

the world he built for me to live in



2020 exhibition catalogue

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A photobook project by Gemma Carosin

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The world he built for me to live in

A Personal Essay on Family

By Gemma Carosin

The world he built for me to live in traces a seemingly ordinary nuclear family living in an outlying suburb of Cape Town. This family, my family, is at first glance unremarkable, but if one scratches the surface there is tension that lies beneath. Society and politics, their norms and prejudices, are made up of seemingly ordinary families like this one.

At the centre of my family is my older brother. I am devoted to my brother, much like any younger sibling is of their older sibling. He has been a source of information to me while growing up, teaching me about equality, compassion and storytelling. He has taught me about gender, and how to perform it. He has shaped me, but I also shape him – it feels like in a much less profound way. I feel I must protect him and take care of him. I want to do it, because sometimes he seems so vulnerable. I am also under pressure to play the part of the responsible, protective older sibling, applied to me by my mother. She sees him as even more sensitive to the world than I do. She shelters him too much – and she expects me to do the same, sometimes to my own detriment. I am not my brother's parent, and I resent him for the burden he sometimes feels like to me and for this resentment I have heavy guilt. This guilt keeps my mouth shut when I must sacrifice small things in my life for my brother.





My brother was diagnosed as autistic when we were very young, but only began to understand what it meant for him around late adolescence. For this he has been given less independence and a lot more slack when it comes to responsibility from our family. At that point he could pick out differences between himself and other people his age. When my brother started to inwardly question his gender identity, he became very difficult to be around – anger and depression linked to gender dysphoria. Somewhere in the discomfort of my family life that ensued, I became the ‘good daughter’ (trapped to always saying the right thing, if I was required to say anything at all). This came from my need to not only please, but damper any displeasure that I was not even involved in creating.



My father did not understand my brother's seemingly theoretical concepts of 'gender identity' at first. Tension and emotion were high, and they would fight endlessly. My family is a quiet one, very introverted, and the shock of raised voices and hot anger shook me to my core. My mother was working a lot at that time, and I was left the only bystander and witness to these arguments – trapped in the car on the way home from school, around the dinner table once it was dark and I couldn't get out the house. The heat of those arguments is all burned up now. But for many months the only language my father could use to describe his son was "Gemma's brother". Now my father uses the right he/him pronouns and they can connect over their similar stubbornness. He had to mourn the loss of a daughter and then learn to love a son. He needed that process, but not all do. He seems a lot older now compared to then, only a few years ago. I do not know what it is he thinks he lost.

Despite the family tension, my brother coming out as transgender (FtM) and starting to physically transition has incited us to shelter him even more. We must and do love him and are constantly reminded that being transgender makes the world more dangerous to him – harsher.

The majority of my photographs are taken in my family home. The space holds so much memory. There might be an ornament on a bookcase that has never once in my life been moved. Dust settles fast. The only difference is that to the framed photos on the bookshelves, where I have removed the ones of my brother as a little girl so as not to make him uncomfortable. He did not ask me to do this, but on occasion I have seen him frown at those photos, and then he won't come out of his room for the rest of the day. Many of these portraits were of both of us as children in pink. I look back in time to try to mark the moment things began to change – I will never be able to pinpoint it, only my brother will know. The past lives with us in the present. The oak trees in the garden stay solid and rooted. Family is so hard to change, but when change strikes, it is frightening.





This year, in March 2020, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a lumpectomy. She now shares chest scars with my brother and the complicated feelings around femininity that follow. This bonds them. I am not a part of that bond. My brother's top surgery, which removed his breasts, while more brutal, did not involve the weeks of radiation that followed. The same week of my mother's surgery, South Africa went into lockdown to combat the spread of Covid-19, the coronavirus. The nation went into stasis – a mandatory liminal space. The sea-side village community we live in went quiet: the streets, the gossiping old people, the barking dogs, all quiet. My brother and I returned home from our university digs, falling sheepishly back into the habits of our childhood home.

My parents love nature and my brother usually is an indoors body. This little thing, no more than a difference in likes and dislikes, has led to many an argument about 'hours on the computer' and 'not getting enough fresh air'. My brother hasn't always been so inclined to stay indoors: as he started to explore gender and become more dysphoric towards his body, he became more aware of the dangers of being transgender. Being outside, in public domain, was a threat to him. It was interesting to move the photographing of him and my parents from inside to outside. My brother exists in his own little bubble of habits – placing him outside reminded me that he does in fact live in context to the rest of us. My brother is much more happy to relax in our garden nowadays, but it is not a space of comfort and play for him.



A large part of my brother's gender experience was influenced by media – books, films, the internet. Thus, media is a repeating theme in my work, linking with the concept of theatre and performance – and the performance of gender and family and online presence. All these forms of media are liminal. These are resources of great worth to most introverts. The internet acted as a gateway to queer and trans discourse, knowledge and community that my brother could not experience in real life. However, it also exposed him to those who are homophobic and transphobic from across the globe. That is not too say my brother has not seen transphobia in the real world – sometimes it walks into our house and has tea with our mother, thinking it is most progressive just for not being disgusted.



My brother was tested by society. He had to *prove* his commitment to his gender and blur lines of gender. And he did, again and again: when he found the courage to ask us to call him by a different name and pronouns; when he cut his hair; when he stopped wearing feminine clothes and asked us to help him buy new clothes; when he had gender-affirming surgery; when he legally changed his name and pronouns. When my brother started to transition, our family was flung into a liminal space – an ambiguous space of constant change. Liminal space is that of great transition: suspension of what was before, without yet having reached what will be: It is a threshold (Thomas, 2018). It is both a space of time and potentially physical location wherein you experience uncertainty, discomfort and exploration, solidifying your identity bit by bit (Thomas, 2018).

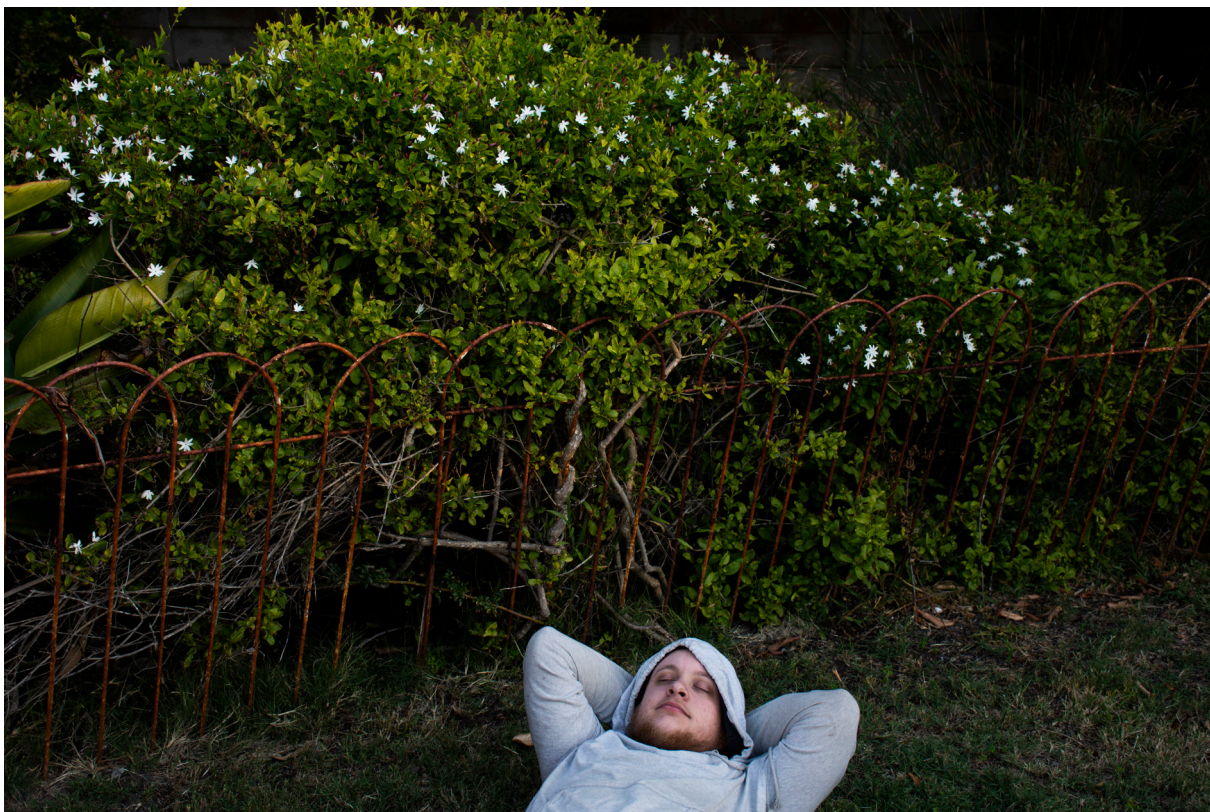
My brother's experience of liminal space is very clear, including the realisation that his birth-assigned sex does not correlate with his gender, as well as his physical transition process. Similar to my brother, I experienced my own liminality: trapped between playing a parent to my brother and a daughter to my parents. I found I was not taken seriously as an adult and was not given the luxury of dependence like a child. This liminal space just before adulthood is not uncommon, but my experience is dependent on my brother's liminal space. I can only move on and be myself as an adult once my brother can be that for himself. My coming-of-age exploration is intertwined with his.



When my brother began to visually present as more male, the people around us began to feminise me. My immediate family is not exempt from this. For the first time since kindergarten I was receiving pink gifts and could feel the expectation to perform stereotyped womanly duties – cooking, cleaning and caring. A lot of these actions come naturally to me – or perhaps I have been constructed by society to think that it is natural to me. Just as, perhaps, society misguidedly curated my brother as female. It is worth mentioning here that my intensified discomfort with femininity was caused by other people's expectations of how women should exist. It was not caused by my brother's trans-ness.

We all have our own stories in mind – of which we are the centre. My project has in some ways been about finding some kind of closure. After many years of feeling defined by my place in my family, especially in relation to my brother, I am hoping that this project marks a change. I want a specific ending to my story – an ‘ideal ending’. The difficulty with aiming for an ideal ending, is surprisingly not that the ‘ideal’ is a fiction, but rather that things do not always *end*. Things, such as time, ideas and identities *progress*.

My photographs chart a story of my family dynamic – and how my brother becoming my brother influenced each member of my family, including himself. As I begin to sense my parents’ mortality, as I care for them and my brother, as I am in the nest but preparing to leave it, I look at my ordinary complex family with new eyes. To most of the people in our life who know us, I am the more ‘worldly’ of the two siblings, but he has built that world. In a sense this *is* my coming of age story, a story that extends back into my childhood and forward into my future as I look back at the people who have taught me everything I know.



Photographing Family:

An Essay examining the theory and practice of Gemma Carosin
in relation to the art and writing of Terry Kurgan

By Gemma Carosin

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The world he built for me to live in is a photographic project focussing on the private lives of a nuclear family in outlying, Cape Town suburbia. This family, just like every other family, experiences external pressures and internal tensions. Themes such as family and gender roles, gender transition, illness both mental and physical, ambiguity and the liminal are what makes this family, my family, a contemporary family. Much like my own exploration of family, the South African fine artist and writer, Terry Kurgan, reveals and unearths her family's dynamic in her book *Everyone is Present: Essays on Photography, Memory and Family*, published in 2018 (Terry Kurgan, n.d.). While Kurgan's art- and writing- based practice visually appear very different to my own, there are many conceptual connections and similarities between her book and my work.

Terry Kurgan looks to her family and bountiful family archive in her art practice and writing. Trained in fine art, Kurgan's recent MA in creative writing allowed her to delve into the world of non-fiction writing in her book *Everyone is Present* (Terry Kurgan, n.d.). *Everyone is Present* is Kurgan's account of her family heritage, pieced together using her grandfather's meticulously kept diaries and his own amateur photography from the 1930s and 1940s (van der Vlies, 2020: 110).

Kurgan brings the past and the present together under her magnifying glass.

Kurgan's work centres generally around photographic theory and the construction or 'truth' of an image (Terry Kurgan, n.d.). Her book highlights physical and mental liminal spaces. Kurgan is analytical of her family, revealing to the point of intrusion. By writing about her family, Kurgan turns her family members into characters in a story, while still having to contend with them as part of her personal heritage.

My older brother is the heart of my photographic practice. My brother is seen as the baby of our nuclear family – in need of care. I have taken on aspects of this caring and parenting role for him, encouraged to do so by my mother. For roughly the last five years he has been on a journey of identity – transitioning from his birth-assigned gender of female, to more masculine presenting. This has been a rocky road for our tight-knit family. Acceptance, let alone understanding, was not easy for those trying to support my brother and his gender transition. Within the family we have now reached a comfortable place surrounding my brother's identity, but his identity makes us overprotective of him.

Figure 1 encapsulates this feeling. Figure 1 is a portrait of my brother, taken in low-light, with a slightly too-long exposure, causing him to blur and duplicate. My brother, bathed in light and captured in this fetus-like state, is surrounded by curtains in the dimly lit space. Curtains are an important recurring symbol in my photographs, as they block out windows, protecting those inside from prying eyes. My brother is depicted in a cocoon in which to transform. Photographing him, as well as our mother and father, has allowed me to construct the narrative of our recent history, and the sudden changes our family went through. These photographs have manifested in an unconventional photobook, revealing our private non-linear narrative for the viewer to piece together.

My practice has developed from my own saga. Understanding my work requires the understanding of how I personally interact with my family. Similarly to Kurgan's writing, I suddenly find myself, through my photographs, interacting with my family members as characters in a story. Like Kurgan, it is through my personal imagining of these characters that the viewer interacts with them. The individual lens through which I have examined my family would be markedly different to that of any of the other family members or an outsider.



Figure 1

As with Kurgan's book *Everyone is Present*, my photographic series also explores familial liminal space in the form of my brother's gender transition. Kurgan describes her uprooted and displaced ancestry and the journey (a liminal space) her family made from Poland to Cape Town (Kurgan, 2018: 158). "These two weeks on the ship are a limbo-like window of time that enables some relief from the uncertain grind of their everyday struggles. They are suspended in a liminal space between continents and lives..." (Kurgan, 2018: 158).

The word Liminality stems from the Latin word *limen*, referring to a threshold – the space between rooms (Thomas, 2018). This is an adequate metaphor for liminality, as it insinuates the experience of both departing and arriving and is thus an ambiguous window of change (Thomas, 2018). While usually referring to a stage of life, such as coming-of-age, liminality can be facilitated by physical places, eliciting emotional responses from those who encounter them (Thomas, 2018), such as the time on the ship Kurgan described above, or a household cocooning a changing identity. Liminal space is defined as a period of transition: suspension of what was before, without yet having reached what will be (Westerveld, 2011: 7).

My family entered a liminal shift when my brother came out as Transgender: while he was transitioning physically, we, as his family had to change how we thought of him. This was a slow process, and it is only now, at least 5 years later, that I realise we are beginning to exit this liminal experience, or even that there was a liminal bubble to begin with. Within this liminality, each member of my family has been defined by the various ways they relate to my brother – as carer, protector, disciplinarian. Each of us experienced our liminal space differently, yet it was all tied to my brother's experience.

I have used the idea of thresholds and the liminal visually in many of my images, best highlighted in Figure 2. While this image is a self-portrait, it is important to note that I do not directly represent me or my brother in this overly performative and constructed image. The light coming in through the window of the door is over exposed to the point of blown-out, absorbing much of the figure's head – removing their identity. A large part of liminality is that it entails a search for identity, and thus, a period of time where identity is in flux, or there is a lack of identity (Beck, 2016). The view from the window is a view into the future, obscured by its own brightness. There is a sense of hopefulness – hope that the changes are changes for the better. The figure in the image is wearing a waistcoat and tie backwards, so that the clothing faces the viewer. These typically masculine clothing items do not seem to fit the individual properly. The tie looks scruffy and uncomfortable, noose-like. With the addition of the clasped hands, the figure seems young – such as a school-goer in uniform or a child playing dress-up. These give the figure a naïve quality. As they stand just at the door, they do not make a move to try the handle or turn the key. They are observing, they are taking their time.



Figure 2

The medium of photography has always been of interest to my family and is linked to many of my childhood memories. When I was young my mother turned our bathroom into a photographic darkroom and taught me and my brother how to develop black and white photographs from tin pinhole cameras. My family has always kept photo albums, and I have on many occasions paged through photographs of relatives that I have never and am unable to meet. I imagine Terry Kurgan doing the same – searching through her family archive for answers. While I have not included any of my family archive images in my project, they make up the entirety of Kurgan's *Everyone is Present*. While the history of antisemitism precipitating her family's journey weighs down on the characters, Kurgan's focus remained on the familial and domestic interactions captured by her grandfather's photographs on this voyage. Kurgan notes the difference between the candid image and the formal portrait amongst her grandfather's photographs – and what she calls the "truth/lie paradox" photographs hold (Terry Kurgan, n.d.).

Kurgan elaborates on this paradox, noting that in the process of constructing a fiction, a desired reality is made clear (Terry Kurgan, n.d.). Richard Avedon has previously marked this conundrum in *Borrowed Dogs* (Avedon, 1987). Avedon writes about his own upbringing, and the multitude of family portraits he was subjected to, constructed so precisely, and always including a dog (Avedon, 1987: 53). Not one of the many canines depicted in the Avedon family albums were ever owned by the Avedon family. Avedon's musing highlights the performative and fabricated nature of family ideals, in which most families participate. We each play our ideal characters: Father, mother, son and daughter. Avedon also emphasises the ways photography can paint both lies, such as the dogs in the family, and truths, such as their belief that the ideal family owned a dog, and that they were inadequate as a family without one.

These photographic concepts are of great interest to me, leading my photographic techniques to play with construction and the 'snapshot' image. Figure 3 is what appears to be a candid photograph of my father, sitting alone in our living room, seemingly unaware of the camera or photographer. The photograph seems to be taken through a crack in a door, signified to us by the strips of black that turn the landscape image into a portrait. The man stares off, out of a window we cannot see. He is surrounded by framed photographs from our family archive, including images of my brother pre-transition. On the right-hand arm of the chair he sits in, is a baby blanket, coloured in pink, blue and yellow. Despite the warm colours beyond, the image is cold. The man seems detached, isolated.

My father sitting alone is something that is completely plausible, not highly coded with symbols, performative, or overtly constructed. While it is a fallacy that this image is anything less than a construct, my father's isolation from our family is true. My father's determination to still view my brother and me as we had been, rather than as who we were, or were going to be, forced him into this isolation. In this I am exploring the coexistence of construction and truth.



Figure 3

Another style in which I have photographed, is the construction of an internal moment. In this way of shooting, plausibility does not factor. As seen in Figure 4, my brother and father are depicted in a body of green water. This image, as well as the previous image of my father sitting alone (Figure 3) are the only two images of my father in the series. After the initial shock of my brother coming out as trans, my father became less involved. However, the few influences he had on us were powerful. His absence was loud, and my brother continued to fight for his understanding, if not approval.

My father stands in the water, solemn faced. Upon being shown this image, my father commented that he has never looked so old and weathered before. My father cradles my brother in the water, evoking religious imagery of a baptism. From the look on my brother's face we can discern that the water is cold. This image relates to my brother's metaphorical rebirth. My father's presence is important, as his own journey of acceptance of my brother and subsequent catharsis has been an impactful moment for both him and his son. The visual ties to the religious are also of interest, as my brother does not partake in religious belief, while my father finds security in it. My brother's willingness to partake in a metaphorical baptism signifies a mutual acceptance.



Figure 4

In 2018 my brother had surgery to remove his breasts. At the time I did not anticipate ever involving my brother's identity in my art practice. Despite this, I photographed him the night before his day of surgery, and again a few weeks later, once he was comfortable enough to move about freely again. These photographs are Figure 5 and 6 respectively. They document a momentous change for my brother, and it is after much thought that my brother has allowed me to use the image of him pre-transition. In Figure 5, my brother is wearing a shirt that he wore day in and out after his surgery, due to how easy it was to wear over his drains. In this image, hours away from the surgery, he seems calm – at this point we had been discussing top surgery for over a year. He already has his surgery lines marked out on his breasts in chalky white marker. In Figure 6, we see my brother standing shirtless. His chest is bruised yellow, swollen, and his nipples, freshly sewn on, are taped up. These two photos are the closest to 'archival' photographs I have included in my project.

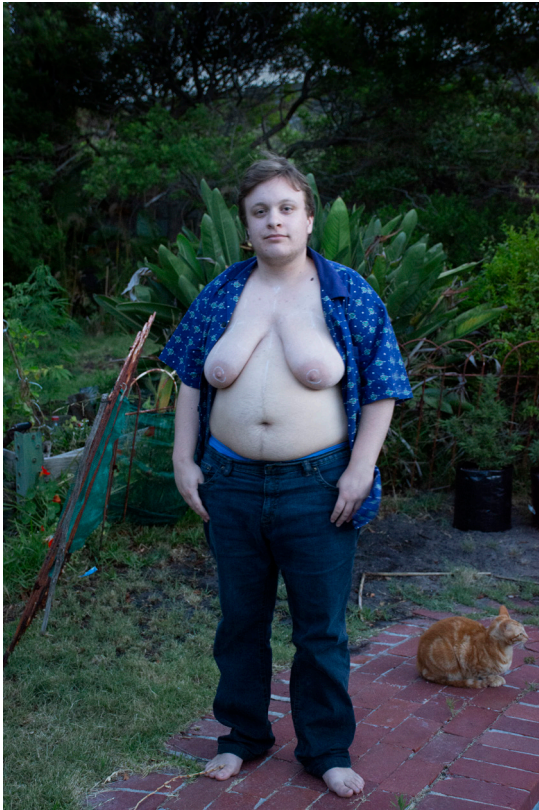


Figure 5



Figure 6

Another photographic technique I have employed is the overtly performative. It is true to say that all my images are performative in one way or another. However, some of my images, such as Figure 2 seen above, and in Figure 7 to the right, are more performative than others. Figure 7 depicts a person, bent over. At first glance the red shirt they are clutching at their abdomen resembles blood, perhaps menstrual blood. The figure is wearing the same shirt seen in Figure 5 – the shirt my brother wore after his surgery. While my brother was mentally prepared for surgery, it somehow took me by surprise. I was not concerned with the losing of his breasts, but rather scared at the idea of him being *cut into*. The chairs in the background are colourful, the pattern evoking circus print. The absence of anyone from the chairs somehow makes the figure feel more watched. A framed artwork hangs on the wall behind, depicting a chaotic, dreamlike scene. Frames are a recurring visual in my photographs, as they, like the frame of the television screen, highlight the performed.



Figure 7

Frames appear in a number of my photographs. In Figure 8 my brother sits at a piano, his back to the viewer. I sit on the floor beside him, looking up at him. On top of the piano there are a row of framed images. These are childhood photographs of me and my brother. My photographs, like in Kurgan's writing, do not tell a chronological story, but rather jump around, compress time and compare it. I allow the past and present to inform each other. In each of the images on the piano, my brother is placed on the right-hand side of the photographer, me on the left. I have mimicked that composition in this image. This photograph encapsulates the tenderness between us as siblings: the adoration I have for him, the intrigue he has for me. This image allows me to bring the past and present together, compare them and be critical of them. Our shared childhood was curated, printed and framed – marked *sisters*.



Figure 8

Photobooks have always intrigued me, but I was sceptical of the format for this project. It seemed too quiet – dismissing the fact that the personal is a political statement. But the photobook can be utilised in different ways, with different effect. My project has taken the form of a Landscape photobook that is printed in strips and scored and folded into a concertina. The concertina display style has allowed me to work with photographic sequence and series in a way I have not before. The book has a dual nature, it can be unfolded or interacted with as a normal book with facing pages. I am able to see my images in relation to each other and the progressions that occurs throughout, while also maintaining the intimacy and domesticity of a photo book. The book is somewhat fragile, reminding the viewer that they are in fact rifling through someone else's personal life.

The book cover is made from an offcut from curtains that have hung in my house my entire life, always sheltering from the prying eyes of nosy neighbours. The lining of the cover is a pink-lavender colour. The blue of the cover and the lavender lining, seen in Figure 9, are soft, gentle colours, that can be found also in the photographs throughout the book. These colours seem to suit my brother – his subtle nature.



Figure 9

The long, thin table my photobook is displayed on elegantly allows for the concertina to be folded out into sections. It illustrates and magnifies the sheer length of the narrative, as well as providing an interesting sculptural component to the work. The concertina peaks and falls, but remains connected, referencing the bonded, or disjointed, nature of family, depending on how it is arranged. The table has been made specifically to hold the book. The Perspex page holders maintain the book's folded nature, while also alluding to the fragility of the book as a whole. At either end of the table display of the photobook are large wall prints. These images mark a beginning and transition (not ending) in the project. Both wall prints make reference to the images in the book, the second print being duplicated in the book, Figure 4 above. This image is powerful on the wall, mimicking an isolation as discussed previously. However, it is just as important that this image exists in the book as well, bathed in context, and able to live on after the exhibition as part of the book.

The nature of a book is that it is portable, a personal item. While different people will ascribe different meanings to the work, it has an overall emotive quality. It has themes of tenderness, anger, guilt, responsibility and change. It speaks specifically to photographic theory, as well as the growing appreciation of the photobook in the world of art and photography. The book is intended to be viewed by those in a similar photographic or academic field. However, it is not limited to this. The family tension visible in the work makes it accessible to all those who have ever felt defined by their family, or experienced change alongside their family. It speaks to anyone who has felt responsible for someone else, or guilty about their irritation at someone else. Because of this openness, I feel the photobook crosses the divide of academic art practice and the layperson. While producing this artwork, the process has been so important: maintaining comfortable circumstances for my family as they pose in the photographs, working through what the images mean to me personally, as well as writing on the subject of my family as experienced through my eyes.

Kurgan writes very intimately about her family, inviting the reader to enter her world. However, she remarks on the censorship she imposed on herself when writing about family members who are still alive (Kurgan, 2018: 219) as against the artistic liberties she was able to take when imagining the lives of her deceased family members (Kurgan, 2018: 218).

Likewise, in my photographs I have attempted to capture the intimacy and vulnerability of family life. In exposing my family's private lives, I have applied the same critical eye to my own role. In Kurgan's writing, there is a clear antagonist (if the presence of Hitler is ignored): Kurgan's grandmother, who played the part of the cheating wife and the neglectful mother (van der Vlies, 2020: 111). In my situation the role of antagonist was not able to be so clearly defined or confined to one character. While the part of antagonist cannot be applied to my work, my brother definitively plays the role of protagonist. As the central focus of the project, he has spoken to me about his transition in an admirably open way. He has allowed my images to express the discomfort and the joy surrounding his transition. It is a beautiful vulnerability he has given to my work.

While there are certainly aspects of the photographic narrative that my family would have different opinions on, they recognise my project as part of my own emotive process. They have been supportive and have given their full permission.

My photographic artistic practice, *the world he built for me to live in*, is situated in a discourse of art examining family through the dynamic lens of photography. Assumptions are made as to what is ideal in both structures of family and photography, and both have complexities. Family, like photography, has the power to influence, shape and tell stories. Terry Kurgan, and especially her written and photographic based book *Everyone is Present: Essays on Photography, Memory and Family*, similarly follows and highlights the themes present in my own work.

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