

“Vice/Virtue”

in *Design and Violence*, Jamer Hunt and Paola Antonelli, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014) 114.

Susan Yelavich, 10/28/13

One of my earliest childhood memories lives in a photograph. I was probably five years old, at the beach with my family in Point Pleasant, New Jersey. That was ‘our’ shore town because my grandparents built, owned, and ran a motel there called Ocean View Courts, which, being eight blocks from the beach, actually looked out on Broadway not the Atlantic. On this particular day, in this particular picture, my parents and I had left our blanket, and my younger sister Christine on it, all alone, just long enough for her to find an illicit prize.

In the 1950s, it was not considered neglectful to turn your back on a small child for a moment or two at the beach. The shore insulated you from the vices of the everyday. (Now, the opposite is apparently true.) Your small square plaid cotton badge of admission, pinked around the edges – purchased on the boardwalk and pinned on your bathing suit – was the insurance policy that this was a domestic space, a family haven. (My dad worked for Prudential in Newark, so we knew all about insurance.) Even today, it’s common to leave a wallet or purse on your blanket while you take a dip; and when you leave the sand and cross over the boardwalk to the parking lot, you are acutely aware that you’ve left a peaceful vacuum for a world just waiting to insert you back into its timeline.

On the day in question – and “day” is inaccurate, it was a moment suspended in time just like the photograph that documents it – I remember coming back to our blanket and seeing my sister, who couldn’t have been more than three, trying to light one of my father’s Winston’s. There she sat crouched under the umbrella, her small fingers trying to cup a flame around the cigarette in her mouth. We howled at her dogged determination to light the match, much less the cigarette, and her defeat by the ocean breeze.

Today, when I look at the photograph – and it was always one of our favorites in the family scrapbook – I see a knowing, gleeful parody of an adult. A towheaded blond in a child-size Brown University sweatshirt (my father’s alma mater, of course), Chris ignored the camera daring it to contradict her version of adulthood, populated with wise-cracking fathers proud of any signs of street-smarts in their offspring, just in case an Ivy-League education didn’t cover all the bases.

Maybe another family would have simply been horrified at the sight of the child-smoker and wouldn’t have commemorated it the way we did. (The camera must have been grabbed from the blanket quickly to catch her in the act.) But then that family wouldn’t have had a father who was a teenage pilot in World War II, who kept that romance alive

with angle of his cigarette; a father who was the first in his family to go to college (much to their chagrin—his penance was managing the motel for a year), and who masked his insecurities in smoke.

We children of the 50s had no idea of the mythology we were imbibing, nor did our parents fully realize that they were perpetuating myths. My father, at 18, was told in flight training that he was one of the golden boys—substitute ‘gods’ for ‘boys’ and you get the picture. Even after the counter culture years of the late 60s (and my parents’ own embrace of civil rights and feminism, and rejection of the Vietnam War) the lingering glow of the 40s still hovered over our family’s sense of itself. Time and memory have no respect for chronology.

War and romance, death and cigarettes, the pleasures and pains of family, beginning with the excruciating act of birth when a new person enters the room and love takes over. We are not hard-wired to separate them fully, as anyone’s family photo album will prove. If we could only know the future, we might be able to dodge the bullets of addiction, but this is the folly and the tragedy of youth. We wouldn’t believe it if they told us.

*

So my father thought. And I do, too, but only to a point. For he also passed on the gene for skepticism, tacitly giving me permission to take exception with his fatalism. Since his death in 1996, an insistent staccato of acronyms – IED, WMD, PTSD – has shot through our veil of ignorance, shredding the glamorous dress uniforms that marched off to war once and for all. My father’s grandchildren and their children can no longer maintain the illusion that they don’t know the future. They can only choose to believe it will not be their future.

Bio

Susan Yelavich is an associate professor and director of the MA Design Studies program in the School of Art and Design History and Theory at Parsons The New School for Design. A Fellow of the American Academy in Rome, Yelavich was awarded the Academy’s Rolland Prize in Design in 2003. She is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Contemporary World Interiors* (Phaidon, 2007), *Pentagram/Profile* (Phaidon, 2004), *Inside Design Now* (Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2003), *Design for Life* (Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2003, 1997), and *The Edge of the Millennium: An International Critique of Architecture, Urban Planning, Product and Communication Design* (Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2003, 1993). Her newest book *Design as Future-Making*, co-authored with Barbara Adams, will be published by Bloomsbury in June 2014. She is also an independent curator whose most recent exhibition was *Deep Surface: Contemporary Ornament and Pattern* at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh, NC, in 2011. Previously, she was the assistant director for public programs at the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York.