Rehearsing Happiness

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Rehearsing Happiness

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By Claire Debost

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When my mum, my brothers and I learned that my dad had been living a double life for 20 years, my older brother renamed the hallway with all our family pictures “le couloir de la mort”/ “The death row”. These photos, these narrations of our life, suddenly felt like those of strangers, a fiction. If they could sometimes be unnoticed, a part of the furniture, they now felt haunting to me. The photographs were unchanged, yet the new context utterly shifted their meaning and my relationship to them. I, the viewer, now felt forced to look at the images while wanting to desperately look away at the same time. They have always represented memories, but suddenly they were a part of an unsure past that was disconnected from the present. Is this what a myth feels like? As my gaze crossed the photograph of my parents wedding, I reminisced the first time I had envisioned my own wedding, a few weeks before when I visited the chapel where both my grandparents and my parents got married. At that moment I came to terms with the fact that someday I would get married, not because I felt a sudden passionate feeling but from the fact that walking down the aisle of that chapel felt in alignment with my family’s history. But history is not always a good tool for prediction.

Yes this is exactly what a myth feels like. Standing in the middle of the hallway of our family pictures, disillusioned, I realized these pictures felt exactly like the myth that Barthes saw in Steichen’s The Family of Man. And at the centre, there is the myth’s backbone: the wedding photo. It speaks a story that needs no telling because social practices and rituals have written it. Yet, this myth that the wedding photo projects is responsible for everything that is unsaid and unseen.

In search of the unsaid and unseen, I decided to start photographing at bridal shows which take place across New Jersey, Long Island and New York City. Bridal shows are organized in such a way that they feel like a wedding where no one knows each other and no one is getting married. There is no place where a woman can be made to feel more special then at a bridal show. They are rehearsals to the big day; a place to practice, and most importantly to purchase all the elements that will be the key to happiness. With bright neon lights across the rooms and people smiling all around, its almost like walking into a pop-up Disneyland. Some have come on a mission, others just to try out some cake and have a good time. It is in the ambiguity of these events that I became intrigued, in the way that they attempt to create a space and an experience that needs to meet the expectations, between fantasy and reality. In fact, bridal shows are a wedding where no one is getting married and a performance where no one is an actor.
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