

## The Album

The family album could be considered the spine of my practice. I have worked with family images from the very beginning of my career. I often say that I don't remember whether I was drawn to this subject matter on my own, or because I was encouraged by my peers and professors. Although I grew up in a very culturally diverse suburb of Toronto, the environment of art school was relatively homogenous. In fact, before I came to university, I don't think I had truly experienced what it meant to be a minority. Suddenly in a very different environment, one in which I was encouraged to express myself, I felt the need to speak about this in my work.

Despite my accomplishments, there has always been a lingering feeling of resentment towards the idea that I was making the kind of work that an artist of colour is expected to make. I am reluctant to speak about "the immigrant experience" as a two-sided coin—to sort experiences binarily as here and there, then and now. In the beginning of my practice, I did make work that does just this. As I move forward, I aim to make work that

complicates these concepts of belonging, community and familial history. At a certain point, looking back to a time in which I myself was not a part of, begins to feel contrived and redundant. Nonetheless, looking back is also an essential part of understanding how to move forward. How can we find a way to look critically at evidence from the past and produce new means to help us understand our current reality?

With this new project, I wanted to find a way to return to my family album but also speak about my own experience. The archival photos included in this series were taken before I was born, however, the sites where they were taken resonate with me as I visited them many times as a child. The games and props featured in the photos are from my childhood. References to books and research offer a glimpse into my thought process as I asked what these vernacular images were trying to tell me. I look to the past in order to better understand the present.

Gabrielle Moser speaks about Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn's project *the Making of an Archive* in "Porous Sounds: Frequencies of Refusal in Diasporic Family Photographs," a project in which Nuygun has vernacular images of immigrant families across Canada.<sup>5</sup> Moser writes "Family photography is a productive and forceful genre through which racialized subjects picture themselves as citizens in Canada."<sup>6</sup> It is a moment in which we preserve our experiences of interacting with the landscape that houses our new reality.

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5 Gabrielle Moser, "Porous Sounds: Frequencies of Refusal in Diasporic Family Photographs." in *The Making of an Archive: Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn* (Vancouver: Grunt Gallery, 2017)) 69–90.

6 Ibid, 71

Moser quotes Dallas Hunt in speaking about these felt archives, "which communicate a shared experience of migration and a common context of settler colonialism," and creating historical evidence that can be felt as well as theorized and analyzed. This helps individuals theorize their own experiences.<sup>7</sup> "The stories people tell about their family albums are rich and sustaining frameworks that help the viewer to draw connections between subjects and contextualize events."<sup>8</sup>

I'm still not sure what compelled me to work with the family album to begin with, but I know now that I look to it to create a felt archive. I can apply a critical lens to images produced throughout mine and my family's life, and to the experiences that have brought us here. From this point of entry, I infer broader connections to the structures that have brought me to where I am. In this work and in this text, theory and writing serve as architecture for my own intuitive knowledge—what I gain from knowing the people in the photographs, the places they have been, what came before and what came after. This knowledge also gives me the comfort and trust to use and manipulate these images in ways I see fit. Knowing the people in the images allows me to feel confident in their representation. If somehow one of the subjects feels I have misrepresented them, I know that the community will hold me accountable. As I use the archive as a way to look back at the past, it is a key tool in trying to understand my future.

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7 Ibid, 78

8 Ibid, 78