

*On Johanna Breiding's Epitaph for Family*

The title *Epitaph for Family* suggests that we might understand the wide-ranging voices, images, and ideas presented here as a sort of memorial for something deceased and already interred, be it "The Family," the artist's family, the artist's mother, an uninterrupted horizon, and so on. But what I find most striking, indeed most moving, in this ambitious constellation is its lively, steadfast reparative impulse, in the Eve Sedgwick sense of the phrase: "Reparation is for Sedgwick about learning how to build small worlds of sustenance that cultivate a different present and future for the losses that one has suffered. You could say that it is about loving what hurts but instead of using that knowledge to prepare for a vigilant stand against repetition, it responds to the future with affirmative richness." *Epitaph for Family* revolves in and around this world-building, this cultivation of different presents and futures, this loving what hurts, even in the face of melancholy or catastrophe. It's affirmative and rich even as, especially as, it mourns.

The reparative impulse runs like an electrical current through the show's presiding image: that of the horizon line, which links up to the table-line (at which various friends and acquaintances discuss experiences of family and love), which links up to the table-line of the meticulous, sleek "queered" still lifes, and so on. This insistence on linkage is remarkable in that it doesn't correspond to a desire to homogenize. The formal similarity of the table settings in the looping video "Magic Hour" instead offers a space to meditate on the differences between each speaker and tableaux, be they differences in surroundings, biographical backgrounds, conceptions or experiences of queerness, or the felt desire/ use for the term "family" at all. What makes this panoply of voices queer, if anything, has little to do with definable content, and more to do with its insistence that we take the time to listen to individual people's opinions, stories, identifications, sorrows, sensibilities, fears, and aspirations, without the disciplinary hope that they will cohere into something uniform, even if it's the uniformly hopeful.

"Normativity reaches for us, grabs for us," one of the eloquent speakers in "Magic Hour" says. "But we demand something more." That "more" here seems to entail an aliveness to a range of full and ambivalent feelings: wanting assimilation and mourning assimilation; the deep pleasure of offering and receiving unconditional love and the knowledge that such love "doesn't solve everything . . . that pain is written into our being"; excitement at the prospect of escaping given family/ forging new forms of kinship, and the serious, sometimes intolerable grief that can derive from removal—be it forcible, voluntary, or eventual—from birth family, and so

on. These generous testimonies on care, love, and loss are delivered in domestic settings, but by conjoining them in conversation, Breiding works against the mechanisms of privatization that have historically defined the sphere.

Breiding is interested in this upending—hence the focus on the horizon line interrupted by "man-made" objects, the attempt to queer the still life, the retrospective interrogation of her archive of home movies. I can't help but wonder, however, whether in looking for interruptions of normativity, the artist but underlines its native instability—its impossibility, even. Breiding says that in the making of "Andrea," she went looking for disturbances of identity that might surreptitiously trouble an otherwise perfect dream of heteronormative family life. But there's a fundamental, poignant strangeness in the familial and cultural rituals in this footage which needs no unveiling. It's in the uncanny national rituals in which effigies fall to pieces and white men wear tri-cornered hats while riding horses, it's in the energetic child's inverted mask, it's in the fire that won't go out on a birthday cake, no matter how many times it's blown out.

It's also in the love. Breiding says that when she looks back at these home movies, she sees "a love that now feels empty." But the love looks pretty full to me. The mother has an affectionate ease with her children that feels almost shocking in its tenderness. Maybe that's the "pain written into our being" part—the fullness of the love corresponds to the agonizing fullness of the loss.

The love and the loss exceed any dyad of the normative and the queer. Likely they exceed everything. They criss-cross the line between that which is given, that which is made. When I close my eyes and think about *Epitaph for Family*, I see a mother hoisting a small body onto her hip; I hear a chorus of individuals thinking, feeling, and sharing their way in and out of complex forms of relation; and I see the artist's child-body, humbled and thrilled by a ravishing, expansive field of yellow flowers.