

Celia Perrin Sidarous

Our Dust

24 February to 23 March 2024



Dear Celia,

Like you, I too am a Shell Girlie, though my shell collection did not survive my family's *déplacement*. You and I, the seeds of uprooted trees, we collect for posterity. But absent return, absent record, how do we compose genealogy? When you set out to wrest your family history from your father—I know your pain when you plead, *why won't you share with me?*—you sought beyond his archive's peripheries. What about all of the things that make a life a life—these not-posed and not-arranged relics of lives lived?

You could compose genealogy from still life: by asking your father to shell pistachios with you, the way he shelled pistachios for child-you, his touch tender and careful, their shells pile, arrange, rearrange: worthy of picturing, preserving. As he sprinkles and strews and pours, rosewater, cumin seeds, sumac, garlic peels, I recall you telling me of his reluctance, then his persistence to remain outside the frame. His eventual participation in your work makes my body prickle and pang with envy when I remember my own father's reluctance; when I ask of his father's role in a political party outlawed by Nasser, he dismisses me with a chuckle; instead he shares news of marriages, births, breakups. Perhaps petty gossip is genealogy, too. Your father couldn't understand why you wanted to know—until he did. You console me with this record you now possess.

The gesture of taking apart to return together again is customary in your work, but one you had not taken to your family archive. How can *re-assemblage* make your ephemeral archeological? You could compose genealogy by ennobling the still life: it's what you call an ethics for living, or an ethics for existing. You could exalt ritual, the objects that form the very basis of life. You could create containers to confine voids—vessels whose surfaces and orifices mirror each other (when one of them overflows, its flow fountain-like, propelled from within, as if with a pulsing core, against gravity, palpitates, then gushes, you remind me that a still life is never still), vessels whose clay still breathes. The vessel becomes visceral, earth skin and skin earth, clay caressed continuous with flesh. The vessel becomes body, brushes with a shell and its kernel and its empty shell cast in bronze, brushes with kneeling gods chiseled from millennia of geological time compressed into slick slabs of alabaster, granite, limestone, which brush with peels, seeds, pods, a shadow, a gaze, a guava's avocado-like flesh, leather, satin, coral, fossil, glass, glaze, a knife's blade, a Cairene cypress captured on a honeymoon, held hands, hair sprayed, portraits of the departed, gelatin and silver and

cellulose, inscriptions of lives lived and bodies formerly inhabited and spirits ascended, their protective prayers for the living. Hands of the no-longer-here brush with the hands of the still-here. You collapse time into an accordion, constantly contracting and expanding, one in which the family album dances with the exhibition catalog from a 1985 Palais de la Civilisation exhibition of pharaoh Ramses II's tomb, in a former Expo 67 building, outside of which your father learned of your mother's second pregnancy.

Within your universe of evanescent arrangements, you make the fragments you took from the whole as *whole* as the whole; you make the fragments fluctuate, fluid, mutable and mercurial—within yet beyond, but of and from and for the same time. Ceremonial. Equally eternal.

Yours sincerely, and always,
Merray

Celia Perrin Sidarous is an image-based artist living and working in Montréal. Her artworks present assemblages and arrangements, following a logic that is at once internal and associative. Her photographs offer a considered way of looking at collected objects and images within the visual rhetoric of the studio. Referencing histories and the overarching structures of still life, interior arrangement and the placement of objects for display and exhibition, her photographs nonetheless confound the conditions through which everyday objects are usually interpreted and the ways we navigate the material world.

Perrin Sidarous' works have been featured in numerous solo and collective exhibitions in Canada and abroad: Foreman Art Gallery (Lennoxville), McCord Museum (Montréal), Centre CLARK (Montréal), Embassy of Canada Prince Takamado Gallery (Tokyo), Norsk Billedhoggerforening (Oslo), CONTACT Photography Festival (Toronto) and FOCUS Photography Festival (Mumbai), Esker Foundation (Calgary), Dunlop Art Gallery (Regina), Banff Centre (Banff). Her work was included in the Biennale de Montréal 2016 — Le Grand Balcon / The Grand Balcony, at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. She is one the five laureates of the Prix en art actuel MNBAQ 2023, offered by the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. She was longlisted for the Sobey Art Award in 2019, and is the recipient of the Prix Pierre-Ayot 2017, as well as the Barbara Spohr Memorial Award 2011. Her works are present in private and public collections, most notably at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal and the Walter Phillips Gallery.

Merray Gerges is an Egyptian essayist and editor based in New York. She is an Associate Editor at *Momus*. During her MFA in narrative nonfiction at New York University, she began working on a series of longform essays about family inheritance through self and body. When her path crossed Celia's, she had also been preoccupied with how to create what Celia calls "family cosmologies" from nonverbal language and the traces of the everyday.

The artist wishes to thank the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec for its financial support, as well as Main Film, Montréal.