



RE-IMAGINING PERSONAL HISTORY: Anthony Goicolea's RELATED

by Madeline Yale

If we hold an early Daguerreotype in our hands, a shimmering ghost-like figure faces opposite, arrested in photographic form contained by glass and enshrined within its casing. A memorial trophy, an early Daguerreotype is a possession of a history past and a reference to social trends of an era. The evolution of these keepsakes before the turn of the 20th century spawned the business of vernacular portrait studios, an important period in the history of the medium when photography became a fashionable method for middle class citizens to cherish and parade their loved ones. When we gently rotate an older Daguerreotype with our wrists, the luminous figure transitions back and forth from the dead to the living. Likewise, when looking at a gelatin silver negative of a human face held up to a light source, the figure appears inert, waiting to evolve into a positive; what we perceive in our mind's eye is alive and, perhaps, more real. These acts of conversion suggest dichotomies in meaning and reveal the analog signatures of the media employed.

In his recent series *Related*, first generation Cuban-American Anthony Goicolea forms a series of visual binaries – black-and-white, left-and-right, negative-and-positive – to propose a series of metaphors about his familial and cultural history. On view at Houston Center for Photography from March 12 – April 25, 2010, *Related* exists in several parts. The artist forms a series of dualities referencing film-based wet photographic processes by re-drawing photographs of his family in negative and photographing them in positive. Placing these images in environments near his childhood homes, the artist then re-photographs his constructions. In addition to these environmental images, Goicolea constructs large landscapes of his interpretation of Cuba. Through the process of transcribing these images through several generations and visiting sites of ancestral importance, Goicolea mediates his lineage, nostalgically re-creating what is both real and imagined.

After the 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion, both paternal and maternal sides of Goicolea's family exited their homeland for the United States. A relatively affluent Catholic family struggling to live freely within a burgeoning Communist regime, the Goicoleas settled around Miami and Atlanta and began a new chapter. As newer generations were born, a mix of Spanish and English was spoken in their homes. While they maintained a continuity of Cuban and Catholic traditions, partial assimilation into American culture naturally ensued. What tangible evidence remains of the Goicolea's Cuban heritage are a few keepsakes including studio portrait images taken prior to 1961.

Using these black-and-white studio portraits as source material, Goicolea began the series *Related* in 2008. These vernacular images depict more than twenty of Goicolea's light-skinned maternal and paternal ancestors. Like the traditional Daguerreotype, the family members are styled in their best clothes for the camera's gaze, wearing the fashions of the era. Most relatives featured are within their formative years to youthful adulthood; the younger versions postured in informal attitudes which reflect their age, the older ones sitting in staged formality, more erect and reserved. The

opposite:
Anthony Goicolea (Brooklyn, NY)
Related, 2008
Chromogenic print, 26 x 20 inches
From the series *Related*
Courtesy of the artist
and Postmaster (New York, NY)





Anthony Goicolea (Brooklyn, NY)
Aunt diptych, 2008
Chromogenic print, 24 x 16 inches
From the series *Related*
Courtesy of the artist
and Postmasters (New York, NY)

sitters' eyes usually focus on objects askance, with facial expressions ranging from resolute determinism to flatly optimistic. The stark studio backgrounds and vignettted lighting give supreme focus to the subjects.

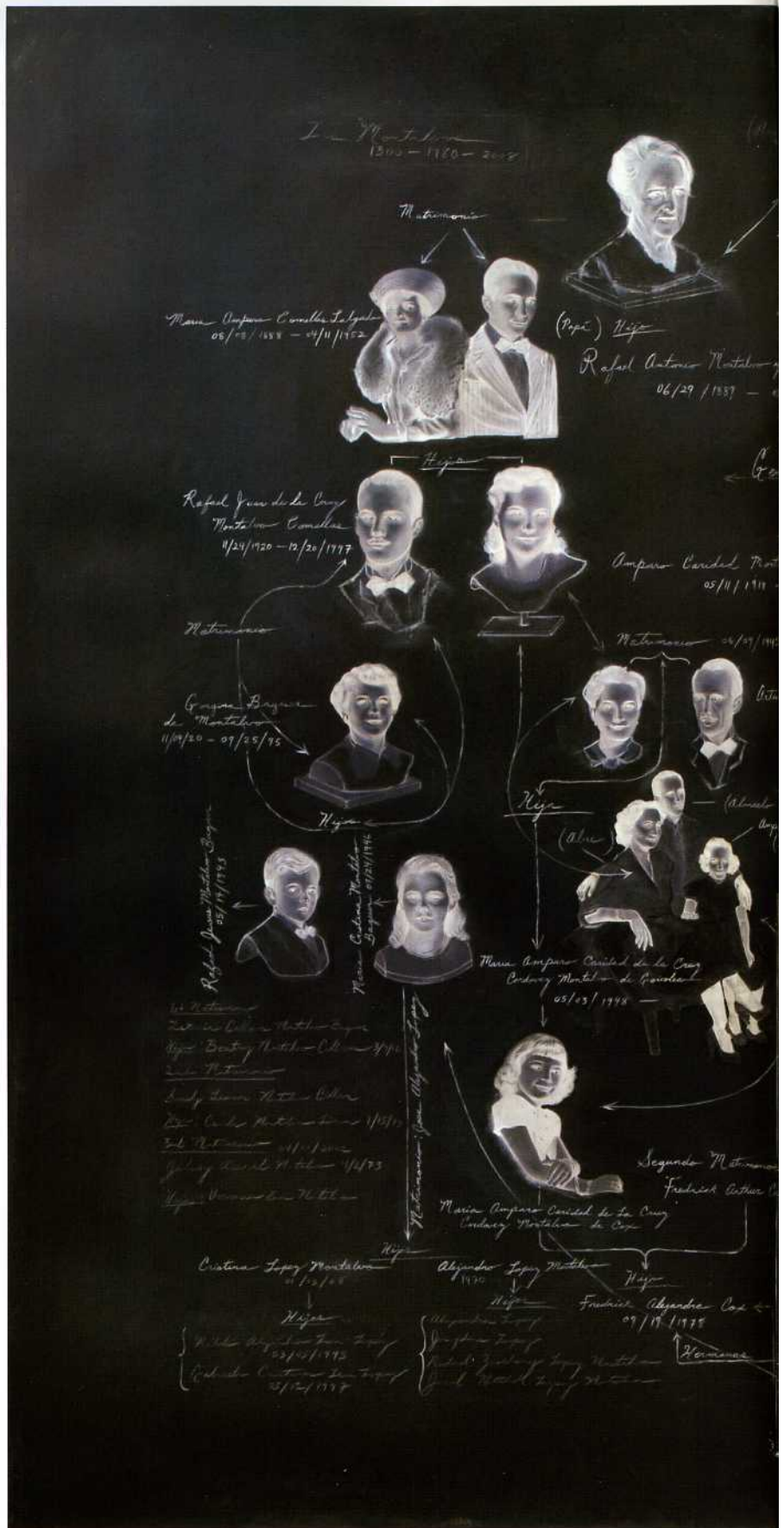
Working in his Brooklyn-based studio, Goicolea carefully draws replicas of these family studio portraits in negative on Mylar or on canvas. This deliberate act of image reversal is both tedious and thoughtful, allowing the artist to reflect upon familial resemblances, to mentally convert figures into their polar opposites, and then recreate the transformed originals in pencil and ink. *Family Geometry*, a large ink drawing on blackened canvas, visually portrays the artist's family tree.

It is impossible to view Goicolea's drawings of these vernacular portraits without experiencing some degree of aesthetic shock. As in *Aunt Diptych*, Goicolea re-imagines his ancestors as apparitional beings, the eyes of whom are the most haunting features. In this new generation of pseudo-analog gelatin silver negatives, the images appear unfinished, resembling Surrealist blueprints beckoning to become actualized or enlivened. We are forced as viewers to conduct our own conversions of these people in our minds. Yet metaphorically, Goicolea's conversion makes sense: it references the artist's dislocation from his ancestral roots.

Goicolea chooses to create another generation of these studio portraits by photographing the negative drawings, creating duplicates, flipping these duplicates from left to right, and converting them to positive photographs. These newer generations are more obviously nostalgic and are paired with their doppelgangers. This "flipping" of images from left to right is curious; his mother's embroidered initials on *Mother I* diptych almost appear as a mistake. However, this reversal is intentional and decidedly photographic. (A few examples exist of this kind of inversion in photography, most notably Manuel Alvarez Bravo's 1931 *Optic Parable* and William Wegman's 1970 *noJ*.) As viewers, our initial discomfort with the negative image is subdued, through its juxtaposition with the positive complement.

Goicolea transported these family portraits to sites near his upbringing in the outskirts of Atlanta and Miami and re-photographed them affixed to telephone poles or trees. These environmental portraits are deadpan constructions; straightforward depictions of Goicolea's family in unsympathetic daylight. These portraits suspend his family in an indeterminate state, alluding to an important phase of migratory transformations.

The pain of loss is strongly evident in this portion of Goicolea's *Related*, yet it also alludes to challenges of immigration and assimilation. Fastened to trunks, the family portraits become missing posters or wanted ads. Additionally, the telephone poles resemble Christ on the cross, a Catholic allegory referencing an experience





Anthony Goicoelea (Brooklyn, NY)
 Family Geometry, 2008
 Ink and acrylic on canvas, 50 x 66.5 inches
 From the series *Related*
 Courtesy of the artist
 and Postmasters (New York, NY)



above:
Anthony Goicolea (Brooklyn, NY)
Day for Night, 2008
Chromogenic print with acrylic, ink and crayon
50 x 57 inches
From the series *Related*
Courtesy of the artist

right:
Anthony Goicolea (Brooklyn, NY)
Mother I diptych, 2008
Chromogenic print
16 x 24 inches
From the series *Related*
Courtesy of the artist
and Postmasters (New York, NY)



Anthony Goicolea (Brooklyn, NY)
Father I diptych, 2008
Chromogenic print
16 x 24 inches
From the series *Related*
Courtesy of the artist
and Postmasters (New York, NY)




which is both personal and universally experienced amongst immigrant populations.

Anthony Goicolea is the first of his family to visit Cuba following their escape in 1961. In May 2008, Goicolea spent two weeks photographing sites of ancestral interest, and attempting to locate old family friends. Using rough maps drawn by his family, Goicolea found landmarks in various stages of decay and was unable to make any family contacts. In the act of searching for these familial connections, Goicolea's longing for a sense of the place echoed in his family's romanticized accounts was unrequited.

Out of this cathartic expedition, Goicolea created a series of landscape images of contemporary Cuba. In *Day for Night*, a mixed media piece featuring a dilapidated art school on the outskirts of Havana, Goicolea inverts the source imagery by darkening a

daytime sky, which contains drawn trajectories of hurricanes that passed through Cuba since 1961. Other images are equally romanticized, where the artist's drawings alter his family's remembered landscapes and suggest architecture of the past or metaphysical reconstructions.

From its initiation, *Related* is quite personal; it tells a complex story about Goicolea's heritage including stories of loss, alienation and assimilation. The constructions intersect vernacular studio photography with fine art, thereby moving beyond the traditional definitions of photography and notions of authorship. Using these techniques, Goicolea challenges the viewer to navigate within a language of ancestral references, constructed mythologies, and to unearth metaphors about his Cuban-American experience, which are embedded in each layer of his artistic process. 

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Looking at Ourselves