

The Way She Was

In photographs documenting her battle with cancer, Jo Spence confronted mortality on her own terms

BY PAC POBRIC

The most striking work in “Jo Spence: Memory Cards,” a small exhibition of around twenty pictures from 1979 to 1990, greets visitors as soon as they arrive at the Shin Gallery. Titled *Phototherapy*, it’s a set of fifteen self-portraits by the late British photographer, neatly arranged in rows and columns, with each picture set against a boldly colored sheet of mounting paper. In one photograph, Spence looks pensive as she cuts bread to prepare for a meal. In another, she holds a broken doll and glances off to her right with a look of vague concern. The images elicit some sense of concern or mystery, especially knowing they were made a few years after Spence was

diagnosed with breast cancer. What’s just happened in the one photograph where she’s sitting at the top of a staircase with her head down and her underwear around her ankles? Why is she dressed as a baby in another?

Spence had a sly sense of humor about the humiliations of disease, but she didn’t want sickness alone to define her. “Why should cancer dominate my life?” she asked in a 1987 BBC documentary on her work. So in the

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midst of her years-long illness, she also made works about her other concerns: domestic labor (in one picture, she lovingly holds a Hoover vacuum; in another, she irons a shirt), art history (she once posed as the Virgin Mary breastfeeding Christ), and her conflicted relationship with her family. As a child, Spence felt abandoned by her mother,

who always seemed to be away at work; in retrospect, she understood her mom had to make ends meet. In the BBC film, she dresses up as her mother, who was a factory worker, and admits to the guilt she feels over their fractured bond.

Spence was born in 1934 in London. In her thirties, she worked as a wedding photographer before she came into contact with feminist and socialist politics. Her earliest notoriety came after a group show at the Hayward Gallery in 1979, the same year of her first solo show. Yet Spence never committed to her art full time, even after taking up formal studies in the late 1970s. Throughout her life she took on other jobs: as a secretary, a grant writer, a sometime lecturer. She slowly became established throughout the 1980s, but only in relatively small circles, which seemed to suit her just fine. She preferred to work closely with one or two other people, which helped her focus on particular bodies of work.

Probably because she was so concerned with relationships, Spence was at her best when she worked serially. She seems to have understood that her simple, unvarnished pictures, which she proudly made on the cheap with simple technology (she even had the pictures printed by a mass market developer), could do relatively little on their own. Although she often made single prints, her best works are groups of photographs, which help to tell stories that unfold from one picture to the next. One set of four pictures at the Shin Gallery, titled *Photo Therapy: The Bride (With Rosy Martin)*, depicts Spence alone on her (fake) wedding day, a veil across her face. She looks anguished—in two of the photographs she appears to be screaming—and each successive picture multiplies the sense of dread.

In 1991, shortly before her death from leukemia the next year, she began her *Final Project* in collaboration with Terry Dennett. One of the pictures in the series shows her looking down into a burial pit. Another, titled (*What 1991 felt like... (most of the time)*), depicts her standing on a narrow plank that bridges two green fields. She looks slightly hesitant, as if she isn’t quite sure how she got there, which speaks to the surprise of illness and the vulnerability it introduces into life. For Spence, art was a form of therapy and a chance to make disease visible in a new way. It let her narrate her own situation. Yet even then, she knew art could only do so much for her. “I know I’m not getting better,” she says in the BBC documentary. “But I’m in control of my own life. And I think people should have that right.”



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