

ARTFORUM

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Leigh Ledare ROTH

A typewritten note describing the artist's mother air-drying naked on a bed, postshower; a napkin on which his mother has scribbled things she would like to be ("a writer like Marguerite Duras and Anaïs Nin"); a grid of thirty-six photos of his mother playing with her labia; a page from a 1966 *Seventeen* magazine profile of his mother as a young ballerina; classified ads his mother placed in the *Seattle Weekly* seeking "a generous wealthy husband (not someone else's) who wants his own private dancer." In all, twenty-three works (images, texts, ephemera) made up "Pretend You're Actually Alive," Leigh Ledare's first New York solo exhibition, which coincided with the publication of an artist's book of the same name featuring even more mementos and cathartic ejecta.

Not since, respectively, the Families of Nan and Mann redefined the stakes for documenting one's own tribe has an artist carved such a dramatic path into the ambivalent territory of the photographer-subject relationship. (Comparisons could also be made to Robert Melee and Richard Billingham, but the former's campy airs and the latter's unreflecting voyeurism don't quite resonate with Ledare's sensibility.) "I do find it difficult that the model often doesn't get any credit for this contribution, for her participation. She's at least 50% of the picture," Tina Peterson, Ledare's mother, argues in an interview

printed on the book's cover. Witnessing the captivating, fiery-haired force majeure splay her legs for *Mom Spread with Lamp*, 2000, or pose soberly for the quiescent *Mother in New Home*, 2006, one could hazard that fifty percent is a conservative estimate.

There's a temptation to read the show diachronically, as the story of a young dancer (Peterson danced with the Joffrey and the New York City Ballet companies) transformed into a modern-day Jocasta, whose two sons attempt to manage and entertain her delusions as she steals one's credit cards and draws the other into bizarre acts of sexual voyeurism. But it is also the loving and patient record of a conversation; that Peterson is a vivid interlocutor is evident not only in the teasing directness of her gaze but also in the texts that she authors accounting for or protesting her plights.

Ledare occasionally teases us, too, by including, for example, his mother (along with Christie Brinkley and Shelley Duvall) on the book's roster of "girls I wanted to do." This libidinal donnée is rendered with histrionic flourish in photo-booth strips featuring him and his mother making out, and in lurid pictures, taken by Ledare, of her being penetrated by unidentified men. It hardly shocks, though, that a son would desire his mother—or vice versa; this is, after all, boilerplate—the central fact in some of the most significant theoretical frameworks of the past century. What is shocking is that neither party seems shy about enacting this fantasy for a broader public. That the erotic pretenses might be a game, that this work, paradoxically, might be an effort in sublimation—that the pair often seem to be in cahoots—only goads the narrative. Ultimately, the photographs are mere titillation: There is some kissing, some nudity. There is sex, but not *that* sex.

Throughout, it is not Ledare's style or photographic talent but his subject—the artist and his mother's unique *modus vivendi*—that lends the exhibition coherence. But over the lively banter looms an air of portent, owing to certain foreboding images (of Ledare's grandmother in the hospital, of his mother posed as a corpse). "One day I told my Mom jokingly, 'As long as you regard your life as fiction, in the very least you'll have some interesting experiences,'" reads a note scrawled by the artist and reproduced in the book. "She replied, 'Finally somebody who understands me.'" Is a life pretended one more fully lived? *Pretend you're actually alive*, Ledare pleads, and shortens the tether of the simulacrum.



Leigh Ledare, *Mother and Catch 22*, 2002, color photograph, 35 1/2 x 23 1/2".

—David Velasco