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Putting Memories to New Use



Sara VanDerBeek, whose first solo museum show is at the Whitney.

WHEN the photographer Sara VanDerBeek was growing up in Baltimore in the 1980s, she yearned for the vanished art world of 1960s New York, in which her father, the experimental filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek, had played an important role. Mr. VanDerBeek, who died when Sara was 7, had collaborated with artists like Claes Oldenburg and Merce Cunningham, and worked with Bell Labs to create some of the first computer animations. Before and after his death, Ms. VanDerBeek said, friends from the old days often visited and talked about the excitement and experimentation of that time.



"A Composition for Detroit"

Mr. VanDerBeek's first wife, Johanna, was a regular. An artist herself, she had participated in his films and in performance events, and "still has a paper dress and bra that Rauschenberg had printed for one of them," Ms. VanDerBeek recalled. "She would always tell us stories about their life in New York and the artists and the scene."

A hunger to reanimate that long gone scene helped lead Ms. VanDerBeek, 33, into the project that first made her name, the Guild & Greyshkul gallery in SoHo, which she founded and ran with her younger brother and a friend from 2003 to 2009. It was celebrated for nurturing young artists and providing a creative gathering spot that seemed a welcome antidote to the rampant commercialism of the time.



"A Reoccurring Pattern"

And some sort of hunger or longing also seems central to Ms. VanDerBeek's own work, which she began showing seriously four years ago. It's especially evident in the installation of about 30 photographs made this year that appear in her first solo museum exhibition, "To Think of Time," which just opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art and runs through Dec. 5.

Some works in the show depict three-dimensional still-life assemblages that she builds in her studio. In "We Will Become Silhouettes" two plaster casts of Ms. VanDerBeek's face suggest a double-sided death mask, while "Blue Caryatid at Dusk" makes a pint-size Brancusi-esque column look like an outsize funerary monument.

Others show architectural details, like the close-ups of decaying windows and foundations she encountered on a recent trip to New Orleans. And many of the most poignant found their source in Ms. VanDerBeek's childhood home in Baltimore, now up for sale. The show opens with "Blue Eclipse," a photograph of a photograph of the 1969 lunar eclipse that she discovered while cleaning out the basement, and closes with a grouping that includes an enigmatic image of light falling through the house's windows onto a wall.



"We Will Become Silhouettes"

Ms. VanDerBeek came to New York in 1994 to attend Cooper Union, her father's alma mater. After graduation she worked in London as a commercial photographer for three years, shooting subjects like artfully composed stacks of toilet paper for the grocery chain ASDA. "There was a lot of tabletop work," she said, "which somehow translates into these still lifes that I am doing now." In her off hours she roamed East London, taking photographs of Brutalist postwar apartment blocks, which fascinated her, she said, because of "a disparity between the idealism of the architecture and the reality of living there."

After returning to New York in 2001 Ms. VanDerBeek became interested in another sort of melancholic streetscape, the makeshift memorials that sprang up throughout the city after 9/11. The idea of making pictures of structures similarly studded with photographs and mementos began to infiltrate her imagination.

In 2003 she and her brother, Johannes VanDerBeek, opened Guild & Greyshkul with the artist Anya Kielar, another Cooper Union student. They wanted to provide a locus for their friends from school, inspired by their "idealistic view of the art world of my father's generation," Ms. VanDerBeek said. "We saw among our peer group a similar need to gather and show."

Until the gallery closed, it advanced many careers, including those of Ernesto Caivano, known for intricate drawings, and Mariah Robertson, whose photographs were included in the last "Greater New York" show at MoMA P.S. 1. And in 2008 they reintroduced Stan VanDerBeek to the art world by giving him a well-received retrospective. Ms. VanDerBeek and her brother now manage his estate.

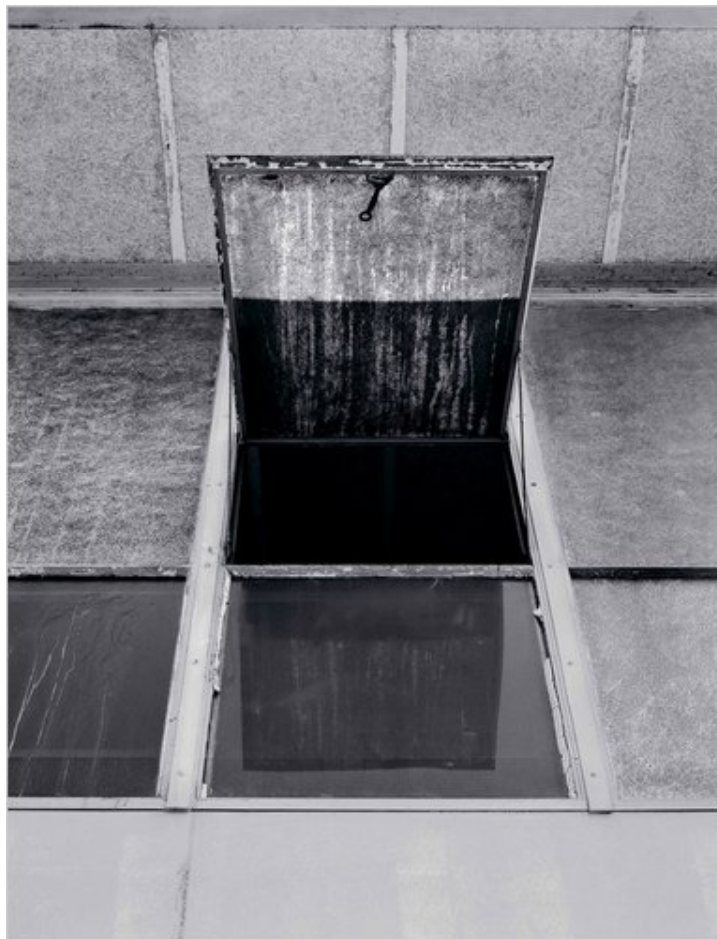
At the same time Ms. VanDerBeek was making her own work. While producing the pictures for her first solo show, "Mirror in the Sky," at d'Amelio Terras in 2006, she thought back to those impromptu Sept. 11 mementos mori, she said, and "the whole tradition of holding onto images of people and things that have been lost." Many depict photographs and other objects suspended from metal structures that apparently float in space, as in "A Reoccurring Pattern," for which Ms. VanDerBeek collaged magazine photographs, bits of fabric, her own family snapshots and other talismans against a chain-link fence.

Ms. VanDerBeek said that she saw the layering in those photographs as being similar to "the way our mind organizes our memories, at different depths, one superimposed over the other, and constantly shifting." The resulting works, with their Dada and Surrealist overtones, struck a chord and curators began visiting her studio in the gallery basement.

One was Eva Respini of MoMA, who put Ms. VanDerBeek's work in the "New Photography" show there last fall. "Although Sara is a photographer, I like to think of her practice as multidisciplinary," Ms. Respini said, because she

usually makes a multimedia sculpture before taking a photograph, and is "very interested in the space of sculpture, the space of theater." And by opening a gallery and representing her father's estate, she added, Ms. VanDerBeek was "involved in a larger artistic dialogue."

For MoMA Ms. VanDerBeek created an installation of four photographs based on images of Detroit, a city she regards as embodying long-term change, good and bad, rather than urban decline. Similarly her new Whitney project, loosely inspired by Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," is something of a meditation on America during a time of social transformation. And like that poet, who reshaped and expanded on his opus throughout his life, Ms. VanDerBeek's intention was to create a project that could remain in flux. She continued tweaking every aspect of "To Think of Time" until it opened, and intends to recombine the images and add new ones over the years. "My hope is to have it grow and evolve over time," she said.



"Tremé School Window"

The project also owes much to her personal history. Two years ago she and her siblings began cleaning out the family home so that their mother, Louise, who has multiple sclerosis, could move to a nursing home. As well as uncovering long-lost family mementos, like the plaster life masks her father

encouraged them to make each year, they also found decades of his previously unknown work.

While their discoveries were “like sifting through history,” the process of clearing them out was “like a physical manifestation of change,” Ms. VanDerBeek said. “I hope my work is as much about the positive and inspirational aspects of change as it is about loss or melancholy.”