Margit Ellinor: Forgotten Images

Bente Geving

Abstract
I began photographing my mother’s room in 2002. Around that time she began changing the arrangements of pictures and ornaments, fetching things out that had been stored in cupboards and drawers, and putting away other things that had previously been features of the room. She assembled various objects on tables, shelves and in cupboards. She tidied and sorted. I became fascinated by the colours of her compositions, and wanted to enter her world.

Keywords: Sámi, home, Margit Ellinor, photography, memory, contemporary art
DOI: dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2014s33bg

Biographical note
The artist Bente Geving, born 1952 in Kirkenes, Norway, explains her work as follows: ‘I am concerned about the context in life: between the personal life and historical events, between reality and dream, between the human made and the original. Between the spoken and the unspoken. I photograph my surroundings, make connections between places, past and present, put the images together in pairs or diptychs, in series which create new rooms. The images live their own life, they are changing and gain new importance through the viewer’s experience and imagination.’

Bente Geving has exhibited widely in Norway, Germany and Sweden, and her work is represented in collections in Norway and abroad. Recent exhibitions include, Down Under Up North, 2013–14, an art and documentary project about the Sydvaranger iron ore mine in Kirkenes, with Per Berntsen, Art Museum of Northern Norway, Tromsø. In 2014, Geving was awarded a six-year Artist Grant from the Norwegian Council.
An earlier version of this material was presented on the occasion of the project conference ‘Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity’ (20 -22 November 2012, Museum of Ethnology/Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna). To view the film footage on the Open Arts Archive, www.openartsarchive.org, follow this link: http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaa/content/disturbing-pasts-memories-controversies-and-creativity-conference-23

‘Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity’ is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme ‘Humanities as a Source of Creativity and Innovation’, co-funded by AHRC, AKA, DASTI, ETF, FNR, FWF, HAZU, IRCHSS, MHEST, NWO, RANNIS, RCN, VR and the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 235366/291827.
My mother, Margit Ellinor, was born Sámi. She grew up in Kirkenes, in the north of Norway, close to the Russian border. She moved south near Oslo at the age of 24, where she remained for the rest of her life. In 2001, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and she died in 2007.

In 2001, my mother began arranging and rearranging photographs, knick-knacks, silverware and other memorabilia, which decorated shelves and sideboards of her home. Part of this extended process was the replacement of these objects with sets of hidden objects from cupboards and drawers, as she constantly and continuously changed her own surroundings. She made arrangements with Sámi dolls and Norwegian flags, and placed together different things that had the traditional Sámi colours. I was fascinated by her juxtapositions of objects, the colours and form of her compositions, and I felt the desire to enter into this part of her world. Consequently in 2002, I started the ‘Forgotten Images’ project, photographing my mother’s arrangements in my parents’ home.

By producing this series about my mother, I also became aware of the context for, and the continuity within, my own art work since my first solo exhibition in Norway 1988. There I showed photographs featuring my grandmother and her sisters, Anna, Inga and Ellen, living near Kirkenes.

The Sámi people
The Sámi are the indigenous people of Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. They have their own language, clothes, culture and songs. It was important for the Norwegian State to colonise the border district near Russia with patriotic residents, who could speak the Norwegian language. This scheme of the Norwegian authorities was intended to force Sámis to forget their culture and to be assimilated as ‘proper’ Norwegians. By the end of the 19th century, the Sámis were forbidden to speak their own language in official contexts, such as in schools. The traditional songs of the Sámis called joik were also banned, but, even so, the joik survived secretly in some families. These laws were enforced until about 1960. In 1997, during the opening of the Sámi Parliament, King Harald V apologized for
the way the Norwegian State had handled the Sámi people throughout the years. 'The Norwegian State is founded on the territory of two peoples – the Norwegians and the Sámi', he said.

My grandmother and grandfather decided not to talk the Sámi language with their children. They always talked Norwegian with them, so my mother never learned to speak proper Sámi.

The rare thing is that it was the progression of my mother's short-term memory loss that helped her to regain her Sámi identity.
Forgotten Images has been exhibited at the National Museum of Photography, Horten Norway in 2005, Sogn og Fjordane Art Museum, Eikaas Gallery, Jolster in 2006, the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art in Karasjok in 2006, and in 2009-12 a selection of the photos were included in touring exhibitions in Sápmi: Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. Gierdu: Movements in the Sami Art World, curated by Eva Skotnes Vikjord and Irene Snarb, and Being A Part: Sami Artists’ Union, 30 Years Anniversary, curated by Jan-Erik Lundström.