

“Stories On The Couch” (a series of pictures taken from home)

The “Stories On The Couch” series developed (no pun intended) just before, during and after the time I was taking a class, “The Photographic Portrait.” This was at the SCAD (the Savannah College of Art and Design). The pictures were taken mostly between 1994 and 1996. At first, in the class, in our group critiques, the couch appeared as if it would be a problem. It seemed repetitious and distracting, and some wondered where I might go with it. Mostly they wanted *it* to go somewhere else, perhaps on to another venue.

But I liked the couch. It seemed distinctive and a little different, and I believed that its use, over and over, like the early photographer’s staged backdrop, could actually assist in - as opposed to taking away from - the self presentation, the individuality of each of my sitters. My idea was that each person could, to one degree or another, project their own portrait, or ideally their own story, and the couch would simply serve as a staging ground from which each could express themselves, their story, non-verbally, by the way in which they utilized the space of the couch. As it came about, this worked pretty well.

In practice I’ve found the best stories are given, and in turn, received. They are not necessarily *made*, as many photographers may claim. But with patience and composure they can often be a *given*; they become a *gift*, and sometimes even turn out to be prophetic. One in this series, “Childhood No More,” for example, was recommended by Rachel, my oldest daughter. I had attempted to make other pictures of her but none worked quite as well as this, her own construction, as she was approaching puberty. Thus, the title.

People are different in the ways they may give of themselves and certainly a portrait can be an encounter that confronts the sitter with the very issue of giving. Some project themselves with difficulty. Others do so with ease. “Kelly,” I think, serves as a good example of a smooth encounter. Hot and sweaty, at first he asked, “What should I do?” I said, “Just relax and find a way into the couch.” No problem. He gave me a picture in two frames. The first was an attempt on my part to *make* a picture. The second was on him. I used the second,

and he went home. Who's to say, sometimes we do best by following, not by being the director!

It has been a number of years since I took these pictures. Most of the children are now out of college, or nearly so. The adults in the photographs are beyond middle age. We all still see each other. Some frequently. Others not so much. Isn't that the way; here today, less so tomorrow.

I think that were it not for photographs our visual memories would well be lost. But with the photographs the stories may continue, at least until the generations can no longer remember those who filled them. Were it not for the photographs we probably could not even begin to imagine the stories. But with them the pictures can eventually become like little grave stones. They may well mark a kind of a visual legacy for children and grandchildren, and grand grands. Some may hold on to them because of their narrative quality. Some may not. The pictures could end up in antique stores, or in museums. That is one of the delightful aspects of a legacy, you never know. But you do know that something will become of them and that is part of why I took these kinds of photographs. In a sense, the pictures are about me. And the pictures are about you. Who knows what stories you will respond to in them.

My appreciation goes out to my many sitters. They have been the center score for my stories on the couch.

Mark Uzmans

Savannah, Georgia