



Liv the Cat

Cathleen Clarke

August, 2019
Brooklyn, New York



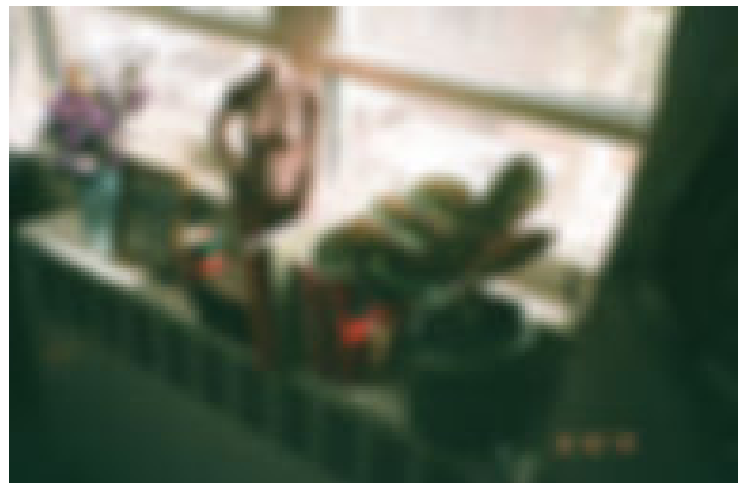
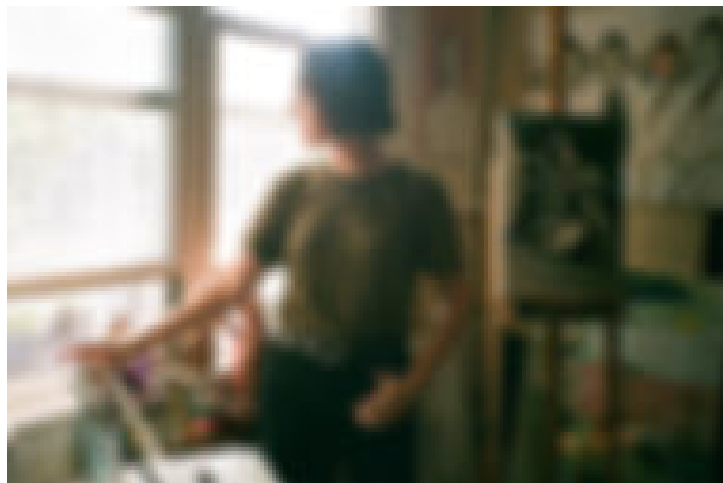
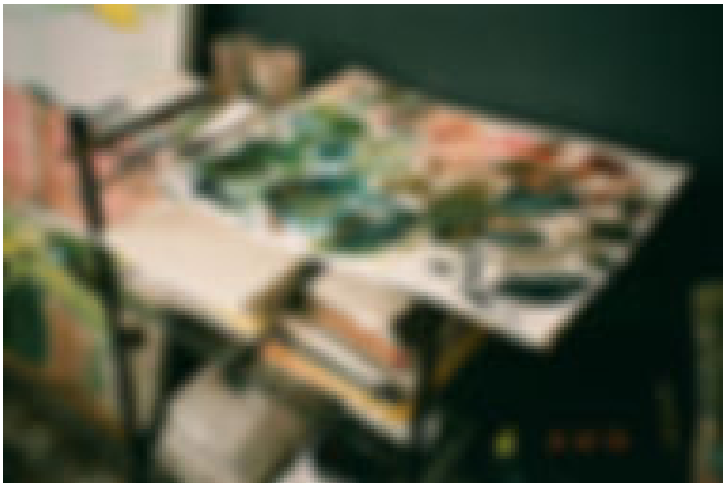
The Pajama Party 2019

"There are certainly things you learn from photographs, but in the end, they are not such great messengers. They bring too many riches, they pose too many questions they cannot answer." Reading this in a New Yorker article on a Sunday morning gave me a lot to think about regarding Cathleen's work. Resonating in the way she explores history through old family photographs passed down from her grandmother.

Encountering Cathleen's works left me feeling haunted and refreshed, left with an aftertaste for a sense of longing. Longing for what? I can't answer. It must be the way the figures in the paintings stare unwavering back at you, their inky eyes begging for attention. And then you look away, a little shy.

The handwritten element in her paintings, caught in different fragments of the canvas and watercolor paper add a story, giving some inkling into a story you can only see so far into. Maybe these pencil marks curve and bend to conform along the body of the figures, or they stand out, stamped by certainty, lending voice to the "artist's hand".

Cathleen tells me there is "some beauty in being haunted, it's supposed to be disturbing." Readers, you can imagine that Cathleen must be like her paintings, dark and melancholic. For you may be surprised by her light spirit and good humor. Leaving us to ponder on the deliberation of exposing ourselves.



cookin' up

Can you tell me a little about the subject of your paintings?

I have always been drawn towards people since I was a kid, fascinated with the idea of memory, and how time passes. I have a lot of old family photo albums, I'm the "sentimental sibling" in my family, so I've kept so much of the things. I've been so lucky to have kept a lot of letters, you just don't keep emails or anything. As well as photographs, I try to shoot more film because it's nice to have that physical object in your hands.

Yes! Definitely, there is something very precious about these things that have been digitized. I feel that we will never go through that generation anymore, everything is up in the cloud these days.

I have these large photo albums from my grandmother of her mother, which I find a lot of inspiration from, but also my grandmother's album of my dad growing up. A lot of the text from my new series of work "Nothing To Write Home About" comes from my grandmother's writing on the back of those photographs. When I first started going through them, I found so many personal stories about what was happening at the time, things that my dad wouldn't have told me. They were kind of sad, and even sentimental.

How do you usually work with these photographs?

They are a starting point, I start with the person in mind as I paint, but the figures that I paint, or the text I use isn't necessarily meant to match the person painted, I like to leave it open ended, the viewer guessing. Sometimes I leave sentences unfinished as well. Looking at these photographs, and memories, which are often times distorted, I'm just trying to capture a vague moment in time.

It almost seems like you are trying to remake history, that could have existed or not.

Yes, exactly, it's like I am playing with history, almost as if I've been investigating a time I've never lived in or through.



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As I listen to the recording of our conversation, I recall a quote from Louise Bourgeois "I had a flashback of something that never existed". As all of these images that Cathleen had created were so true, yet so vulnerable in the face of truth only the ones that have lived through that history would know.

How has using text changed the way you work?

Using text in my work has really challenged me, I've always found it hard to choose titles for my work, or put things into words. I've always been a visual artist, where I find myself wanting to express through imagery, not through text. But it has really gotten me out of my comfort zone.

I think that text can be super powerful, especially on canvas.

Text can have a lot of meaning, but I like to leave it open-ended, not give too much away in the words I choose to use.

Can you tell me about the reoccurring hands in your work?

I feel that hands are so expressive, and can also be difficult to paint. I love painting them in abnormal colors, almost creepy, glove-like at times. Painting them in a way where viewers are not sure if they are real or gloved.

To me, they are loose, and the water-colored ones are not trying to look realistic, a little freaky in their own way.

I think that I grew up reading these scary stories, like *Scary Stories To Tell in the Dark*, and I've always had the idea of these inky, creepy hands with stories to tell.

I've noticed a progression of the distortion of figures in your works throughout the years, was there a decisive choice to do so?

I was trained to paint very traditionally at The Academy of Art in San Francisco. Which was a good foundation in figure drawing, and painting realistically. However, after I graduated being exposed to so many different types of artists, I've been really drawn to more expressive paintings. Gradually changing, I've been loosening it up, and still trying to do so with my brushwork, and being more expressive.

What do you think the function of a photo and painting is to you?

Sometimes I look at a photo and think that "this is meant to be a photo", it's not something that you can just turn into a painting. I don't plan out too much, I

cookin' up



branches from Cathleen's childhood home

take different parts of the photo, they are beginnings for me, and I use them as references for shadows and lights. I think it is important to talk about references, to know where they come from.

Music is a big part of my process. I've always admired musicians, they have such a way with words



Hand Memoir #1 2019



It's a Good Thing We Cannot Look Ahead, 2019

It's nice to finally allow myself to be an artist

There is something kind of creepy about your figures' eyes, they are all kind of hollow looking.



Yes, I paint my figures' pupils really small, which are **cookin' up** a really creepy and mysterious side. The figures are all looking at the viewers, kind of stiff in their body posture, as if they are frozen in time. I've always wondered what else was happening in those photographs, and years later, there is still a disturbing element in them.

They look like they can be anyone! Your studio corner looks like a puzzle of a mind map of a moment in time.

The Pajama Party was inspired by a photo of my great grandmother, the figures are meant to be ambiguous. They are memories, and not meant to be clear, and even open for the viewer to put themselves in the image. Leave them to question.

Can you tell me about some of your inspirations outside of these photographic elements?

Music is a big part of my process. I've always admired musicians, they have such a way with words. As I'm painting, it's like they are taking the words out of my mouth, and singing about what I'm trying to paint. I've been listening to a lot of Big Thief, Advance Base, their music is really relevant to what I'm working with now, and they really put me in the mood for painting.

I think that it's really fitting that your studio is in your home, and that you are painting about home, about family.

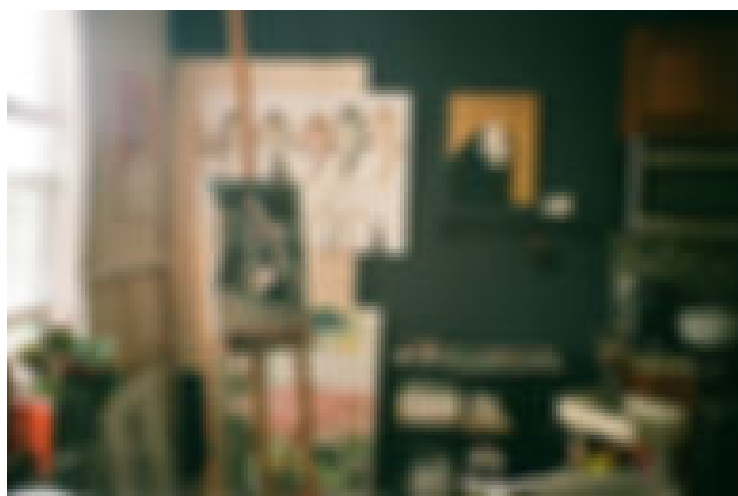
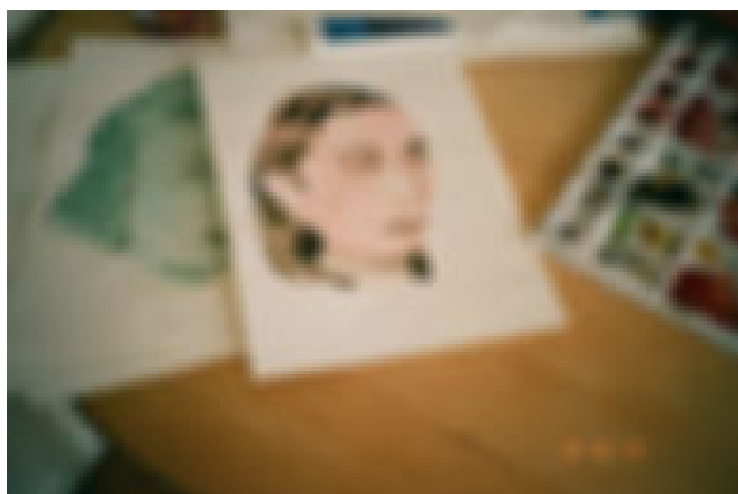
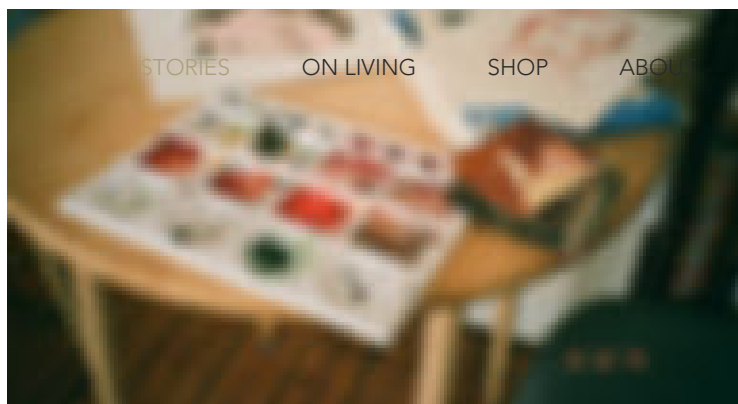
I guess it is! No one in my family is an artist, and for a really long time, I was doing a lot of jobs, but never taking the leap to being an artist. It's nice to finally allow myself to be an artist. These family photos are all of the happy moments, but it never reveals the whole story. I loved my grandmother's way of writing, that share a little into what was really going on.

Do you think that they were meant to be read?

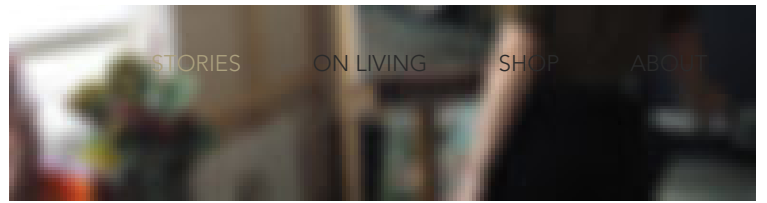
We never talked about them, and I wouldn't want to either. That generation is so private, and so is my dad. It's one of those things that I don't want to talk about either.

I think that we are in a generation of overexposure, and oversharing, but most of the time, only the happy moments. I think that it's as if you are keeping a secret, that both you and your dad know about, but no one with broach the subject. Maybe some things are better left unsaid.

I remember very clearly one piece of writing in Cathleen's works, "It is a good thing we cannot look ahead into the future, for perhaps we could not bear it." Above it was a watercolor drawing of a woman's face. It left me to wonder about who's



*future, and what had happened for someone to
cookin' up* *visit his photo and write down those words.*



Photos taken by Cookin' Up Magazine, July 2019

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/life-in-miami-on-the-knifes-edge-of-climate-change-anastasia-samoylova>

Artwork images courtesy of the artist

<http://www.cathleenclarke.com/>

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