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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A Photographer Turned the Tables on His Parents to Learn About Himself

By Arthur Lubow
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Larry Sultan, *Fixing the Vacuum* from the series *Pictures from Home*, 1991.

Parents photograph children to create a lasting record of ongoing changes. In the 1950s, when Larry Sultan was growing up in Los Angeles, it seemed that every middle-class father was shooting home movies with a Super 8 camera. Watching reels of long-forgotten footage one evening while visiting his parents, Sultan, by this time a professional photographer who would soon have a wife and kids of his own, was inspired to compile a sequel.

Turning the tables, he scrutinized his elderly parents, in the belief, as he readily admitted, that by learning more about them, and especially his father, he would resolve unanswered questions about himself. The result, *Pictures From Home*, a book of photographs and text that he published in 1992, is recognized as a highlight of his distinguished career. Ten of the photographs by the artist, who died in 2009 at 63, are now on display at the Yancey Richardson gallery through April 8, where they can be judged as independent images.

Sultan's project explored whether documentary photography can be faithful to some hypothetical "truth" and concluded that it always comes down to the question of: Whose truth? By placing this debate within the emotionally charged setting of a family, Sultan in his book added dramatic weight to an abstract discussion. His rendition was so theatrical, in fact, that it has been transformed by the playwright Sharr White into a play of the same name, running on Broadway with Nathan Lane, Zoë Wanamaker and Danny Burstein.

Much of the dialogue in the play is drawn from the extensive interviews that Sultan conducted with his parents and included in the book, along with his own musings about the ethical complexities of his undertaking. He photographed his mom and dad at their home in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles where he was raised, in their retirement in Palm Desert, and at their Lake Tahoe condo. The text is so specific about how he took the pictures that the photographs bear the risk of simply becoming illustrations of his process.

One of the distinctions he makes is between photos that are candid and those that, in his word, are "staged." I would have used the term "posed" rather than "staged," because he hasn't engaged actors to impersonate his parents, and his parents are not pretending to be anyone other than themselves. Most family photos are posed by the photographer, who has an idea of how the picture should look and what story it should tell. Children, at least until they reach adolescence, rarely contest that control. But when a child is photographing a parent, the dynamic alters.

"This isn't about me, it's about them," Larry says early in the play. To which Irving, his father, retorts, "Larry may say it's about us, but trust me. It's about him." Of course, they're both right. But where does the balance lie? The tension in the book and the play arises when Larry and Irving, vying for authority over the image, fall into an Oedipal struggle. (Larry's mother, Jean, although equally aware of what's at stake, is philosophically resigned to letting her son see it his way.)

Very sensitive about being perceived as old, Irving in the play lashes out at Larry for his photograph of the two parents, with a postcard placed between them of a young Hawaiian woman sent by Larry's older brother, Kenny. (This photograph is not part of the Yancey Richardson exhibition.) "There's me," Irving says. "Old. On the other side of the table, there's your mother. Old. And in between these two old people … is a postcard of youth. Like someone from the young past has sent a missive to these old despairing people's present. Did you do that on purpose, Larry? Place that postcard there? Just like that?"

In his father's home movies of his childhood, Larry detects, as he puts it in the book, "more a record of hopes and fantasies than actual events." A child is a seemingly blank slate on which parents can project their dreams. Many years later, photographing his father, Sultan is depicting the way that hopes and fantasies wither. Irving rose from the ranks to become a vice-president of the Schick Safety Razor Company, but at the age of 56, he was fired, and his career was over. He described to his son the brief termination meeting with his boss, but there is no visual documentation of that decisive moment.

To portray the dislocation, Sultan has his father put on a suit and tie (which, as Jean remarks in the play, he no longer wears in his Southern California retirement) and sit on his made bed at home, hands folded, face somber. (In the book, hammering the point home, Sultan placed this photograph opposite one of the youthful Irv, also in a suit and tie, smiling in a group company portrait in which all the other men and women have been scratched out.)

Perhaps this is what Sultan meant when he used the word "staged," because he is asking his dad to play a formulaic role of late-middle-age anomie. It is too obvious, and too obviously fake. In this genre, I much prefer the portrait that William Eggleston made in a Huntsville, Alabama, motel room in 1971, of a vacant-looking fellow in a white shirt but no jacket — which is how a traveling businessman sits on a bed — holding a drink, in a room bleakly devoid of all charm and character.

For his photograph *Dad on Bed*, 1984, Larry Sultan had his father put on a suit and sit on the edge of a bed, face somber.

Sultan is far more effective when he poses his parents in stances that he has observed. Irving especially loathed a picture in which he is swinging a golf club in a room with green wall-to-wall carpet while the television plays. His gripe is not that it's a phony setup. It's not: He keeps clubs scattered throughout the house so he can practice when the impulse strikes. What makes him unhappy is that it's a crappy swing. And the photograph captures something else that reads as true. Through the large window, veiled by a sheer curtain, we can glimpse the pool furniture and other sun-drenched manifestations of the California Dream. That photograph, when seen on the gallery wall, potently conveys the quandary of a man, aging but still vigorous, who has been consigned to pampered desuetude in his Palm Desert retirement.

The friction and resilience of his parents' long marriage is another recurring subject in Sultan's project. In a photograph taken in Los Angeles a couple of years before the golf swing, Irving is seen from behind watching a baseball game while Jean, knowing and stoic, poses against the green wall for Larry. It is a classic portrait of an American marriage of that time and social class, close in certain ways and distant in others, with Sultan as the invisible apex of the triangle.

He photographs his parents in the bed they share, side by side, reading different magazines; dressed in leisurewear, puzzling over a nonworking vacuum cleaner, with the pool visible outside the window; and, in an image that is a little too on-the-nose, watching a fiery sunset.

In the book, he included stills from the Super 8 film of his early years. A still, however, is a thin approximation of a moving image. One of the few ways in which the play surpasses the book is that it opens by projecting clips from Irving's actual films, and the awkward, jerky charm of his son's childhood comes through poignantly. The pictures are endearing. They are not, however, very informative.

Living in a post-Freudian age, we know as we search for self-understanding to look not to images of ourselves prancing as toddlers but to the parents who shaped us. In Sultan's probing *Pictures From Home*, every question leads to another question — why Irv and Jean made the life choices they did, and whether Larry's photography revealed or obscured his parents' relationship to each other and their relationship to him. In the play and the more successful photographs, the ambiguity comes through. Where did we come from? It is a tantalizing search for an answer that always eludes us.

Larry Sultan: Pictures From Home

Through April 8, Yancey Richardson Gallery, 525 West 22nd Street, Manhattan, 646-230-9610.

Larry Sultan, *Sunset* from the series *Pictures from Home*, 1989.