



Press release Fotomuseum Winterthur, April 2022

# Chosen Family Less Alone Together

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The exhibition *Chosen Family – Less Alone Together* draws on international positions and works from the collection of Fotomuseum Winterthur to shed light on photography's treatment of the (elective) family and its representation of it as a social and cultural construct. The artistic approaches on display are as varied as the different family stories they depict. In addition to the works of professional photographers and artists, the museum also presents personal photo albums, showing the family stories of people from Winterthur and from all over Switzerland.

The exhibition *Chosen Family – Less Alone Together* presents works by contemporary photographers who delve into their own family history, examining and exploring their past. Alba Zari's work involves a reappraisal of her own family history mediated by pictures from her family archive and contemporary photographic documents. The artist – who was born into a fundamentalist Christian sect – uses scraps of text and image fragments to investigate the history of her family and explore her own identity in the process. The photographer Lindokuhle Sobekwa also uses pictures to reconstruct events from the past. When he was just seven, his sister, who was six years older than him, disappeared without a trace and did not return until ten years later. With the help of a documentary photo book, Sobekwa attempts to create a picture – quite literally – of this formative point in his life, a time he knows very little about and which no one has spoken about for ages. Richard Billingham, meanwhile, grapples with his own history and biography by making a loving yet unsparring record of his parents' life and day-to-day reality, in the process showing a domestic world shaped by poverty and addiction. Diana Markosian processes her family history in a short film featuring actors she cast in their roles and clever set photography. Her narrative video sequences re-enact her own childhood memories, which she stages as cinematic imagery. The film's perspective is shaped by the experience of migration undergone by her mother, who left her husband after the break-up of the Soviet Union and moved with her children to the US to marry an American.

Other artists present themselves and members of their family in sometimes elaborately staged settings. By breaking open and re-enacting the family structures, their work reflects on the roles played by the individual family members and the photographers' own position within this constellation. This way of exploring family dynamics turns members of the family into collaborative partners in the image-making process. Charlie Engman, for example, presents his 'mom' in settings that have little in common with our conception of a mother's everyday reality: we may see her posing in a hydrogen-blonde wig, with blue



eyeshadow and a fierce, challenging look, or climbing up a rope ladder fixed to a tree, wearing white knickers. Engman's work playfully calls into question the one-dimensional image of the caring mother. Pixie Liao also takes a playful approach as she bucks classic role models: her portraits of herself together with her partner subtly subvert stereotypical ideas of men and women. The photographs show her partner resting his head on her shoulder or being held in her arms. Photographer Leonard Suryajaya, meanwhile, stages his parents and extended family using symbolically charged props in elaborately arranged environments fitted out with rugs and fabrics. The at times quirky interactions between individual members of the family are at odds with our idea of a conventional family portrait.

Other artistic explorations focus on the fact that family can be defined by much more than just (blood) kinship and is experienced via community constellations with deep bonds. These works show how photography can be a means of creating new 'images of family' that offer an alternative to middle-class notions of it. Their depictions of communities that exist outside traditional constellations challenge our concept of how a conventional family looks. Dayanita Singh, for example, took pictures of Mona Ahmed and her adopted daughter Ayesha during the 1990s. Ahmed identifies as a hijra, as part, that is, of a community that rejects a binary view of gender and the norms it imposes. Members of the community, which has existed for thousands of years, were criminalised under British colonial rule and they are still exposed to discrimination and violence today. As viewers of Singh's work, we are confronted with images that challenge our idea of traditional families and communities. Photographer Mark Morrisroe also depicts a sense of cohesiveness apart from kinship in portraits of his friends and lovers – his gang – who were the hub of his daily activities and a pivotal element in his life. The pictures reveal the deep emotional connection between the protagonists, expressing complicity and a sense of belonging, an embodiment of the idea of elective family.

In addition to the works of international artists, Fotomuseum Winterthur is also exhibiting photo albums and presenting the stories of families from Winterthur and Switzerland in association with the pictures. As part of an open call, the museum is offering people the opportunity to share their personal family stories with visitors and to display their family photos in one of the exhibition spaces.

An exhibition of international loans and items from the collection of Fotomuseum Winterthur, curated by Nadine Wietlisbach with the support of Katrin Bauer. With works by Aarati Akkapeddi, Richard Billingham, Larry Clark, Charlie Engman, Seiichi Furuya, Nan Goldin, Pixy Liao, Diana Markosian, Anne Morgenstern, Mark Morrisroe, Dayanita Singh, Lindokuhle Sobekwa, Annelies Štrba, Leonard Suryajaya and Alba Zari. Christoph Merian Verlag will publish the book *ChosenFamily – Less alone together* as an adjunct to the exhibition.



## Selection of Artists

**Alba Zari** (b. 1987) embarks on a forensic photographic search in her ongoing work *Occult*, which sets out to explore her family history. The Italian artist was born into the fundamentalist Christian sect The Children of God (now known as The Family International) after her grandmother and mother fell into its clutches at the ages of 33 and 13 respectively. The cult was discredited because it encouraged sex with minors and forced women into prostitution as a way to 'recruit' new members. Using her family archive as well as texts and visuals of the sect, archive images of other members and found material from the internet, Zari explores her own family history, while also reflecting on the propaganda tools and mechanisms deployed by the Children of God. The photographs in Zari's work function both as source materials and as a medium in themselves. Her compilation of these different images not only indicates how photographs are used to spread untruths but also helps to reveal and expose them to critical view. The artist's multimedia research thus renders an overall sense of the categories and symbols we use to define and represent family, yielding a picture that is at once self-reflexive and charged with social criticism.

**Seiichi Furuya** (b. 1950) took portrait pictures of his wife Christine Gössler over a period of several years. Furuya was fascinated by his partner from the moment they met and was deeply attached to her. For him, photography was a way to capture the numerous facets of the woman who was both his wife and the mother of his child. What was key here was not so much the finished picture but rather the brief, rapt moment of being face to face with one another. His photographs were not just an observation of his subject but also an act of self-discovery. The relationship between the couple came to a tragic end when Christine took her own life in 1985. Furuya's hundreds of photographs of her are still an important element in his work today and, over the decades, he has repeatedly made new compilations of them. His preoccupation with them entails grief work. As he puts it, it is a way for him to pursue the 'truth', even if, in the end, he only ever finds himself back with his own version of the story.

What does a modern romantic relationship look like? How is its shape determined by the expectations of the individuals involved and by social preconceptions? **Pixy Liao** (b. 1979) focuses on these questions in her long-term photographic project *Experimental Relationship*, in which the artist presents herself with her partner in a range of staged situations. The couple switch between different modes at different times and may be serious or humorous, vulnerable or self-assured. When Liao met her partner in 2005, she quickly realised that he did not fit in with the conservative ideas that had informed her socialisation, and her received sense of gender roles began to unravel. Liao used this as an opportunity to examine their relationship – along with the cultural and social dynamics inscribed in it. In her photographs, it is Liao, then, who supports her partner as he lies across her shoulders or shows him stripped down to his underpants as she – herself fully clothed, it should be noted – tweaks his nipple. It is Liao who lays the man's naked body across a table, using it as a serving dish from which to eat a papaya. Not only are gender stereotypes and clichés inverted in Liao's work but their power dynamics are questioned and probed in a shared performative act in front of the camera.



**Lindokuhle Sobekwa's** (b. 1995) handmade photo book *I Carry Her Photo with Me*, is an attempt on the part of the South African documentary photographer to reconstruct the life of his sister Ziyanda, who disappeared in 2002 at the age of 13. She did not return to her family until ten years later, by which time she was seriously ill and died shortly afterwards. Sobekwa's documentary research of places where his sister stayed allows him to make artistic assumptions about her life. It is not uncommon for people in South African townships to disappear. Sobekwa's work thus not only deals with his very personal family history but also focuses on questions affecting society as a whole. The title of the book documents Sobekwa's desire to preserve the memory of his sister, while also standing for the effort to enshrine in the collective memory the fates of other people who have disappeared.

For all the colourful patterned wallpaper and kitschy interior decorations they show, the photographs by British artist **Richard Billingham** (b. 1970) are not images of a stable family in a sheltered environment. Growing up in a precarious household, affected by alcoholism, violence and his parents' lack of prospects, Billingham began working in 1989 – at the age of 19 – on a complex photographic portrait of a dysfunctional family constellation, a project that he would continue over a period of seven years. In a bid to productively confront his day-to-day sense of powerlessness, the young artist makes his own parents' lack of agency the tragicomic subject of his photographs. The domestic poverty in the images, which is at once tragic and sensitively portrayed, was seen by art critics as a sociopolitical comment on the upheavals of the Thatcher era. However, Billingham's *Family Album* should not simply be viewed as a metaphor representing a sociopolitical crisis – it is first and foremost autobiographical in form and a means of coping with the present.

## Information about the Museum

Fotomuseum Winterthur plays a prominent role in presenting and discussing photography and visual culture. Its temporary solo exhibitions and thematic group shows present works both by young photographers and by those established in the field. In addition to this, the institution also studies photographic phenomena in the context of new technologies and digital media and reflects on them from a critical perspective. The museum explores a diverse range of artistic, applied and cultural photographic forms. Dialogue and the exchange of ideas are of key importance here. Fotomuseum Winterthur advocates a use of the medium that is considered, autonomous and creative. The museum's collection (which dates back to 1960) has helped to shape the history, narratives and understanding of photography as a multifaceted medium.

Fotomuseum Winterthur was founded in 1993. In 2002, it joined forces with Fotostiftung Schweiz to create the Centre for Photography – Switzerland's leading specialist institution for photography.



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