

ARTFORUM



Rami George, *Untitled (with my father)*, 2020, HD video, color, sound, 20 minutes 30 seconds.

Rami George

MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

In the early 1990s, Nelli George began receiving pamphlets in the mail from a place called the Samaritan Foundation. Nelli was a ceramist and homemaker who lived in Somerville, Massachusetts, with her husband, Jonathan, and their two young children, Leila Malini and Rami. The foundation, led by a woman named Linda Greene, was a new-age religious sect that practiced, among other things, pendulum dowsing—an occult technique that can be used for divination or even clearing out evil energies from everyday objects. (Greene also believed that Hillary Clinton was a “three-virtue type zombie” and that telephones were used by vampires to drain unsuspecting people of their life force.) Intrigued by the group’s teachings, Nelli moved her children to its headquarters in Guthrie, Oklahoma, a former jail that the foundation dubbed the Monastery. What began as Nelli’s private, obsessive quest for spiritual fulfillment soon erupted into chaos and a publicized custody battle—Jonathan eventually gained full custody of the children and returned with them to Somerville. Years later, Nelli came back to her husband and children and repressed her memories of her time with the foundation in order to ease their collective suffering.

During a residency in 2013, Rami George received a Facebook message from an Oklahoma-based stranger, who asked the artist if they had any recollection of the time they spent in Guthrie. This prompted George to begin an ongoing investigation into the

foundation, part of which appears in their first institutional solo exhibition (shuttered early by the pandemic, with installation views and video works made available online) at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. For the show, George built a fragmented version of the foundation's seminar room with rough, freestanding plywood walls—a fractured memory palace of suppressed trauma. (The structure furnishes another psychoanalytic reading: George's father worked for many years as a carpenter for the long-running DIY home-improvement show *This Old House*.) In approximating a site of so much violence and pain, the artist suggests that reconciling one's past is processual and provisional, an operation with psychic resonances that must be slowly, steadily exposed.

At the heart of the exhibition are two essay films. In one, an unseen speaker reads a newspaper article printed in the *Oklahoman & Times*, that details the Georges' custody battle (*Untitled [Saturday, October 16, 1993]*, 2015). The title of the work refers to the date the story was published). During this narration, the camera pans across other articles in that day's paper, situating the artist's personal strife against the thrum of world events. *Untitled (with my father)*, 2020, chronicles Nelli's life with the cult and her subsequent return to the family. For this work, George returned to Somerville for the first time since they were a child. The video features a recorded conversation they had with their father in 2013, during which Jonathan gave Rami a box of personal effects and sundry documents. The voice-over, however, is stilted and marked by a strange staccato. This is because the artist hired an actor to read their father's portion of the dialogue, destabilizing the narrative with a creeping sense of doubt and underscoring the distance between past and present, reality and unreality. In both films, George seems to ask, What can truly be decoded by memory, and what is lost by the flood of time?

Of the pair, *Untitled (with my father)* is the most heart-wrenching. Moving at a placid pace, the work juxtaposes scenes of suburban Somerville with images of the artist's hand rifling through legal documents, photographs, and childhood report cards, yellowed and pockmarked with age. Defining events from George's early life are recounted, such as the death of their dog, Juanito, who appears as an illustration that George made as a child in a spiral-bound notebook. Interpolated with this story are views from a plane's window, meant to suggest the flight the artist took with their father and sister when the trio eventually left Somerville and relocated to Portland, Oregon. What is most striking,

however, is the quiet absence that haunts the entire exhibition. Fleeting shots of the letters George's mother mailed to her estranged kin (often sent through a proxy address to keep her whereabouts hidden) crop up throughout the piece. In one correspondence, scrawled in pen on blue paper and marred by redactions, Nelli implores her husband to find their children a "more supportive environment away from all the past troubles and memories." She concludes by noting that people "grow in different direction[s]"—hinting at more treacherous psychic trails, perhaps, for George to pursue.

— Tausif Noor

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