

In one of the eight sequences of photos in Susan Unterberg's newest installation *Sons and Mothers*, a slow dance between a compact blond in tight leather pants and her tall ruffled son is being performed. In the accompanying video clip a voice-over loop containing out-of-sync filial and maternal testimonials is heard: "To me she's the best person I can think of . . . she cooks, she cleans . . ." "I like his taste . . . I like him more as time goes on . . ." "She's compassionate, nervous, sensitive . . ." "He's very funny, sweet and compassionate. He has soulful eyes. He's sentimental and romantic like me . . ." In the video clip a young man heaves his mother on his back and sways her gently as a beatific smile appears on his face and an anguished one on hers. In the stills a heavy-set woman places her left hand on her bearded son's chest over his heart as her right hand reaches around and over his neck.

Since *Mothers and Daughters* (1983-4) Susan Unterberg's art has mined the rich field of family relationships to explore the subjects of authenticity, existential aloneness, psychological projection and how these subjects are intertwined around the various degrees of love that people feel for one another. The rapport between family members is loaded a matter. Unterberg's complex visual inquiries have examined different levels of intimacy, asking us in the process to reexamine conventional assumptions of the role of togetherness, taboos, and intergenerational competitiveness within the family circle. That circle serves as the first collective unit through which the individual observes social and sexual bonding. The family amplifies how we feel and what we feel about ourselves and others in and outside the group. Unterberg's work not only plays off the idea that biological or kinship ties intensifies feelings of aloneness, separateness, and uniqueness just as easily as it increases our sense of belonging and dependency, but that these oppositions coexist in each one of us to some degree. In *Sons and Mothers*, as in her prior work, Unterberg uses two observations to brilliant advantage: images of physical closeness can unveil a palpable psychic isolation between so-called *loved-ones*. Conversely, a quality of shared psychological closeness can be heightened by contrasting it with the image of physical awkwardness or physical distance of otherwise compatible individuals.

Sons and Mothers departs in several ways from Unterberg's previous efforts. The artist's use of shadows and greater depth of field gives a new sense of place, of mystery and of the mythic to her work. The uneven light that she casts on each figure defines him or her not as a specific individual as in her prior works but more as a generic type of everyday person. By incorporating a carefully edited sound track and video to her photographic stills, for the first time the artist adds a dynamism to the implied psychodramas in *Sons and Mothers*. Here we see large, pushpinned, stacked black and white photographs whose stop action effects are antithetical to the formality of the earlier studies in which the artist used flat backgrounds of no-seam paper and strong, even lighting. The blurry images of moving figures in the new works are frozen moments of spontaneous interaction rather than the quietude and stillness of her earlier works. The stop-action technique also helps downplay the residual monumentalizing and heroicizing impulses used to powerful effect in Unterberg's earlier *Mothers and Daughters* and *Fathers and Sons* (1990). Importantly, stylistic looseness in this new body of work is the result of having allowed chance and free association to intrude into this multi-layered, multi-textured project to a degree not felt before.

To be sure, Unterberg had already relinquished a certain amount of control in *Mothers and Daughters* and *Fathers and Sons* to the effects of coincidence and happenstance. In *Mothers and Daughters*, for example, Unterberg had taken particular pains not to look through the viewfinder, in order to elicit spontaneous expressions from her models. Her subjects were sometimes people she knew but just as often they were strangers who would receive a print of a *good* (read *flattering*) likeness of themselves in return for having taken the time to pose for the photographer. They were not asked to dress in any particular way beforehand, nor were they told how and where to stand or sit during the photo sessions. In *Sons and Mothers* dress style was also left open to the individuals, and they were asked to interact with one another in the studio without rehearsal and without any specific instructions on how to proceed. Similarly, the voice-over segments of short descriptive statements by each subject were recorded privately and were unrehearsed.

“He’s very funny, sweet and compassionate. He has soulful eyes. He’s sentimental and romantic like me . . .”

“She’s compassionate, nervous, sensitive . . .”

All photography is collaboration but in this particular work Unterberg plays a decisive role in suggesting to the viewer that there are two simultaneous worlds being unveiled: the emotional relationships between mother and adult male child and the subjects themselves who serve, in the artist’s words, “as the fictionalized foils for my preoccupations.” Unterberg’s investigations of the dualities that lurk in the human psyche are laid bare and seem to waft impressionistically throughout *Sons and Mothers*, whose structure contains elements of performance, ritual, and courtship dance. The mixture of movement and the smokey quality of the photographs suffused with the sounds of odes, testimonials, and hymns of praise give rise to a dreamlike atmosphere that seems to celebrate the absent father and his moral commandments. In this arena Unterberg muses on the replacement of paternal law by a dance of pure instinctuality, the worship of mother as lover, the worship of her consort, the son, as hero. Darker aspects are also present: intimations of unconscious manipulation of parents by their children and the tug between sons and devouring mothers.

Text composed by Dominique Nahas. Layout and design by Jeannine Deacon.

SUSAN UNTERBERG

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SONS
AND
MOTHERS

I had seen something in the man’s face that resembled what I saw in my own face in the mirror. A kindred intangible, something lurking in the eyes, and in that smile, and in the tilt of the head... Nothing you could say was genetic. But something you knew you wanted to acknowledge because it was valuable when you saw it – even though you couldn’t say what it was. And you didn’t want to lose it.

– Very Old Bones,
William Kennedy

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