

The question; “Are you my mother?” begs one to consider how it is that we identify those who are often the closest to us. In trying to describe this figure, one might choose to highlight the similarities between mother and child - perhaps behaviors or physicalities. One might choose to think further back, drawing upon family histories and consider shared cultures, geographies, or traditions.

From birth, one’s identity is formed in relation to what they are surrounded by. We as humans are first identified as someone’s baby. Later, people begin to self identify through their interests, dislikes, gender, culture, religion, occupation, and geography- the things that they feel are the most pressing to convey to others who we are. While ‘identity’ is made up of many deeply personal elements, it is also something that requires constant explanation for others throughout a lifetime. In the recent decades of our global society, it has become far more common to be defined by what divides one another, rather than how people are unified. The artists whose work is included in this exhibit ask us to look past these physical or familial barriers, and urge the viewer to focus on kinship through shared histories, cultures, and experiences.

“Mother” -as explored through origin and family history- looks into deeply personal relationships that are tied to a shared tradition, memory, and heritage. To an outsider looking at another family, many of these details might be hidden- yet they remain impactful through a common understanding of the strong bond that families share. Jamie Diamond explores the importance of these details in her series, Constructed Family Portraits (2008), where she stages complete strangers as kin. Because the viewer needs to understand the context of this work to know that it is fiction, the deceptive reality of these photos explore the way in which bio-canonical photography has the potential to distort the ways in which the present views the past.

Beyond a familial definition “Mother” might also refer to a mother country or mother-land. In our increasingly interconnected world, a sense of national identity is often lost or misconstrued- through media, generational shifts, or through the movement of a family from one space to another. As the artists exhibited in this show engage with the perception of history and the cultural events of specific locations, Aleksandar Duravcevic’s series Youth uses an iridescent reflective material to incorporate the viewer in the piece. With three doric columns covered in this material, Duravcevic evokes a sense of loss through the absence of what this column is implied to have once supported. From within the columns, a sound piece of lamenting female voices incorporates Montenegrin mourning tradition within the experience. It is through the artist’s focus in memory and identity that elements of both a familial and cultural loss are felt, as Duravcevic’s own distance from his homeland is embedded in his work.

Similarly, artist Eugene Lemay explores one’s relationship to place through his ongoing series, Amerkia, which is influenced by the effects of polarizing politics on the people of a nation. In Lemay’s work, the most iconic example of a nationally unifying symbol- is used to question the truth of what the flag represents. The removal of all color from the American flags prompts the viewer to address the importance of these symbols to the United States at this point in history, or even the validity of them. By examining how groups continue to unite under these national ideals, or increasingly divide over them, Lemay harkens back to questions that address the conviction that is needed to maintain a national identity.

As our behaviors create the history of those who will come after us, “Are you my Mother” implores that we each examine our unique positionality as the keepers of our own narratives. By refusing to lie about their own histories the artists of this exhibit beg the question of how we can continue to empathize with each other, despite differentiating opinions of family and national identity. With more opportunity to share personal histories than ever before, this show invites viewers to ask themselves how they are choosing to use their unique positionality to emphasize the similarities and differences to those around them.