

Diana Blok is a Dutch-Uruguayan artist who explores cultures and identities in her artwork, often questioning the established norms and structures of society. Her perspective as an outsider looking in is reflected in her work, which mainly consists of photography and more recently video installations. Our guest curator Judith Hoekstra introduced Blok's "Time Tells" series, in which she researches her family history through photographs of her mother's handmade garments and unique representations of the Wailing Wall.

Through your work Time Tells, you searched for traces of your family history and identity, by photographing garments designed and woven by your's mother's hands, and the Israeli Wailing Wall. Why did this feel necessary?

For different reasons, it was a way to process my mother's passing and my father's history. It was complex to fully grasp my parents' inner worlds; both migrants from different parts of the world, different religious and cultural backgrounds. They were expressive, joyous and caring but distant and secluded when it came to their vulnerabilities and personal histories. As a daughter, that inner world is important, because it helps to define your own. My father never spoke openly about his Jewish roots, which I discovered at 15 years of age.

What led you to focus on your mother's garments in order to uncover your family history? My mother, who was a designer and couturier, poured her love into the garments she created. I think the textiles' tactile qualities - how they envelop, safeguard, and comfort - seem to preserve our family's history. Many items also signified important stages in her life and ours: She embroidered our baptism dress and her wedding negligé for example. They are very existential pieces as is. Through my photography, I weave, or stitch together some of the untold stories of her life, comparable to how garments are made. As patterns stitched together.

And what about the Wailing Wall photos?

In time, I discovered that my father was Jewish and had escaped the holocaust at 24 years of age, with the help of a Turkish ambassador who hired him overseas. My father lost both his parents and only brother who were murdered in Aushwitz. I was in 2007 when I coincidentally discovered the Turkish family in Istanbul during a whole other project which I was working on. As I had already worked on the photos of my mother's garments, I felt the need to fill in my father's side visually so decided to visit the Wailing Wall to delve further into my family's identity. Including my father in this photo series was a way to honour him, his struggles, his journey, and the loneliness he must have felt. This final chapter brought my work to a close.

Why is the work called Time Tells?

My mother, Argentinian, used to say "*el tiempo lo dira*", meaning, 'Time will tell.' And as it turns out, time did tell, and reveal the story. Time tells.

What else did you learn from your mother?

She was very charming. Full of life. She made moments count, by dancing, singing, and expressing herself. Also, she was a creator, like I ended up being. She designed and made garments, working at a wedding gown couturier in Buenos Aires. But when she married my father, had four daughters and because the perfect diplomat's wife. She continued sewing all of her life but only for ther daughters and for herself.

You have mentioned in interviews that your father was your 'first feminist'. He wanted you to work and be self-sufficient. However, your mother wasn't financially independent. What are your thoughts on that?

I believe it was simply a different era with a different mindset. Despite this, my mother was still very independent in her own way. She was for example the only one of her siblings to emigrate, and also very particular about caring for her mother. My father had to wait to marry her. Despite this, she was autonomous and self-reliant. It was easier for women to translate these virtues into careers later on, but this was not as feasible during that time as it is now.

Is Time Tells your most personal piece?

No, not necessarily. My project Blood Ties is also a deeply personal and intimate work that may have laid the groundwork for Time Tells. In the Blood Ties series, I photographed families in the 1990s, with all members posing naked. This challenged many taboos that were important to me. At the time (and still today) , it was typical to be photographed in a glamorous manner, but these families were just ordinary people, hailing from diverse ethnic backgrounds and a variety of body shapes. The sense of normalcy was quite jarring for many viewers.

When did you find your way in your work? When did you identify who you were as an artist?

As soon as I decided to be an artist, I think I found my way. It took time and courage to decide though. I studied Sociology, and History of Art but never finished. I went to the Rietveld for two whole days and left! After leaving school, I searched for assistant positions with brilliant photographers. I worked alternatively for Billie Glaser, Arnoud Overbeeke and Anna Beeke for three years, and started my own work on the side which was very personal, not connected to fashion at all. Shaping my own curriculum, following my heart and soul so to speak, really defined my work.

What drives you to work, what is your process like?

My process, and content, is a lot about uncovering. About revelations. A lot of them are unplanned. The photos of the Wailing Wall, for example, were disappointing at first. Then by pure chance and accident, I pressed 'invert' on my computer while viewing the images. And suddenly: the colours inverted and the final image revealed itself, showing me exactly what I felt within when I first experienced the Wailing Wall. It clicked. These types of serendipitous occurrences are often self-reflective, for me personally, or for the idea or the material of the work. It shapes my final work.