attack on the photographic veracity, then is not confined to the 1940s but extends through the 1950s, the 1960s, and even into the work of artists of the 1980s. While these photographers share no single style, common belief, or orientation, in one way or another the transcendence of photographic truth, and the pursuit of a symbolic or interpretative imagery, is key to all."⁷

Also relating to the surrealistic tone of Lopez's work and her desire to remain accessible is Naomi Rosenblum's explanation of the montage technique by avant garde artists in the early twentieth century. "The creation of a new visual entity from existing materials appealed to the avant-garde artists because it was a technique employed by naive persons to create pictures—a folkcraft, so-to-speak—and in part because it used mass-produced images and therefore did not carry the aura of an elitist activity."⁸ Lopez not only utilizes this "folkcraft technique" of montage, but furthers

the notion of accessibility to the general public by making her images appear as if they were hand-colored and using family album photographs. Interestingly, collaging snapshots and photographic portraits and then applying color has been a popular hobby that many have enjoyed since the nineteenth century as evidenced by the works of Lady Filmer in the 1860s. In this sense it must be seen as purposeful for Lopez's work to sometimes appear to look "cut out." In *Promising the Past, 2, 1995* the figure edges are more like outlines than contour lines. Images cut on contour lines would enable the disparate images to blend together more seamlessly as with the technique of Jerry Uelsmann.

Indeed accessible, Lopez's images also allude to tourist photographs. In presentation, the photographic prints float on a black background just about the size of a slide projected for the slide shows of the suburban tourist latest travels. The repetitive technique of figure in foreground and landscape in the background is reminiscent of the travel snapshot. Bizarrely enough the style, the monumentality of the figures with rigid gazes in black-and-white against a decoratively clouded blue sky in Lopez's *In View of the Heart, 1, 1995* parallels painfully close postcard images of Mount Rushmore. It conjures up memories of the countless acquisitive photographs taken at the scenic lookout. The obvious formula of her images is purposeful and again points to the concept of the Arcadian myth and imagined nostalgia.

At first glance it might be easy for the casual viewer to angrily dismiss Lopez's work because "the color juxtaposition bothers me." Other viewers may even enjoy them with a smile for the thrill and sensationalism of her images and technique. There is comfort and escape in imagined nostalgia. Both responses offer truth and points of entry for further contemplation if the viewer is open to confronting the unknown and often little understood aspects of the nature of life and relationships. Lopez skillfully and cleverly weaves aspects of our "collective history" into images that are pensively quiet and mysterious yet also questions and make judgment about our "collective history" too. She accomplishes the task with experience, seriousness and skill and a bit of the kitsch and familiar.

FOOTNOTES

1. Peter Schmitt, *Back to Nature, The Arcadian Myth in Urban America*, Oxford University Press, New York, New York, 1969, introduction
2. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 13, 1995.
3. *Ibid*
4. Sylvia Wolf, "Memory/Reference, The Digital Photography of Martina Lopez," *The Art Institute of Chicago*, 1995, brochure text.
5. Frederick Hartt, *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, volume II, third edition, Prentice Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey and Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York, New York, 1989, p. 813.
6. *Ibid*
7. Andy Grundberg and Kathleen McCarthy Gauss, *Photography and Art: Interactions Since 1946*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1987, p. 46
8. Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, Abbeville Press, New York, New York, 1984, p. 397

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