

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

**Tracking Jimmy**

A Thesis in  
Artisanry

by

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## **Abstract**

*Tracking Jimmy*, by Caitlin von Schmidt

My work is about the subjectivity of story telling, the power of photographs, and my love of the everyday object. Part of my installation consists of mixed media sculptures which tell a fictional story of a real boy, Jimmy Bernadt, using the photos from his family photo album, bought at a flea market. His story can be any of ours. The other part of the installation consists of a book which tells another story - the story of how I tracked his family through the information in the album, how I contacted them, and why I made this work. People are the most important things in the world. There is great beauty in the ordinary.

*Thanks to Tim and Kevin, without whom the show never would've gone up; to Kelly, without whom I never could've gone on; to Ruth, who was unfailingly supportive and generous; to my friends at Purchase Street, both students and teachers, past and present, who always had something to say and time to listen; and to Mark, who reminded me that one story can have many different endings.*

For my mother Helen, who taught me more about beauty than she will ever know.

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## Introduction

I have been collecting vintage photographs for nearly twenty years. My house is filled with "dead people's stuff," the belongings of people I never knew. The pictures of these mysterious strangers and the furniture and objects which used to dwell in someone else's house and life fill me with wonder and curiosity. I don't know these people. I can't. In most cases I don't even know their names. All I am offered is the tiniest glimpse into their lives, a moment captured on film, an object used and discarded or forgotten. This moment is beyond my control; it can't be prolonged or changed; it is what it is. It feeds me and inexorably draws me in. Conversely, and perhaps perversely, if I knew *everything* about these people, I might find them dull. Is it the unsolvable mystery of these strangers' lives, held forever in these stolen glimpses, that makes these photographs and objects irresistible to me?

In his book *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*, James Elkins talks about the phenomenon of subjective contour completion, in which our brain perceives an entire object, even if we see only a portion. "On a deeper level," he writes, "subjective contour completion answers to a desire for wholeness over dissection and form over shapelessness" (125). Subjective contour completion refers to a visual phenomenon, but it is a fitting metaphor for the way I see found photographs and objects in general, and the way I see them in my work. From one photograph, one moment, I am driven to extrapolate an entire imaginary life and its attendant imaginary end; from one fragment, I cannot help but leap towards the whole.

My thesis work is made up of vignettes, chapters of my fictional story line for one boy, James "Jimmy" Bernadt (see fig. 1), a portion of whose life I found in an old photo album in a western Massachusetts flea market. This album provided a much more complete record of someone's life than did the single photographs I had used previously in my work.

It gave me names, dates, places; I could follow Jimmy from birth to manhood, all in 74 pages. The additional information did not dull my curiosity, but rather piqued it. Here is his mother, his father, his home; here is his school. Sometimes he looks at the camera; sometimes he looks away. What did he feel in those captured moments, often mundane and occasionally extraordinary? What did he feel that we *all* feel, in our various moments of exhilaration and exhaustion, joy, depression, and boredom? And how could I express those feelings, in tandem with the imagined stories of Jimmy's life, in my work?



Fig. 1. Jimmy Bernadt.

The pieces in my thesis show are mixed media objects, viewing devices shown in tandem with the objects which inspired them. A wedding cake (see fig. 2) is seen in conjunction with a stripped down version of the same form, its doppelgänger, its shadow object (see fig. 3). This shadow object is simplified in both form and color and constructed in wood; it is an echo of the original rather than a duplication. Inside the constructed object, seen through a peephole, is a scene from my imaginary narrative of Jimmy Bernadt's life, a scene depicting a moment taken from its original context which both connects to and transcends individual experience.

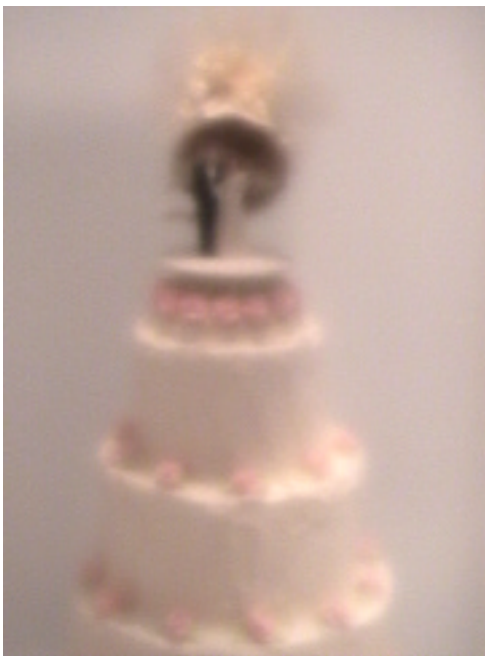


Fig. 2. The "real" object, obscured.



Fig. 3. The made object.

The objects are displayed together on specially constructed pedestals (see fig. 4). The made object rests on the top, as any object on a pedestal would; it is the palpable present. The vintage object is displayed below, in the center of a case of frosted plastic, partially

obscured by the filmy surface. Lit from above by a light within the pedestal, the object within is illuminated and removed at the same time; it is the untouchable past.



Fig. 4. The pieces on their pedestals.

The interior scenes (see fig. 5) are built of a combination of photos and found objects, e.g., candy and Astroturf, birthday candles and toy soldiers. The photos are not the originals from the Bernadt family album. From the start, it was vital to me that the album not be harmed; somewhere there was a family, a boy now grown, who might want to see these photographs again. Neither are the photos in the pieces simple reproductions. The snapshots have been scanned into a computer and manipulated; what were black and white photos have been colored, and often distorted, then reprinted for use in the tableaux. Manipulating the images allows me greater control over the viewing experience, facilitating the reading of the photographs within the small interiors through the distorting peepholes.

More importantly, altering the photos allows me to influence how the images serve as part of a narrative whole.

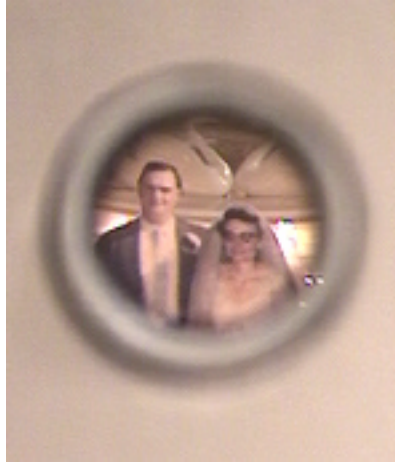


Fig. 5. A peephole.

I have illustrated moments of childhood victories and defeats, shame, loneliness, and glee. There are moments of self-awareness, sometimes painful, which mark us on our way to adulthood. Perhaps the viewer empathizes, perhaps they recognize and remember a source of pain, of joy; perhaps instead, it was they who were the inflictors of pain, either physical or psychological; perhaps, for a moment, they feel shame and regret. Perhaps, like me, they were both receiver and giver of pain; perhaps, like me, they remember the incredible capacity of children to be ecstatic, to be cruel.

What is it that prompts the viewer to look through that peephole in the first place? My work also concerns itself with our innate curiosity about others and their unknown lives. Curiosity, linked with aesthetic pleasure, drives me to collect abandoned objects, to pore over the photo albums and home movies of people I've never met, to dig through the detritus of past lives, to peer in the uncurtained window as I pass by at night. It is this curiosity which brings eye to peephole, be it in a door, a wall, or a work of art. It is a trait I believe to be

universal. Curiosity about the viewed other, and the tendency to compare their lives to our own and to empathize, drives the body of my thesis work. In this written thesis, I will address the power of photographs and our innate curiosity about others – how it has informed the work of other artists and, in turn, how their work has informed mine.

## **The Photographic Image**

Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination. The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: 'There is the surface. Now think - or rather feel, intuit - what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way.' Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy (Sontag 23).

A neighborhood child, looking at my old [photographic] postcards, studied them a long while, her own face as grave as theirs, then said, "It looks as though they never had a red dress.... (Baskin x).

As far back as I can remember, I have been fascinated by photography, in particular the kind that records, or purports to record, real people, the places they inhabit, and the way they spend their time. From very early on, I was exposed to documentary photography of all kinds. My grandfather and father, both painters, had large libraries of reference material, including volumes of photographs. The nature photographs of Ansel Adams, the still-lives of Edward Weston held little appeal for me. Those pictures offered no faces; they revealed no eyes. Instead, I pored over Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs, wondering at the strange costumes and twisted corpses. I studied Eadweard Muybridge's book *Animal Locomotion*, fascinated by the pre-cinematic progression of animals and people, children and the elderly, absorbed especially in the images of a handicapped boy who moved forward in his own fashion, smiling. In the tabloid magazines which littered the floor of my grandfather's studio, I saw gruesome photographs of car crashes and the victims of lovers'

quarrels; in those high contrast black and white photographs, blood spilled out of bodies like ink. I was fascinated by life and death captured on film. My father's collection included books about Diane Arbus, Paul Strand, and Alfred Stieglitz. I saw their work in the same context as Brady's – someone with a camera had recorded regular people in their natural environment. It would be some time before I understood just how different images of actual people could be.

When I was an undergraduate studying painting, my interest in documentary photography was rekindled, only now I viewed these images armed with many additional layers of information. When I looked at the work of Lewis Hine or Jacob Riis, Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans, I could put it in its historical and sociological context, understanding that there was far more to these images than simply the visual record of common people; there was more to these images than met the eye. I understood that the work of Diane Arbus (see fig. 6) is *not* like the work of Weegee (see fig. 7), that knowing about the photographer can inform the viewer as much as the photograph itself.



Fig. 6. Diane Arbus, *Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C.*, 1962.



Fig. 7. Weegee, *Lost Children*, June 9, 1941.

Yet for all this extra information, what had originally attracted me to this kind of photograph remained the same. It was not the photographer's motives or techniques that held my interest; it was the subjects of their photographs. It was the way people held their hands, or stood, or angled their bodies for the camera. It was the way their eyes met the camera's gaze, or looked away. It was the gigantic questions these recorded fragments of time posed: who are, or were, these people? What were they doing before they were recorded for posterity? What did they do afterwards? What are their stories? In a way, the less I knew about the photographer and their subject, and the more I was left to create my own narrative, the more the images appealed to me.

It follows, then, that for me, an anonymous photograph can be imbued with as much power as the work of a master. If it is not the technique that attracts but rather the subject, then the artist becomes less important. "Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art," wrote Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (21). I think that looking at professional photographers' work gave me, for want of a better term, an educated eye. I understand composition, lighting, and mood; I understand intent. But in the end, the mysterious unrecorded story is what attracts me the most, and the story of a famous photographer's subject is not privileged over the story of the subject of some anonymous candid shot. If anything, the mystery is only deepened by not knowing who it was who tripped the shutter.

Around the same time as I was being educated about the documentary photographers, without a conscious decision to collect, I began accumulating vintage photographs of children (see fig. 8). I didn't buy every photo I saw, but picked and chose carefully. I am hard put to say what it is about particular photos that attract me: it isn't some sort of aesthetic ideal that the images have to live up to; it isn't their age, or where they

come from. I suppose it is the stories I imagine about certain children that make me pick up their pictures and take them home. The pictures I choose among are like narratives, like novels – sometimes the story is interesting and sometimes it isn't; sometimes you read the book to the end, sometimes you just put it down. What makes one photograph different from the next is intangible, unexplainable; it is internal and beyond my own ability to describe.



Fig. 8. Found photograph, my collection.

In my own work, it is the imagined stories of those unknown subjects that inspire me. Using anonymous, or nearly anonymous photographs, I imagine, I extrapolate, I expand, I project; I tell a story. I believe that there is something about the "realness" of photographs that affects the way people see the art that uses them. Even in this age of the

computer, people are quite accepting of the reality of photographs. That reality, or perceived reality, provides a powerful point of departure. Because the viewer is inclined to believe that the person they see is, or was, real (and indeed, they are, or were), they can readily attach to an image situations and emotions they also know to be real. Christian Boltanski, an artist who uses found photographs and objects in his work, said, "When we look at a photograph, we always believe that it's real; it's not real, but it has a close connection with reality. If you paint a portrait, that connection is not so close. With a photo you really feel that the people were 'there'" (25). Susan Sontag writes:

The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph – any photograph – seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects (7).

By incorporating a narrative framework of found objects for these found photographic images, in essence providing the setting that documentary photographers carefully record either by circumstance or decision, I guide the viewer's reading of the story of the person in the photograph I have chosen. In this way, I build a three-dimensional documentary narrative, a slice of fictional life. What the viewer sees is the story I've written in objects.

## **Other Artistic Influences**

There are also artists who are not photographers, but whose work includes found photography and images, who have greatly influenced my thinking about my own work. Two of these artists are Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) and the aforementioned Christian Boltanski (b. 1945).

Joseph Cornell used found objects and paper ephemera arranged within boxes or other types of containers to create complex and oblique narratives; he created his own tiny worlds. His work is inspirational to me in both his use of materials and his use of light, motion (many pieces were meant to be held and moved about), scale, and implied narrative.

Cornell found mystery in the ordinary; he saw deep symbolism in seemingly mundane objects. Goblets, balls, springs, bits of printed paper - all were given life, were animated, in his work (see fig. 9). When he used images, he rarely used the original, preferring instead to use a Photostat copy while retaining the original in his extensive

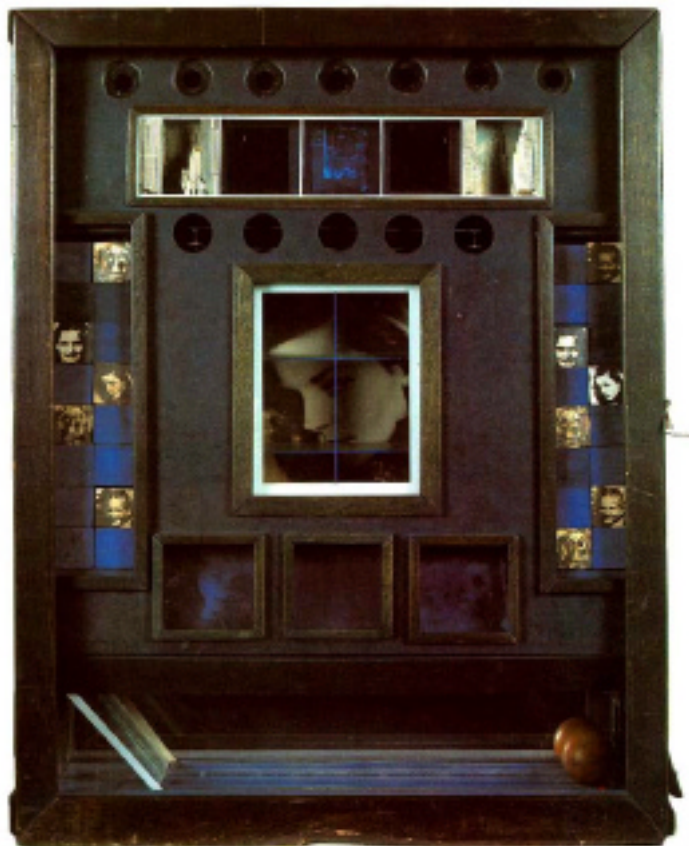


Fig. 9. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)*, 1945-46.

archives; he reused certain images many times, sometimes repeating an image in one piece, sometimes making many similar versions of the same piece. In her book, *Utopia Parkway*, Deborah Solomon wrote of Cornell:

In using a reproduction, Cornell wasn't trying to recapture the experience of seeing the original; rather, he was recognizing that reproductions have their own potent qualities. Like his boxes, reproductions are suffused with desire: they make us long for originals we can never possess or perhaps even see (103).

The scale of Cornell's work was small, rarely larger than two or three feet in any direction. "His genius was an intimate one;" wrote Solomon, "many of his best boxes are just a foot high, and they speak their secrets in a whisper (270)." Working in a time when the art world intelligentsia believed that bigger was better, Cornell worked with no regard for the prevailing trends. He was not ignorant of the art world at large; he was, in fact, an avid follower of modern art. But throughout his entire life, he remained singularly uninfluenced by the outside world.

Christian Boltanski is an artist who also believes in the life of inanimate objects, especially those objects which have passed through someone's hands, which have been used. "When someone finds or buys your old thing," said Boltanski, "it has a new life, new love. An object in relation to someone is important, it has a story, it has a life" (lecture). In his own work he uses empty biscuit tins, used clothing, and objects retrieved from lost and founds.

Boltanski also frequently uses found photographs of people, usually just disembodied faces, often illuminated very simply and straightforwardly by naked light bulbs. He believes in the power of the anonymous image, the unidentifiable face: "If I show you a photo of a child running on a beach, for each of you it will be a different photo and a different child. It is a stimulus to remember your own story" (lecture).



Fig. 10. Christian Boltanski, *Monument: The Children of Dijon*, 1985.

Unlike Cornell's, the scale of Boltanski's work is often quite large. He often does his installation work in museums and galleries, as well as in alternative spaces such as churches and former prisons (see fig. 10). Some installations use only the found objects, heaps of clothing, or mock anthropological displays of lost and found items. The installations using photographs, however, resonate most deeply with me. In them, numerous pairs of black and white eyes look out from black and white faces. Sometimes they are arranged in tight grids, sometimes in triangles; sometimes they are organized more randomly around the space. Sometimes in a darkened room, the faces glow, each illuminated by their own naked bulbs; sometimes the faces are projected from behind onto plain white sheets and stand in the space like ghosts. Sometimes mirrors on the walls reflect black and white faces from across the room, joining the viewers' faces with those of the photographs and removing the space between the seer and the seen, making the viewers part of the work. Always there are the questions: who are these people? What did they do? What happened to them?

Yet for all the size and space of Boltanski's work, much of it is really about little things, human things, the things we tend to forget, or choose to ignore, but which are always there.

Part of my work has been about what I call 'small memory'. Large memory is recorded in books and small memory is all about little things: trivia, jokes. Part of my work then has been about trying to preserve 'small memory,' because often when someone dies, that memory disappears. Yet that 'small memory' is what makes people different from one another, unique. These memories are very fragile; I want to save them (Boltanski, interview by Tamar Garb 19).

In own work, I am also trying to preserve these "small memories." I believe that, paradoxically, these memories help to make us unique, yet also help to join us together. They are the memories of things that often occur but never repeat, of infinite permutations of finite experience.

## **The Work**

James "Jimmy" Bernadt was born in 1940 in Burlington, Iowa. His father, Alfred, was the pastor of the Oak Street Baptist church. As a child, Jimmy was a member of Pack 16 of the Burlington Boy Scouts. He played guitar. He broke his arm. He shook the hand of Harry S. Truman at the back of a train (see fig. 11). He grew up and graduated from college. In 1963, he went into the Air Force. I don't know Jimmy Bernadt. I've never met him. Everything I know about Jimmy I learned from a photo album that I bought for five dollars at a flea market in Ware, Massachusetts in the summer of 1999.



Fig. 11. Harry meets Jimmy.

When I brought the album back to New Bedford, it was an addition to my extensive collection of vintage photographs, mostly of children. I had been using these single, isolated photographs, mostly from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in my work. The children in those earlier images were usually posed in the studio in their Sunday best, their hair neatly combed.

As photographic equipment became more accessible to the masses, the nature of the family photographic record changed. A trip to the studio was no longer required; now any family member could snap the shutter. A mid-20<sup>th</sup> century family photo album provides different kinds of images than the earlier studio portraits. Posed pictures in these albums are usually commemorations of special occasions – baptisms, christenings, graduations, weddings, and funerals – but most shots are candid. In these photographs, more everyday moments are recorded. A family smiles at the camera from the dinner table; a man sits in the living room playing the banjo; jumping children pass through the photograph in a blur.

Even relatively formal photographs have a more casual feel as faster shutter speeds allowed for more relaxed poses.

The family album format also provided something the single studio portrait could not – an arc of events. Instead of a single page from a book, there are chapters. In the Bernadt album, photographs of Jimmy show him growing from a baby to a boy to a man. Around him, family members, neighbors, and friends come and go, aging in the process. I am provided with many more clues as I imagine this boy's life. In making work centering on my version of Jimmy's story, I have selected both candid and posed photos from his family photo album.

## **The Pieces**

### ***Fatty, Fatty, 2 x 4***

*Fatty, Fatty, 2 x 4* consists of a blue and grey vintage lunchbox and its shadow object, a wooden box painted a matching blue and grey with dimensions equal to the original lunchbox but simplified in form. As in all the pieces, the two related objects are shown on one pedestal. The constructed form sits on top, the original form is inside a display case of frosted acrylic which makes up the center of the pedestal, and this section sits on top of a third section, the classic white box pedestal. Viewers can look at but not touch the original, which is lit from above by a light inside the pedestal, as if it were being shown in an anthropological museum (see fig. 12).



Fig. 12. *Fatty, Fatty, 2 X 4.*

The actual lunchbox, like the other vintage objects, is of a past to which we can never return; it is a dead thing. Seen through a haze, as our own memories must be seen through the distance and haze of time, it is not meant to elicit nostalgia but to refer to history, the history of the subject of this work, the boy Jimmy Bernadt. We can never go back to the time of his family's photo album, and our knowledge of that time is filtered through everything that has happened since. The made object is the living thing. It is from the present, and there the story exists, not about the time of the vintage object but about the emotional life of the work's subject. The history referred to by the original object is only one piece of information in that story.

The constructed object of *Fatty, Fatty, 2 x 4* can be picked up by viewers. It has two peepholes in one end. The same diorama is seen through both peepholes. The lower

opening (see fig. 13) uses a magnifying lens to show the interior scene closer than it actually is; it puts viewers on Jimmy's level. The upper opening (see fig. 14) uses a door peephole to distort the interior, creating the illusion of a much larger space and making the objects inside seem farther away than they actually are. Viewers, like Jimmy's schoolmates, see him from above.



Fig. 13. Interior of *Fatty, Fatty*, lower lens.

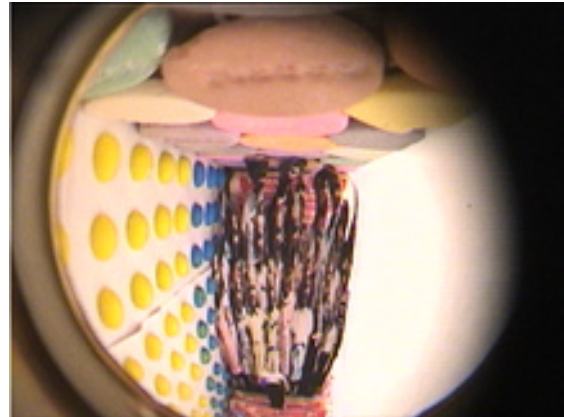


Fig. 14. Interior of *Fatty, Fatty*, upper lens.

The interior walls of the object are covered with penny candy, brands which were available during the period of the photo, i.e., the mid-50s. The ceiling is tiled with Necco wafers, the floor with Pixy sticks, and the left wall with button candy. The back is lined with rolls of Smarties. The right wall is made of white translucent plastic, which allows in light to aid viewing. Standing against the far wall, on a roll of Smarties and in front of the heads of Dum Dum lollipops, is a tinted photo of Jimmy's third grade classmates. The image is distorted so that the children stretch out towards the top of the picture, their heads and torsos grossly out of proportion to their tiny feet and legs. Like Alice in Wonderland, their bodies appear too big for the tiny space, their heads cramped and bent against the candy ceiling. They tower over a separate image of Jimmy, less than two inches tall, who stands on

a tiny chocolate bar facing the peepholes. He smiles beatifically at the viewer, his back to the taunts of his peers.

When viewers look through the peephole of *Fatty, Fatty, 2 x 4*, or the peepholes of any of the pieces, they become complicit in the action. The very act of bending to look, or squinting the eye to see through the hole, involves them in the scenario in a way that can feel like prying or spying, like looking through their neighbor's keyhole. This involvement is necessarily constrained; they may witness a painful scene, but they are powerless to intervene, just as I cannot intervene in the actual lives of my photographic subjects. *My* intervention comes in the construction of the narratives. Viewers may empathize with Jimmy, remembering a time when they or someone they knew were, like him, wrapped in a layer of baby fat; they identify with the protagonist. Other viewers might identify instead with the antagonists, remembering, perhaps with a pang of guilt, a time when they were the bully, rather than the bullied.

### ***The Way to a Man's Heart***

The pair of objects that make up *The Way to a Man's Heart* are an aluminum cake carrier and its constructed wooden shadow form, painted grey (see fig. 15). The fabricated form has only one peephole, a lens which makes the interior appear larger, while also increasing the angle of view of the circular inside wall to 160 degrees.



Fig. 15. *The Way to a Man's Heart*.

Inside, centered and near the front of the space, is a photographic dining room table, at which sit Jimmy, his mother and father, and an unknown girl (see fig. 16). The photograph is of a birthday party and on the table is a cake with lit candles. Jimmy and his mother are in color, and she has been enlarged and is out of scale. The father and girl, whose back is to the viewer, are faded, grey.

On the back wall is a frieze, a photographic collage of multiples of the mother's head, every other one reversed, large enough to reach from the floor to the ceiling of the space. Her face is that of the table scene, smiling and looking down, lit by the candle flames. Along the bottom and top edge of the wall is a molding of white frosting stars; the upper molding is

dotted with a line of silver dragées. Birthday candles, partially burned, form columns between each pair of heads.



Fig. 16. Interior of *The Way to a Man's Heart Is Through His Stomach* seen directly through peephole.



Fig. 17. Interior of *The Way to a Man's Heart Is Through His Stomach* seen from a distance.

The floor is lined with a mirrored film, partially covered by dragées, colored nonpareils, and tiny round candies, all cake decorations (see fig. 17). When a viewer picks up the piece and tilts it back and forth, these various sized balls roll back and forth and the distortion of the lens creates a vertiginous effect. The ceiling is translucent white plastic which allows in light.

*The Way to a Man's Heart* speaks about the way food can be used as emotional succor. In my story of his life, the relationship between Jimmy and his mother is complicated by the substitution of food for emotional support. The funhouse effect of the interior represents their shifting, unpredictable relationship.

### ***Watch Them, Catch Them Unawares***

The two objects of *Watch Them, Catch Them Unawares* are a large picnic basket and its simplified double, which contains two peepholes (see fig. 18). The lens in the upper opening is a special type of door peephole, over 2 inches in diameter, which is meant to be viewed from a distance of over two feet. Viewers are able to see the interior through this opening only from that distance or more; from close up, the view becomes obscured. This lens also reverses the image. The lens in the lower opening makes the interior seem larger and pushes the far wall back visually.



Fig. 18. *Watch Them, Catch Them Unawares*

Inside the constructed basket is a false floor of Astroturf which rests just below the level of the lower peephole; on this "grass" lies a red and white plastic picnic blanket. On the blanket, in the center of the space and surrounded by plastic ants, stands Jimmy (see fig. 19). On a false back wall is a posed picture of Jimmy and his classmates on a picnic. The classmates and scenery are in color but Jimmy, the same Jimmy who also stands closer to the front, is gray and faint and stands at the edge of the group. The ceiling is translucent white plastic.



Fig. 19. Interior of *Watch Them, Catch Them Unawares*

*Watch Them, Catch Them Unawares* has an additional element. Mounted in the front of the pedestal is a timer switch which activates an internal light and audio tape. The music is played in a three-minute tape loop – 90 seconds of silence alternating with 90 seconds of a child's voice singing "The Teddy Bear's Picnic." The back wall is made of the same plastic as the ceiling and the image in front of it is printed on back-light film, lit brightly from behind when the timer is on. The idea behind *Watch Them, Catch Them Unawares* is that of being alone in a crowd. On a school outing with his peers, Jimmy, though to all outward appearances participating, feels isolated, separate. His is the isolation children often experience when they feel different somehow.

## *Always a Bridesmaid*

In the album, "Jimmy" Bernadt turns into "Jim"; the baby turns into a boy, then a teenager, then a man. His older brother Al gets married, but in the photos, Jim is always alone. In my story, the loneliness and isolation of the boy has turned into the loneliness and isolation of the man. In *Always a Bridesmaid*, there is no actual vintage object. The "real" object is a faux wedding cake, frosted with real royal icing, its four tiers decorated with pink frosting roses and green frosting leaves, its peak capped with a vintage caketopper - two small figures of a bride and groom (see fig. 20).



Fig. 20. *Always a Bridesmaid*.

The interiors of the bottom three layers of the shadow object represent the wedding of Jim's brother. The bottom two layers flow into each other, each visible through the other's peephole, a ballroom with a grand lobby and a first mezzanine. On the floor of the space stands Al and his bride Ruth, dressed for their wedding day, amid rice, pearls, and white doves (see fig. 21). Mirrored walls reflect tiny white lights to infinity, as plastic swan wedding favors glide along the walls of the mezzanine (see fig. 22). In the third layer, a mirror ball hangs from a ceiling in a room of broken mirrors (see fig. 23). In the fourth and top layer, Jim sits alone in a white, empty room, looking glum (see fig. 24). An adult, he is still alone, sad and separate in a world of happy others.



Fig. 21. *Always a Bridesmaid*, bottom layer.

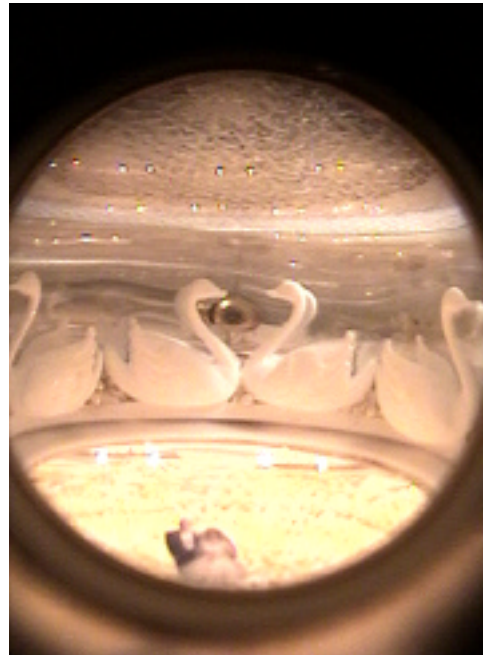


Fig. 22. *Always a Bridesmaid*, second layer.



Fig. 23. *Always a Bridesmaid*, third layer.



Fig. 24. *Always a Bridesmaid*, top layer.

On the front of the pedestal are two toggle switches. The left switch activates a hidden audio tape which plays Wagner's "Lohengrin," better known as the Wedding March. The right switch sets off Connie Francis, singing "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" Each piece of music may be played separately, or they may be played together, creating a discordant cacophony, a counterpoint to the sweetness of the wedding cake.

## *Be Prepared*



Fig. 25. *Be Prepared*.

The final mimicked object is a mailbox (see fig. 25). Each end of the shadow object has its own peephole and each end of the pedestal has its own toggle switch which activates a tape player. Through one peephole the viewer sees an idyllic rural scene lit by natural light which comes in through a white plastic roof (see fig. 26). The interior of the roof is hidden by a blue sky in which floats fluffy white clouds. In the distance stands Jimmy's house on Jimmy's street. Between the house and the viewer is a green field filled with red poppies, the sort of artificial flowers sold on Veteran's Day, and just inside the peephole, as if ushering the

viewer into his world, stands Jimmy in his Boy Scout uniform, playing the guitar. When the toggle switch is flipped, bird song fills the air.



Fig. 26. *Be Prepared*, the Jimmy peephole.



Fig. 27. *Be Prepared*, the Jim peephole.

The world viewed through the peephole in the opposite end of the "mailbox" is dark and difficult to see (see fig. 27). It is lit only by "starlight" (tiny white lights) in a black fabric sky. As the viewer's eyes adjust to the dark, they can make out green, plastic toy soldiers standing in a field of dirt, towering over and threatening a tiny Jim in paratrooper garb who stands in the center foreground. The toggle switch activates a tape of Country Joe and the Fish playing at Woodstock, singing about the war: "Be the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box!"

The boy Jimmy and the man Jim co-exist in the same piece, the sweet boy seemingly oblivious to the nearby ugly adult inevitability. It is the last piece in the series, the end of

the part of the story I tell, the beginning of the story the viewer must tell themselves. The piece asks a question it doesn't answer, the same question I've asked myself about all those photographs I've collected: "How did it all end for them?"

### *Tracking Jimmy*

As I worked on the pieces, my curiosity about the album never abated. There was just enough information in the album to whet my appetite, just enough to make me think I could find out more. I knew some names, some places. Sitting at my computer, I could search for the Bernadts and information came back. But my committee was reluctant. They told me they were afraid too much knowledge would negatively affect the work. They suggested I might be sued. They urged me not to try to contact the family. So, for a while, I didn't. But I had this album and it belonged to someone, and they were out there somewhere.

In the end, the story of how I came to own the album and how I came to contact the family became an integral part of the work for me. So for my show, I wrote a book (see fig. 28). The book and the show shared the same title: *Tracking Jimmy*. And as I wrote, I came to understand something of what has always attracted me to these objects, used and loved, and these photographs, loved and lost. I came to understand a large part of what drove me to make the Jimmy pieces.



Fig. 28. Photo illustration from *Tracking Jimmy*.

*Tracking Jimmy* is bound in a vintage photo album; its pages measure seven by eleven inches. It is the story of my finding the album, my finding the family, and my finding the heart and center of the work. The illustrations are images taken from the album but never used in the rest of the work. There were so many beautiful photographs in the album; I felt very strongly that they needed to be seen, that part of understanding the work and the thought behind it had to do with the way I felt about the photos.

The Jimmy pieces were a way of looking at an intimate photographic record and expanding that record to create a fictional story; I wrote my own imaginary version of the life of a real but mostly unknown person. When I began working with the Bernadt album, I felt freed by my lack of knowledge about the actual family. Unhampered by the facts of Jimmy's life, I felt I was able to say what I wanted to say without regard to the reality of his experience. What mattered was that the events depicted were real to *me*. But when I learned about the real James Bernadt, I found it didn't change the work at all, but only deepened my respect and appreciation for the source material, the album, the objects. It was a revelation. An essential idea informs this work, and I understand now how it will inform the work I will

do next, and the work I will always do. I understand how it affects the very way I move through the world. I wrote about it in *Tracking Jimmy*.

But it is not the extraordinary moments that make up the bulk of a life.

It is all the moments in between.

These are the moments we ought most to remember...

You should look around.

You should always look around.

There is great beauty in the ordinary.

## Postscript

The opening of my thesis show was held on April 28, 2001. Ruth Bernadt, Jimmy's sister-in-law, drove from Connecticut, along with her next-door neighbor, a high school art teacher, and her neighbor's daughter, to see the work. She showed me pictures of Jim (he'll always be Jimmy to me) and his wife Linda, now living in retirement in Florida. I will never be sure, of course, but I think I would've recognized him anywhere. She told me how he came to meet Harry Truman, how he broke his arm. She told me about her wedding cake. She was open, kind and enthusiastic about the work, and she made three years of struggle seem more worthwhile than it ever had before. I will always be grateful for her generosity and support.



Fig. 29. Ruth Bernadt, Jimmy, and me.

And so you see, every story is not as we imagine. In real life, sometimes there *are* happy endings. The sad and lonely Jimmy of my pieces is actually happily living his life in warmer climes, along with a loving wife. They spend their time fixing up their beach house and acting as docents at a local house museum. Ruth says, when she talks to him about my work, he just laughs.

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