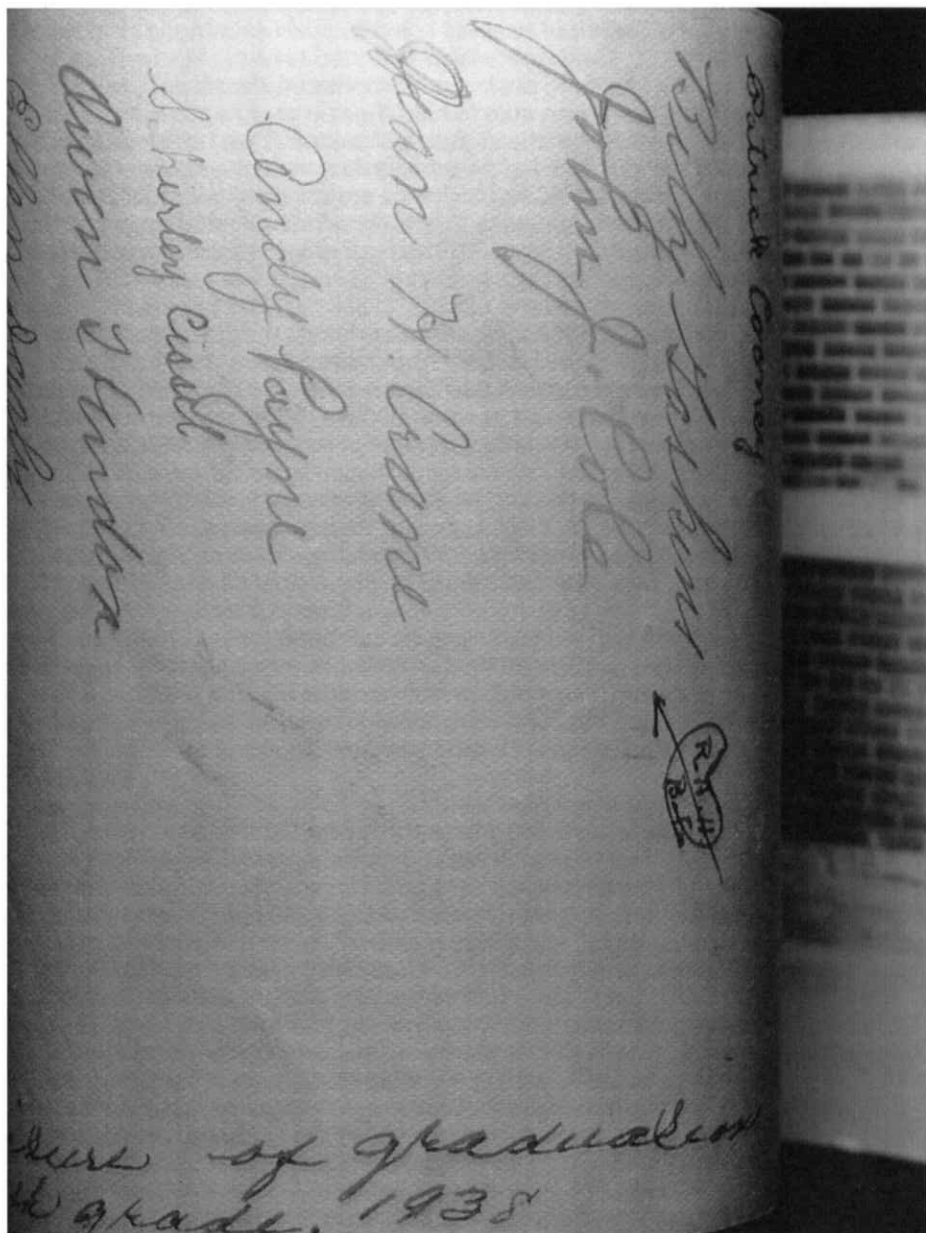


FICTIONAL SUBSTANTIATION: THE WAY WE WERE? ON LYNN SILVERMAN'S *IN A MATTER OF TIME*

By Laura Noble



Many of us have boxes of old photographs languishing in dark spaces. Tucked away in wardrobes, under beds, in the back of cupboards, up in the attic or down in the basement, these treasures are brought out into the light just once in a while. When the lid is lifted, the momentary flood of sentimental reminiscence is so tangible it can be swum in.

These boxes contain remnants and evidence of family history, some of it known, some unknown. Relatives long since gone, distant cousins, close and farfriends, all melded into the annals of the past—alongside our nearest and dearest—await the next generation.

Family photos have the power to draw out memories of places, people, pets, and things in a unique way. Being able to hold them in your hands brings forth a more physical connection that the digital age cannot as yet replicate. More often than not, they are indicators of personal milestones, special occasions, holidays, and leisure time. In families, weddings are usually the largest attended and most photographed gatherings, with everyone in their smartest attire, the camera ready for the inevitable groupings and grinning, the photographer hired for one day, never to be seen again.

What distinguishes these large group gatherings is that the collective community is represented. Through a shared event, the guests become a cast of characters gathered for a common cause rather than a collection of individuals. What happens to these pictures as time moves on? Do we recognize all the guests at our parents' or grandparents' weddings? Do our parents or grandparents recall everyone in the photos? Rarely. A sea of faces become part of the crowd. The majority of the guests may never see the photographs in which they are depicted or the albums and boxes they end up in. Their presence is not so much diminished, but rather overlooked, lost amid the familial and familiar. When the key protagonists pass away, how are they to be remembered or acknowledged?

Discovering or rediscovering old photographs can bring forth as many questions as answers. We can see how things looked but cannot necessarily feel how they felt. Once the company disbands, whom do we ask? Is it better to forget or remember? For Lynn Silverman, uncovering a bevy of tightly rolled panoramic banquet photographs, the answer was both.

Silverman rightly refers to these photographs—some up to three feet long—as “scrolls.” In so doing, she assigns the images historical significance before they are even visible. This deference to her source material flows through *In A Matter of Time* (2020–), a series reflecting upon the dual inevitabilities of the medium's obsolescence and the ever-lengthening period since the photos' creation. A reconciliation of past, present, and future is rolled into her imagery and presented in a variety of semi-anonymous, still life, black and white gelatin silver prints.

Despite their varied subject matter, these pictures, tied together, are once again made relevant, treasured and preserved for a new and different purpose. As viewers, we are invited to participate in unfurling these histories and become fellow investigators of the mysteries they hold. By implementing her own system of cataloguing, Silverman binds and formalizes the set of scrolls into a new whole. Each image is given a place amid a new archive, in the form of a series.

Each title features numbers in parenthesis that mark Silverman's revision of the

narrative history of the objects. The coded numerals delineate the intervention of the artist and her process. For example, in *High School 1967 (20.35.01)* (2020), the numerals refer to the year the photograph was shot (2020), the film number (35th roll of film), and frame number (01). Using this classification system, Silverman establishes a new structure in which to view these photographs, from a more oblique angle, wavering between fact and fiction. We are given some information but not the whole image. We are thus able to project our own thoughts and ideas into the crevices of the scrolls, while also enjoying the composition of the picture. By altering the position of the photographs, Silverman presents an alternative viewpoint and takes us to the edges of abstract expressionism. The high contrast between light and dark areas draws us in to inspect them more closely and more keenly.

Silverman's departure from the formal conventions of the depicted events allows for experimentation with time and form. The use of the term still life implies stillness. However, some scrolls unfurl before a long exposure, resulting in an image which records the photograph as both a still and moving object. Life once recorded for posterity—held still and captured by the camera—resides alongside the ever shifting passing of time, both in the same frame. One such scroll, *High School 1967 (20.35.01)* (2020), reveals a school photograph with uniformed pupils sitting neatly in rows—a scene that may remind us of our own school days. Combining the two narratives abstracts the original just enough to let us in and project our own thoughts and memories of school.

Many school and summer camp photographs in the series retain multiple signatures on the reverse. In some, lit from behind, both sides of the paper are revealed at once. This device condenses the solidity of objects and their structure, highlighting tears, holes, or other damage and further driving the history behind the object into the present. Fingerprints, signatures, and general wear and tear from handling all add to the story of the photo's journey. Human elements are ever present despite the mechanical production of the object in question.

Silverman allows our eyes to adjust as they travel back and forth across the paper, first to the surface of the gelatin silver print, then to the aspect of the photograph she captures. In using a medium format camera, Silverman brings the hands of time closer to the present but not so close as to overshadow the objects she depicts.

Through Silverman's conceptual approach, the scrolls become art forms in their own right. They articulate and fuse into sculptural forms as figures pass through them and past the physical matter of the image on the wall. *In A Matter of Time* propels a continuation of remembrance by integrating new forms into the past.

Resonating throughout the series are impressions of family, community, and personal histories alongside key moments in history, such as the First and Second World Wars. Although a photograph of World War I army recruits is not part of the family collection, it interweaves with the history referenced though formal occasions, such as an anniversary banquet in *The 20th Anniversary of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 1935 (23.01.02)* (2023).

Founded in direct response to World War I and still active today, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom is a membership-based feminist organization dedicated to peace and pacifism. This large format banquet

photograph, a beautiful scene of female solidarity captured as the specter of World War II loomed on the horizon, echoes today. The importance of recording this moment also reminds us of the significance of the past informing the present.

In Silverman's series, we are consistently reminded of time as a circular construct. The linear panoramic made using the banquet camera is now obsolete—a fitting metaphorical comparison to the scroll. In these works, Western and non-Western approaches to time passing are dually rendered. Notions of circular time are ancient, suggesting an eternal repetition of history. Using the revolving door of time as a visual metaphor through these works, a sense of renewal is unavoidable, thus inviting us to reflect upon our own histories and communities.

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Cover image: Lynn Silverman, *First Love 1938 (20.17.11)* (detail), 2020. From the series *In A Matter of Time*, 2020-. Silver gelatin print. Courtesy of the artist and Klompching Gallery, Brooklyn, NY.