

MoMento

Norm & Noeleen

Bernie Harfleet and Donna Sarten
Members Only Magazine Issue 11 May 2012



Norm

photographs by Bernie Harfleet



My father, Norman Harfleet, suffered depression most of his life and all of mine. He was born in England and lied about his age to go to the Second World War. He remembered a cruel father who never once called him by his name, and said that when his father was buried on his 15th birthday it was the best birthday present he ever had. His mother, whom he was devoted to, died a year later. He immigrated to New Zealand and married my mother. Unable to have children "of their own" they adopted me at a month old in 1964. With the wisdom of hindsight I can see why Norm was so distant as a father, and in many ways unable to parent. In the last five years of his life I was the only one constantly there for him, and yet I'm not sure he ever really understood me or saw my worth. When I asked if I could photograph him after he was diagnosed with lung cancer in November 2010 (he had smoked since he was 14) I was surprised that he said yes to this unique opportunity to highlight an aspect of society many would prefer to ignore.

Bernie Harfleet

Noeleen

photographs by Donna Sarten



My mother, Noeleen O'Brien, suffers from Narcissistic Personality Disorder, which means that her whole world has revolved around her and no one else. She was the youngest of seven children, by 10 years. She was six when her father died, but nobody told her, so she sat for weeks on the fence every evening waiting for him to come home. Engaged to a young man who called the wedding off when he lost his sight in World War II, she later married my father, an alcoholic, who had served in the Royal New Zealand Navy. Unable to have children they adopted my brother Kevin in 1956 and me in 1959. Our father helped clean up Hiroshima after the dropping of the bomb and when we were very young he told us bedtime stories of what he had seen there! Our childhood was violent – a bit like war – and our home, where many horrors took place, was more like a prison. Noeleen has lived there for the past 51 years, and has caregivers twice a day to help her stay in her own home as long as possible.

Donna Sarten





















Afterword

Norm & Noeleen: photographs by Bernie Harfleet and Donna Sarten

In every photographer's life there is a decision to be made about which, if any, of their personal family pictures could, or should, ever be shown in public. For the unlucky ones who never discover a collection like *The Family of Man*¹ to see how universal a personal photograph can be, it is a decision never resolved in their lifetime. Thus, left to the fickle judgement of posterity, the "family" photographs of professional and talented amateur photographers are seldom seen without the aid of astute curators like John Szarkowski and L.Fritz Gruber, who first brought the brilliant boyhood photographs of Jacques Henri Lartigue² to public notice.³ If not destined for the fire or rubbish tip, as whole collections still are, the most personal, and potentially most important images of established practitioners are often held in limbo within public and private collections, separated from the approved known works. Rare is the photographer like Peter Peryer, Sally Mann, or Richard Billingham who make their personal photographs so public. Whether honour-bound to a secret existence, or simply too personal to want to share, there will always be some extraordinary "family" photographs that can't be shown during the participants' lifetime.

Serious photographers know how potent and contentious photographs of their family can be. A major reason for not showing them to anybody, let alone the public, is because they can reveal so much about the character and habits of close family members and the photographer's true feelings about them. Like dirty linen, family photographs can accurately reveal inescapable facts about human life, but they are not always something to skite about.⁴

Bernie Harfleet and Donna Sarten are accomplished artists who are well used to going outside of their comfort zone to probe their own psyches and social issues, but they did not set out to make an exhibition of their respective parent's declining old age. Rather, their family was confronted first by the spectre of terminable cancer in the case of Bernie's father Norm, at the age of 89, and then the reality of dementia in Noeleen, Donna Sarten's mother, at 85.

Compelled by the realisation of his adopted father's impending death, Bernie Harfleet went as far as he could to capture the reality before him. From November 2010 for Norm's final seven months, the camera became a component of caregiving and witness to the ups and downs of his decline. Listening to Bernie's story, I gained the impression that this unusual degree of attentiveness between them at this stage of their life might have brought them closer, just as it had for me and my adopted father on his deathbed.

Certainly his poignant and remarkably restrained black and white photographs suggest so. Being late may be better than never for some reconciliation, but histories of abuse and family dysfunction like his and Donna's can never be wiped clean. Knowing how terrible Donna's upbringing had been, it was Bernie who suggested she should also photograph her surviving parent in the house that was once like a prison for her and her brother. No easy task. The advancing dementia of her adopted mother has reinforced a complicated situation because it is on-going and there is little, if any, possibility of reparation. Considering the reversal of power over one another, as the child, in a sense, becomes the parent and vice versa, Sarten's photographs are doubly remarkable for their restraint. Never strident, her images reflect the nature of the burden of care required of families faced with the surreal distancing and the frustrating boredom of repetition-as-communication that accompanies this condition. Like so many elderly individuals, because Noeleen refuses to leave her familiar environment for the uncertainties of a "Rest Home", she lives in an increased state of isolation and potential danger through accidental self-harm or neglect.

The decision for Bernie Harfleet and Donna Sarten to go public with these individual but parallel photographic essays of their parents in the decline of old age was not easy. Combined with the anxiety of facing a huge burden of care, and indeed their own mortality, they were compelled to re-examine what they had learned about nature and nurture from their abnormal life journeys. And figure out where they are now?

Just as every image is communicated through its combination of content and form, they are fully aware that their images are also primed with biography and metaphor. It is the fact that what has happened to their parents now is happening to others, and will happen for generations to come, that emboldened them to go public. But in recognising that their personal stories are essentially universal we should not forget the ability of successful pictures to exert their own power over such decisions.

We New Zealanders, generally, have not proved to be enlightened about dealing with the issues of old age and death now confronting us. Some families are in denial, as was one which protested that a reputable Wellington photojournalist did not have their permission to show their naked parent being washed by a rest home nurse, only to find that it was definitely not their father, whom they had seldom visited, but somebody else's from whose family

permission had been granted to depict the reality of his declivity.

Harfleet and Sarten reveal the nature of what is becoming a central issue for life in developed societies where people are living longer but not necessarily better lives. The human will to hang on to whatever life the body can sustain is reinforced by medical experimentation to slow natural degeneration, regardless of the resulting quality of existence. Dementia is becoming commonplace and, like any mental condition, is extremely difficult to deal with.

Harfleet and Sarten's separate but linked essays are not like the happy commercial illustrations of retirement homes. Instead, they are a reality check on the kind of situation we and our children are increasingly likely to find ourselves in. New Zealanders may take some comfort from recognising something of themselves in the ordinary settings for these photographs. The basic kitchen, cluttered living room, old-fashioned china cabinet and fire guard—even the cockiness of a cancer patient who refuses to give up smoking – they are common denominators. The blank or barely recognising stare of somebody we have known all our life, however, is new. That is the disturbing face of dementia.

There are many reasons why we should take notice of these signs and be grateful to these messengers for finding the courage to bring their profoundly personal experiences to public notice. It remains to be seen if we as a society can pool our resources to provide humane comfort and practical help for families coping with dementia and other manifestation associated with the reality of all kinds of people experiencing longer lifetimes.

John B. Turner, Beijing, April 2012.

1. Conceived and directed by Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 'The Family of Man' (1955) was a hugely popular and influential touring exhibition and publication featuring personal and professional photographs from all over the world.

2. Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986), from about the age of seven photographed the wide-ranging exploits of his wealthy family in the "decisive moment" style. A devoted painter, Lartigue's early photographs were first exhibited by John Szarkowski (1925-2007) in 1963 at New York's Museum of Modern Art, and by L. Fritz Gruber (1908-2005) at Cologne's Photokina in 1966.

3. An outstanding recent local exception was the elegant small exhibition of family photographs of the late Bob Raw (c.1950-c.2007) shown at the Corban Estate Art Centre, Waitakere, for the Auckland Festival of Photography in 2010. Raw's fine work was rescued from obscurity by the Waitakere librarian, Robyn Mason, and the photographer-teacher, Allan McDonald.

4. The English photographer, Richard Billingham's searing essay on his dysfunctional family, published as Ray's a Laugh (1996) is an interesting case in point.

The artists

Bernie Harfleet is a multi-disciplinary artist who uses painting, sculpture and photography to explore social-political themes. Bernie shares a studio with his partner, **Donna Sarten**, at Corban Estate Arts Centre, in West Auckland, where Bernie was raised and has lived most of his life. Donna is a graduate of the Elam School of Fine Arts, the University of Auckland. Together they have four children and four grandchildren.

Their joint exhibition, **Norm & Noeleen** opens on 31 May starting at 6pm and runs from 1 June - 8 July 2012 at the Corban Estate Arts Centre, Waitakere, as part of the Auckland Festival of Photography. A floor talk with the artists in conversation with Rob Garrett, is scheduled for 1pm Saturday 16 June, 2012.

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Bernie Harfleet and Donna Sarten.

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