

Familienfest is a family celebration, but her title: Familienfest im Focus means: Families: sharply focused or Focus on Family -so it is really a neat double meaning.

Focus on Family by Husch Josten

This is serious. You can smile if you want. But no one is going to urge you to do so. Jessica Todd Harper is not thinking of idyllic family celebrations when she points her Mamiya or her Hasselblad. The 28-year-old observes. Takes time for private moments that will later be seen by strangers: gestures and looks between people at breakfast or tea, in front of the Christmas tree or talking by the fireplace. People who intimately live and love in complex layers of engagement and who occasionally also get on each others nerves, people who are closely or more distantly related and, therefore, who are together for holidays. In short, Jessica Todd Harper photographs her family.

The series, "Portraits from Private Spaces," earned the young artist praise and recognition and scholarships; she has been regarded for sometime by insiders who love photography in America as someone to watch. With "Scenes from a Marriage Diary" – pictures that show her then future husband and his family, she landed a show in the Allentown Art Museum, then in the Houston Center for Photography, in each case as a solo exhibition; and now she has become a teacher of digital photography at Haverford College in Philadelphia: the beginning of a picture book career. Just like a novel.

Harper's colored Epson prints, one meter wide and 80 centimeters high, produced with the software "Live Picture" either scanned in multiple layers, which gives them the appearance of something moving, or fixed through color with the aura of a still-life, have the effect of oil portraits. Actually Jessica Todd Harper dares to approach an important theme of painting.

"I show people in familiar settings, in their homes the way the Renaissance artists Dürer, van Eyck, and Anguissola examined simple people, their identities and existences in their private

activities rather than in the happenings or objects around them.” Harper would have her photos looked at as paintings: the primary focus being not the production techniques but the composition themes, the insight into the people, their weaknesses and follies.

Photos such as “Easter Dinner” remind one of Jan Steen’s “Christmas Eve:”, Velasquez’ “Kitchen Scene, ” and also Van Gogh’s “the Potato Eater.” One sees families in urban or rural settings who sit together daily. The observer of Harper’s photos actually often would feel transported to another epoch, were it not for the hints of the present through plastic cups, jeans, videos, TVs, (and) car keys. Jessica Todd Harper shows a virtual reality that could not be more real; a movie (statue still) in a frozen frame; film that originates first in her mind and then in reality.

She shamelessly invades private spaces. She emphasizes the role of details, assigns them their place, and infers character through gestures and body language. At first glance many photos seem to be snapshots. A second glance reveals the detailed staging. There is the insight into the intimate connections of the Harpers, the closeness or distance of individuals. At the same time there always remains the question of how much the photo shows the truth- such as when the artist represents herself on the lap of her husband Christopher, who stares indifferently into the distance , when her grandmother in the picture “G-Jean” sits between chairs at Christmas, when the “Three Marcelles” - grandmother, cousin, and great grandmother- looking down from a painting (all three bear the Christian name of Marcelle) are together at Thanksgiving and also distant from it, presented as an intimate unity.

Jessica Todd Harper says she thinks in pictures and has no interest in everyday stuff; she must mean household routines of cleaning and vacuuming, because her photos show a real nose for exactly those everyday details that connect family members. Many pictures remind one of the uneasy “normal” scenes of the Canadian artist Jeff Wall. But Jessica Todd Harper forgoes the weird aspect. “For me it’s all about the connections that make people a family.”

What makes Harper’s pictures so gripping is that familiar feelings, whether good or bad, show up as something subtle rather than

shocking. And from this point of view, holidays must mean concentrated inspiration for Jessica Todd Harper. She graduated cum laude from Bryn Mawr College in Philadelphia ; then completed her Master of Fine Arts degree at the Rochester Institute of Technology, winning the ‘best student’ award at the end of her 2nd year. In between she spent a year at the Ecole Nationale des Arts Decoratifs in Paris. Says Harper, “Holidays are the time for families to be together. To be yourself with those closest to you. When turkey (is) being eaten, the presents unwrapped, then, sometimes, Jessica Todd Harper gets her digital camera. Her family is used to it. And her family is also a reason why, in spite of mounting successes, - ten solo and six group shows in the last three years- she still amazingly remains on home turf.

“I like to take photos and have since I was 15,” she explains. “Earlier I sketched and painted, but I like photos more.” Obviously others also like her pictures which are priced starting at \$800, because she has already sold many. To gallery owners, art collectors, and others who want to become collectors: photography enthusiasts who are convinced that Harper’s photography will one day be worth far more. Her “Portraits of Private Spaces” and new work from her series “Legacy”, which focuses on the female side of the Harper family, will be shown until January 11 at the Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia.

She is already planning future exhibits. The artist is really not lacking for new themes, as she places her friends in front of the camera. Because it’s getting serious. We’re home for the holidays.

Exhibit: Until January 11 at the Woodmere Art Museum; 9201 Germantown Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19118.
www.JessicaToddHarper.com