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'Unseen,' 2006, 20" x 34"

The artist merges her own face with that of Sylvia DeWolf Ostrander (1841-1925), whose belongings were rescued from a Soho sidewalk trash pile in 2002.



'Becoming,' 2006, 30" x 40"

Morrison wears Sylvia's faded gown. "When I put on her tattered silk and lace ball gown and looked in the mirror... I became her."

arts

Girl, interpreted

A PHOTOGRAPHER STUDIES A LIFE LIVED LONG AGO

'THE GIRL OF MY DREAMS'

e Stacy Renee Morrison
Jan. 30 through March 16
Photography Gallery, Fine Arts
Center Galleries
University of Rhode Island, Kingston
(401) 874-9628
www.uri.edu/art/galleries

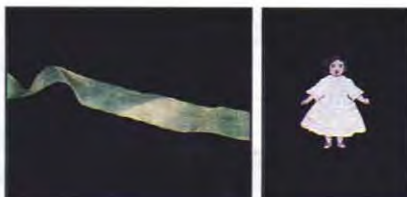
BY LISA UTMAN RANDALL

In "The Girl of My Dreams," Stacy Renee Morrison's beguiling exhibit at the University of Rhode Island's Photography Gallery, the artist has carefully pieced together the life of Sylvia DeWolf Ostrander (1841-1925). Beginning with an old and battered trunk long ago filled with an orderly selection of personal items found in a pile of garbage on a street in Soho, Morrison followed a trail of crumbs that led her first to the owners' identity and then deep into Sylvia's life.

Through her fanciful imaginings and painstaking research, the New Jersey born Morrison, 33, has created an exhibit that transcends the 133 years that separate her date of birth from her subject's. And although Morrison never technically knew Sylvia, she has remembered her in exquisite detail, so that we too may know her.

"It was in 2002 and I was answering an ad for a roommate," Morrison explained. "I went to this apartment and I instantly liked it. I felt weirdly at home there. The woman brought out this trunk that her friend had found. It was filled with these amazingly personal items that had been lovingly saved. I felt so devastated that someone had thrown them out. I became completely enamored of this box. Finally, I asked if I could take it and photograph the contents."

Morrison took the small trunk back to her studio and over time photographed all of the items on black velvet. She moved into the apartment and eventually, through a complicated roommate-to-roommate trade agreement, gained ownership of the box. For a time she was satisfied with idly taking the contents out and fingering the paper dolls, calling cards, daguerreotypes and small perfume bottles, imagining the person



'Ribbon,' 2005, 30" x 40"

'Paper Doll,' 2003, 11" x 14"



'Blue and White Paper Doll Dress,' 2004, 8" x 10"

'Pink Paper Doll Dress,' 2004, 8" x 10"

'Pink Paper Doll Dress #2,' 2004, 8" x 10"

Morrison photographed the items in Sylvia's discarded trunk on black velvet.

who had owned them, before placing them back into their tidy eternal order. "Anonymous was good for a while," Morrison said.

But Sylvia, as Morrison now knows her, began appearing in her dreams. "They were good, comforting dreams," Morrison insisted. "She was a constant, even though I couldn't really see her face, and at the time I didn't even know who she was."

"Then one day I was bored and I did an online genealogy search using the name on the two calling cards in the box," Morrison said. The cards, she soon discovered, had belonged to Susan Amelia DeWolf (1820-1886), Sylvia's mother. Morrison traced them to the prominent Bristol, Rhode Island, DeWolf family. "They were a very wealthy family who had, I discovered, ties to the slave trade. I knew then that I had to go to Bristol to find out more."

Her first trip was in 2005, but Morrison said it was a "mixed experience."

"In a way I felt like this was my introduction to her, as if I would meet her. But I didn't find out very much and I wondered if I was going to have to fictionalize her."

One of the impediments to finding information Morrison encountered was the general lack of reference to women in historical documents—a fact with which Morrison, who earned a bachelor's degree in women's studies from Rutgers University before completing a masters in photography at New York University in 2000, was well acquainted.

Morrison, however, did not give up her search and eventually found Sylvia DeWolf Ostrander's great granddaughter. "She's an amazing woman, in her 70s, just very kind and very generous, Morrison said. "She has clothing and letters from

the Civil War period, even Sylvia's journals."

Through these artifacts, Morrison developed a greater intimacy with her subject and even walked the streets of Bristol wearing Sylvia's dress. "It was extremely weird putting on her clothes," Morrison admitted. "I absolutely knew beforehand that they would fit me. When I put on her tattered silk and lace ball gown and looked in the mirror... I became her."

From there, Morrison created a series of interpretive photographs to complement the photographs of the objects in the box. "Among other things, I created a digital merge of the two of us together and photographed myself in her dress," Morrison said.

Within this context Morrison has created a period she calls "No When," a place where she and Sylvia "co-exist." A place hinted at in photographs such as those in a series called "Becoming" where we catch glimpses of Morrison wearing Sylvia's ancient, faded gown and "Union" where their two faces are merged into one.

"The combined effect of the collection of photographs is both eerie and beautiful. The most tangible connection between these two women, wherein one plays both subject and observer and the other lays open the mysteries of her past through what she has left behind, evokes a sense of timelessness that leaves one questioning the supposed linear nature of history."

Morrison currently teaches photography at Montclair State University and Cooper Union, and is represented by Zed/Corbis. She received support for this project through the Rhode Island State Council on the Humanities.

Stacy Renee Morrison will give an artist's talk Wednesday, Feb. 6, at 2 p.m. at the University of Rhode Island's Fine Arts Center Galleries. The opening reception for "The Girl of My Dreams" is Thursday, Feb. 7, from 4-6 p.m.

Gallery hours are Tues.-Fri., noon-4 p.m., Sat. & Sun., 1-4 p.m. Open to the public without charge. Handicapped accessible.



'Sunshine Through the Clouds,' 2006, 40" x 45"

The title of the largest photograph in the show comes from a childhood novel that Morrison read belonging to Sylvia about an orphan girl who apprentices in a doll shop. The girl makes a beautiful doll and is forced to sell it to an unappreciative girl who mistreats it.