

PHOTO SOUVENIRS

CAROLLE BÉNITAH

Selected by Ellen Harris

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The tenacity and fearlessness of Carolle Bénitah's artistic vision haunted me long after FotoFest 2012. Her work struck me as being not so much an intellectual construct—which in its almost obsessive detail it could have been—as a highly emotional struggle for self-knowledge. Small in size and obviously mementos of a family's distant past, Bénitah's photographs are so cunningly embellished (or, some would say, defaced) with embroidery and beading that the viewer is compelled to look more closely to unravel their significance.

Bénitah's own words, from her artist's statement, provide an eloquent description of the genesis and execution of the work:

"I started to be interested in my family pictures when I was leafing through my family album and found myself overwhelmed by an emotion that I could not define the origin of. These photographs were taken forty years earlier...and reawakened an anguish of something both familiar and totally unknown.... I decided to explore the

memories of my childhood because that allowed me to understand who I am and to define my current identity.... I choose snapshots because they are related to memories and to loss.... I order them, classify them, scan them, then I print them.... [Then] I start to tell my version of the story.... On the next step, I add needlework: embroidery and beads.... I use its decorative function to reinterpret my own history and to expose its failings.... With each stitch I make a hole with a needle. Each hole is a putting to death of my demons.... I make holes in paper until I am not hurting any more.... This precise and slow process is a metaphor for the work of making oneself and for the passage of time."

One could call this process a series of excavations, a way of resurrecting memories while adjusting them to the realities of the present time. We are all compendia of our past experiences and the people we have known—good, bad, and everything in between. If we can embrace the totality of these memories, we can safely move beyond them.

Bénitah notes that embroidery was an integral part of the milieu in which she grew up in Casablanca, Morocco, where her mother embroidered her trousseau. Yet as an artist, she both embraces and thwarts that tradition, which could have helped define her as a "well-behaved girl, wise spouse, and loving mother." Her frequent use of red thread, for example, is a conduit to violent emotion, blood, and sexuality. *The Disguise* from her 2009 series shows a group of children bound together by stitched

masks defined by red thread. *The Reunion* is a family grouping in which each individual is separated from the others by outlines in red thread, and four faces are hidden under cross-stitches. The black thread draped across *On the Sofa* obscures all but one of the children in the picture.

The most subtle work is also the most unsettling: *In Daddy*, the same decorative snippet covers the genitalia of a little girl, standing between her father's legs, and the eyes of the mother. By the time we get to *Yad Vashem*, we suspect that the death heads floating around the teenager at the center have a much more personal significance than the Holocaust. Carolle Bénitah has made photo-based art as original and moving as I have ever seen; it is to be hoped that she is also successfully exorcising the nightmares that haunt her dreams.

ELLEN HARRIS

Carolle Bénitah
The Disguise, 2009
Digital Print on Baryta Paper,
Embroidery, and Beading
Courtesy of the Artist