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Mary Lucier

Hagen, Charles. "The Unsolved Mysteries of Memory." *The New York Times*, April 7, 1995.

The Unsolved Mysteries of Memory

By CHARLES HAGEN

The persistence and fallibility of memory has been a central, if often hidden, theme in Mary Lucier's video installations of the last two decades. In "Last Rites (Positano)," her terrific new piece at the Lennon, Weinberg Gallery in SoHo, Ms. Lucier addresses the fluidity of the past and the urgency and impossibility of preserving it, in what is by far her most explicitly autobiographical work.

Combining still photographs and interviews presented on video monitors and through speakers scattered about the gallery and items of furniture suspended in midair as if in the wake of an explosion, the piece recounts a central incident in Ms. Lucier's family history. As with most such stories, details and even crucial facts are remembered differently, with family members offering competing tales that are fragmented, repetitive and contradictory.

The work is based on events in the life of Ms. Lucier's mother, who in 1934 traveled from her home in Ohio to England, where her brother was a Rhodes Scholar. There she met and married a charming German correspondent; after the birth of a daughter, the family settled in Positano, the picturesque fishing village on the Amalfi coast south of Naples. Two years later, Ms. Lucier's mother divorced her husband and returned to the United States with her daughter. She later remarried, and spent the rest of her life in her hometown, Bucyrus, Ohio, where Ms. Lucier herself was born.

This complex narrative is never presented directly. Video monitors present interviews with three secondary figures: Ms. Lucier's elder half-sister; her mother's brother, and the Italian woman who worked as the family's housekeeper in Positano. Each recalls aspects of the overall story, but with significant gaps and apparent distortions.

The main characters, though, are absent. Ms. Lucier's mother, who died several years ago, is heard on speakers suspended from the ceiling, and large photographs show her both as a beautiful young woman and as an older woman, her gray hair cropped in a severe cut. But her video image is missing, and as a result she seems ghostly, an invisible character.

Her first husband is even more invisible. The other characters speak of him endlessly, describing him as engaging and witty but neglectful and a heavy drinker. Soon after the divorce, he disappeared; some reports said he had been interned by the Nazis and sent to fight in Russia. The family quickly lost touch with him.

Also apparently missing from the cast of characters is Ms. Lucier herself. She appears nowhere in the installation, neither in the video or audio interviews nor in the photographs. But she is still clearly present, as the drama's narrator and stage manager.

Underscoring the installation's autobiographical nature are the pieces of family furniture suspended throughout the gallery. These come from Ms. Lucier's childhood home; the open drawer of a night stand reveals graffiti she put there as a girl.

Sophisticated but unobtrusive technology allows this richly evocative work to achieve striking effects. For example, as viewers approach the video monitors, motion sensors cause the static figures on screen to spring magically to life. As visitors pause to listen to the interviews, the tapes lapse into silence. But when the viewers move on, the monitors start up again, as if anxiously tugging at the visitors' sleeves to keep their attention.

Projected onto the back wall of the dimly lighted space is a huge video close-up of undulating waves colored with splotches of pastel light. This mesmerizing image not only sug-

gests the exotic dream that Positano must have represented for Ms. Lucier's mother, but also evokes the shifting crosscurrents of conversation offered by the characters of the story.

The image also brings to mind Ms. Lucier's earlier installations, many of which have been based on similarly romantic landscape imagery. In particular, it shares the mood of "Ohio at Giverny," her 1983 work relating close-ups of Monet's gardens with shots of the Midwest.

In fact, that well-known piece can be seen in retrospect as a rehearsal for "Last Rites (Positano)." In her powerful new work, Ms. Lucier directly addresses issues she dealt with metaphorically before, about the lasting influence of the past, and about the role Europe has played in the American imagination as a place of romance and culture.

That these questions turn out to have such a strong personal dimension is no real surprise. In recounting in all its ambiguity a pivotal episode in her mother's youth, Ms. Lucier points to the sense of mystery that permeates the stories most families tell about themselves.

Mary Lucier's work remains at the Lennon, Weinberg Gallery, 580 Broadway, at Prince Street, SoHo, through April 22.

THE NEW YORK TIMES