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"What if this were the only way to clothe your family?": An Interview with Erica Vermette

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"What if this were the only way to clothe your family?": An Interview with Erica Vermette

Erica Vermette is an artist living in Massachusetts. She grew up there on the South Shore and studied painting and drawing at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where she received her BFA. Her collection of paintings, "Archive I: Family," featured on the inaugural cover of Résonance, grew out of an annual weekend gathering of Franco writers and artists in Walpole, Maine, in April 2016. The piece now hangs above a fireplace mantel at the Franco American Centre at the University of Maine in Orono. In a 2016 description of the piece, Vermette writes: "The format was chosen as a deliberate reference to quilting. I wanted to allude to textiles and the fiber arts for two reasons: because of the incredible importance of the textile industry and mills in Franco American history, and because the fiber arts have been so central to the way my Franco heritage has been passed down to me. The 'quilt' format seemed especially appropriate, conjuring notions of tradition, inherited memory, and collaboration." Vermette participated in an interview with Résonance reviews editor, Jacob Albert, over email correspondence during several days in January 2018.

R: Can you talk about the genesis of this piece ["Archive I: Family"]?

EV: The piece was created for the 2016 Rassemblement. I don't remember if there was an explicit theme announced for that year's gathering, but attendees were asked to read Elizabeth Kadetsky's essay "Ghosts and Chimeras" as a jumping-off point for discussion. The piece is about how families forge an identity through telling stories and creating myths about themselves, and how, even though many of these stories are proven to be false, they reflect the traumas and anxieties a family has faced. I wanted to create a piece that would explore the fractured nature of collective memory.

Before the gathering, I created a set of written prompts, each with a unique "serial number." Contained within each set were different types of questions, all coded. For example, questions of type B were "Something you only learned about a relative after they had died," with subtype B1 being something a relative or relatives told you, and subtype B2 being something that *wasn't* told to you by other family, but was found in personal effects, newspaper archives, etc...and then each prompt had a lowercase a., b., and c. space for participants to fill in. (My inspiration was the Aarnes-Thompson Tale Type index for folk tales, where, for example, you might have a group called "Lost Husband Tales" that is labeled 425, with variants labeled 425-A through N depending on whether the story involves an innkeeper, or a lullaby is sung at some point, or what have you.)

The prompts were distributed at random as slips of paper to other attendees at the gathering. Every slip had a sort of tear-off receipt with the unique serial number and prompt code, and everyone was instructed to fill in a prompt, tear off and keep the receipt, and submit the prompt. I read through all of the prompts, and whenever I found one that had a compelling image, I made a 5x5" painting. Each finished painting had a label with the serial number of the prompt that had inspired it affixed to the bottom of the canvas. The final result is the grid of 25 paintings that you see at the Franco Centre.

The most important part of the piece for me was mirroring the unreliability of memory and particularly of *collective* memory. I wanted the process to be convoluted, and for it to be “faulty” at points.

The first breakdown was the creation of the prompts themselves. They were all numbered by hand, so who’s to say I numbered them correctly? What if I accidentally made a duplicate serial? Skipped a number? There was also the fact that the whole numbering system was (a) totally arbitrary, and (b) unnecessarily convoluted by design.

Then there was the distribution. Some people took prompts that they never filled out. A *lot* of people ignored the direction to tear off the receipt portion (which is exactly what I’d hoped for), or they lost it before the piece was finished, so the only real, concrete “key” to finding those anecdotes was lost. (Of course, they could ask me, or they could recognize the image from their story, but those aren’t as reliable.) The written prompts themselves were also destroyed after the paintings were complete, so there’s no way for an outsider to know the exact anecdotes behind the images.

And then there’s the fact that these anecdotes and memories were interpreted and represented by me, a third party (although I did contribute at least one anecdote). The images or associations I might have latched on to in any particular story might not be what someone else would choose to depict. And there were also many prompts submitted that weren’t used for paintings, simply because I couldn’t think of a succinct image to represent them.

The end result I wanted was an “archive”—seemingly meticulously labeled and organized—that became increasingly inaccessible after the Rassemblement was over and time passed. The only way to know what the story is behind each of the images is to have been there, and to be able to remember. Even now, three years or so later, I’ve forgotten what most of the anecdotes are behind the images. I can remember painting them, or snatches of what the story was about, but there are only a couple where I can remember the entire anecdote!

I also wanted the images themselves to be vague and evocative, rather than specific, so that future viewers could be drawn in and make their own associations—and I didn’t want the paintings to play off of each other neatly. Why is there a scary monkey? What does that X mean? Is that a baby in that box? Family histories and personal narratives are so messy and strange; I wanted the final piece to reflect that broken-ness.

R: So these paintings were at one point vehicles for a very specific sort of exploration, but they are not that anymore. What's left of them is just the art (if I can say "just the art"), not so much what it points to, unless I have some special knowledge.

EV: Yes—the term used in performance art is “relic.” I [would] definitely consider it a performance piece, and the paintings to be its relics.

R: I want to ask if you had ever developed a piece like this before, but it strikes me that there is so much more than one thing going on here. You did not simply sit down and paint. Had you ever tried something else like this—either in terms of a very structured, very intentional, layered or thematic piece, or in terms of a piece whose goal was, in some ways, to be lost or broken? Or a performance piece?

EV: I would argue that sitting down and painting *is* a performative act with many layers. Say you were going to make an oil painting of a vase of flowers—it may seem like a simple painting of a traditional subject, but you're dialoguing with the centuries-long history of the medium, the history of still life as a genre, all kinds of questions—Why did oil paintings come to be valued? Why are vases of flowers a traditional subject—Who has traditionally bought paintings like this and why? Who, historically, has been allowed to become a painter, and am I like them? Where is this painting ultimately going to be displayed, and who has access to the space where the art will be consumed?

That being said, I don't think I've done a performance piece before where the relics became a stand-alone piece to be consumed after the performance was over, or that involved an information collection process like this. Or that I've used painting so extensively in a performance context. It was definitely a new kind of piece for me!

As far as pieces meant to be lost or broken—this question has me thinking a lot about finished paintings in general as relics of a performative act. When I look at one of my finished paintings, it sparks a lot of memories—for a more recent painting, I can probably remember exactly what podcast or music I was listening to when I made it, my mood, what I was worried about that day. Even older paintings spark *some* kind of memory—who else came to paint with us that day, a conversation I had with the model during break. All of that is a big part of how *I* consume the work after the fact, but it's completely inaccessible to anyone else. And it becomes less accessible to me as time passes.

R: Could folks at the Rassemblement see your work as you finished each painting? Or can you remember their reactions to what you were doing in real time and whether these reactions informed your process? I appreciate the idea of "consuming" one's own work after the fact, and I wonder when you consume this piece now, what you can say about how the other participants—maybe your "live audience"—might have informed or shaped it outside of their more formal roles in responding to your prompts.

EV: Yes, they could! I worked all day while the other attendees were presenting, at a table off to the side of the presenting area.

That was the most fun—but also nerve-wracking—part. It was so delightful to see people find and recognize the images inspired by their stories, especially the people who kept their receipts—like I've said, some of the images were sort of vague, and it was fun to see the "ah-ha" moment when people matched their serial number up and realized how the image related to their story.

I also got to tell other people's stories if someone asked about a painting that intrigued them, which was a lot of fun, and added further layer of filtering and retelling on top of everything else.

I felt a lot of pressure to honor the fact that these were people's personal memories and family stories they were sharing, some of which were very dark. That definitely placed—not a limitation, per se, on the work, but it definitely informed it. If I had gotten the prompts by mail or some other anonymous way and knew the contributors would never see the finished paintings, maybe they would have come out differently—I'm not sure. I know it's something I was very aware of the entire time.

R: How does this experience compare to, say, how you relate to or interact with a portrait model? What are the pressures and risks in portrait painting for you, or what do they feel like?

EV: Most of my portraits are done in a pretty casual setting (I paint with a group that has weekly standing model sessions anyone can join in on), and many of the models are friends or acquaintances, so there's not usually a *lot* of pressure...but I do still feel a responsibility to make a painting relatively flattering! Especially since the models almost always walk around during breaks and look at the paintings. I mean, I would never censor details like wrinkles or anything—but I would never want to make the model look worse than they do in real life. I work as an art model from time to time, and there are moments when I've looked at a painting and been like, "Is that what my arm looks like?" and it can be a little bit of a downer!

R: If the people behind your 25 paintings in "Archive I: Family" share any one thing in common, I suspect it is some relationship to the phrase, "Franco American." Can you talk about your relationship to this phrase? What, if anything, does it have to do with your work in general?

EV: I'm biracial (my mother is from the Philippines, the Franco-American is on my father's side), and grew up in an extremely white area. I grew up identifying with my Filipino heritage—both because I was less removed from it, being that my mother is an immigrant—and because it's the more obviously "othered" identity. Even knowing about my Franco-American heritage from a relatively young age, being partly non-white sort [of] made me consider my other half to be "white" before anything else. I remember being almost...I don't know, annoyed? Or feeling like it was an identity being pushed on me at the expense of my Asian-ness by my Franco-American relatives? I'm not exactly sure why I felt this way, but I did.

But delving more deeply into Franco-American history has forced me to think a lot about whiteness, and how whiteness is truly an erasure of culture before anything else. So many white-identified people don't have to go back too far in their history to find the same kinds of oppression that POC and minorities are still enduring. My mother has been harassed for speaking Tagalog in public, but my Franco ancestors were harassed for using French, too—why is skin color where the line gets drawn? I don't know. I think about it a lot.

I once saw a great documentary about Native representation in cinema that ended with a Native man saying he doesn't actually get angry when he sees things like white kids at Coachella wearing headdresses, because he recognizes that those kids have been stripped of their authentic culture somewhere along the way, so they're just latching on to someone else's authenticity. I think there's a lot of truth in that, and I very much hope (although I'm not too optimistic) that the current fad for DNA testing leads white people to deconstruct whiteness and reconnect with their heritages. I think it would go a long way towards healing a lot of what's currently ailing us. I'm deeply grateful that that work is mostly done for me at the surface level, thanks to the genealogical work of others—at the spiritual level, it is, of course, an ongoing process.

I don't think my Franco-American-ness directly affects my painting practice, but I'm also a crafter and fiber artist, and I do think about my ancestors on my Franco side almost every time I'm working on a fiber project. It was something directly passed down to me by my Franco-American grandmother, along with stories about which women (and at least one man) in the family were best at what—my great grandmother could make mittens in an afternoon, a great-aunt could crochet a beautiful lace apron in a day as long as she had some hard liquor by her chair. Sometimes my grandmother would go through boxes of handmade items and tell me who made them. The format of the piece we've been discussing was deliberately designed to reference quilting—it seemed appropriate for a piece about collaboration and inherited memories.

Crafting also forces me to think about the reality of these women's lives. What if this were the *only* way to clothe your family? It's sobering.

R: What are you working on now?

EV: Right now, as far as painting goes, I'm thinking of going back to still life. I keep trying to do these very elaborate, larger-scale studio pieces, and I find I lose interest right away—honestly, I think I've only completed one of these in the last year! I will still try to complete those, but I'm really drawn to the immediacy of painting something right in front of me. My other great love is house plants and gardening (between my home and my studio I have somewhere between 75–100 plants and I'm always coming home with more), so I'm thinking of doing some “portraits” of my plants. I haven't really been painting for myself for a long time now, and I feel like I'm always searching for ways to bring joy back to my practice.

I also have a bunch of other projects and pursuits—jewelry making, casting cement planters and containers, fiber crafts. I like to be able to bounce around to different projects if one thing starts to overwhelm me. My goal for this year is to be constantly creating, no matter what the medium is.

Erica Vermette's work will be featured during 4th Floor Artists' Spring Open Studios in Rockland, Massachusetts, in April 2019. For more information, visit 4thfloorartists.com.