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For this photographer, art tends to be personal
By Jennifer Modenessi

The woman in the photograph means business. From her wheelchair, she throws you a proud look, her eyes and mouth hinting at a smile. Behind her looms a thicket of green trees. Fields of flowers wind their way up her dark socks, and a bright fabric bag masks a catheter hanging from her thigh. Look at her arms. They gracefully cradle a shotgun. This woman is one of the main subjects of Jessamyn Lovell's photographic series "Catastrophe, Crisis, and Other Family Traditions," on display at Oakland's Buzz Gallery. The woman in the photograph is also the photographer's mother.

Twenty-eight-year-old Lovell, who lives in Richmond, is a rising star in the local photographic community. She's shown work at a handful of Bay Area galleries and is the recipient of several awards and grants. In addition to teaching photography classes at local colleges, Lovell gives countless hours to community art projects. Somehow she also manages to find the time to create her art, mount exhibits and submit book proposals.

She couldn't have done it without her family.

Lovell's clan, which hails from rural upstate New York, has been the subject of her work for more than a decade. Lovell has documented her mother, two sisters and brother with tenderness, dignity and an unflinching eye. Although her work may be rooted in the everyday, it transcends its subject matter to become a powerful statement on human struggle in the face of adversity.

For the viewer confronted with Lovell's images -- whether it's a 30-by-40-inch photograph of her younger brother or an 8-by-10-inch self-portrait, the blend of intimacy with a little voyeurism is powerful. For the photographer, perhaps it's an act of defiance or a desire to understand, cope with and face reality. Or maybe it's a triumphant, cathartic denouement to a family story that has at times, taken on the proportions of a Greek tragedy.

Q: Tell me about your current exhibit.

A: There's over 100 photographs in the show. There's a little bit of text in the form of a letter written by my mother which relates to my interactions with her. The show's really focused on my mom and myself and our relationship.

The other text on the wall is a journal piece that I wrote about the back and forth between the East and West coasts and that 3,000-mile distance. The text on the wall by my mom is a little clip -- a little snippet of conversation. I overheard her calling Social Services on the phone asking for help. She's really having a hard time, she's going crazy -- she was depressed and suicidal.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your background.

A I grew up in Syracuse, in the city. My dad left when I was 12. I have three siblings -- two younger sisters and one younger brother. My dad left the month after we adopted my little brother from Korea. That had a huge, heavy impact on my work -- my dad leaving and my brother being left behind right after being adopted. My mom started to have medical problems, and I ended up taking care of my siblings when I was 12, all the way up until I left for college. It was a really big struggle because we were financially, really, really impoverished. My mom was disabled -- not paraplegic then -- and I had to make a decision. I finally decided to leave for college. I took out loans, I applied for grants. I left, and my mom and my family were really upset with me.

Q: Then what happened?

A I decided to pursue art. I kept my family very much out of my world. And then my mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when I was about 20, and that really changed everything because I had to go back and forth between school and home. A couple months previous to that, my brother was in a fire accident, so that linked me back to them.

Things kept happening -- tragedies would keep happening where I would have to go back and take care of things and swoop in and be the caretaker. I decided to go to grad school, and I moved out here. The reason I decided to go to grad school was because I was working on this project about my family which had developed out of a need for subject matter. I was in school but also going home, traveling home and trying to take care of my family, so in order to get my work done, I would photograph there. I started finding work as just my own means of dealing with my family.

Q: It sounds like you had so much going on in your life. How did you manage to find the time to create art?

A: I started taking pictures when I was 12 -- right after my dad left -- but they were of trees and things like that. I was always drawing when I was a kid -- I was always creative and artistic. I really started to latch onto it as a means of self-expression when I was in high school, and I really used it as a way of escape -- a way to not go home -- a way to be in school. I wanted to be a writer -- a journalist. I just missed photography so much that I just decided that I would switch my major to photography. I transferred out of state school into a private technical institution, and that's how I got into it.

Q: What's your families' reaction been to your work?

A My family has always been really supportive, actually. My siblings didn't really care at first -- it was just kind of something that Jesse does or whatever. Then as I started to send back exhibition announcements and articles, they started to get a little bit more guarded. My sisters and brothers were teenagers, beginning adolescence -- now they're getting into their 20s -- so they were going through this period where I documented this vulnerability, this self-consciousness. I didn't think about that for a long time until recently how they really opened up and gave me a lot.

Q: What else are you working on?

A I'm going to be working on a project with the Richmond Art Center next year for their 70th anniversary. I'll be working in the community of Richmond, where I live, photographing people. I think I'm going to be taking portraits similar to the ones I'm taking of my family and allowing people to tell their stories.

Q: I know you're also a teacher. What is that like?

A It's very different. People want to photograph their lives -- people want to photograph their dogs and their nieces and nephews. At first I was like, "This is so not art," but then I realized that that's exactly what I'm doing. If they want to photograph their family, that's what I'm going to teach them do. That's a very human need -- to document and capture.

"Catastrophe, Crisis, and Other Family Traditions" runs daily through Oct. 28 at Buzz Gallery, 2318 Telegraph Ave., Oakland. A closing reception will be held Oct. 29 from 7-10 p.m. Call for hours. 510-465-4073. www.jessamynlovell.com.

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