

“Elsa Dorfman: Me and My Camera”

Museum of Fine Arts/Boston

Harvey Silverglate’s Reception Speech

Dear family, dear friends,

Thank you for coming.

This MFA showing of a selection of Elsa’s work initially seemed to both Elsa and me to be somewhat funereal. After all, the concept of approaching the end of one’s career has a certain resonance, especially for Elsa, who has mothballed her Polaroid 20x24 Land camera and undertaken, with help, the task of organizing her vast and sprawling collection of prints, both black-and-whites and color Polaroids. Elsa will reach her 83rd birthday five weeks from now. She stopped taking portraits on her Polaroid camera in April 2019—a combination of the infirmities accompanying her advanced age and the aging of the film. There is little useable film left, and a year from now there may be none, unless John Reuter and Nafis Azad and their team pull off another miraculous rescue (as they’ve been doing for several years now).

It was a wholly welcome and delightfully unexpected surprise to both Elsa and me when Anne Havinga told Elsa that the Museum was planning to do a show of her work. The two parts of this show are like bookends of Elsa’s career in photography—black-and-white photos that appeared in her 1974 book titled *Elsa’s Housebook: A Woman’s Photojournal*, and a select group of her 20x24 Polaroid self-portraits.

As it turned out, *ELSA’S HOUSEBOOK* was one of the first of its kind—a diary-like account that used photographs of her family and friends (many of whom are here today) to tell a coherent story about their visits to our Cambridge home at 19 Flagg Street in the early 1970s. And if one ever needed “proof” of the uniqueness of Elsa’s vision regarding this book, it came in the mail in 2013 or possibly 2015—a German PhD student asked Elsa’s permission to use text and photo illustrations from the *HOUSEBOOK* in her documentation of the creation of the field of photojournals! Elsa was thrilled, and she still has a copy of this thesis—in German!

What has been even more thrilling for Elsa is the evolving life her *HOUSEBOOK* has taken on. She decided to get it reprinted in 2012 when she learned that her friends at the Harvard Book Store in Harvard Square had purchased an on-demand printer/binder that they named Paige M. Gutenberg. Then, and again in 2016 and also 2017, Elsa asked people pictured in the *HOUSEBOOK* to send her recollections, life updates and artistic contributions, which she simply added onto the end of the original text. What this means is that the current 4th edition—the 2017 iteration—includes contributions from nearly everyone who was featured in one of Elsa’s *HOUSEBOOK* photos. She always has been delighted by this sort of collaborative project, and she often says that everyone involved should be proud of what they have created. (*ELSA’S HOUSEBOOK* can be ordered from the Harvard Book Store [HERE](#).)

And then there is the Polaroid 20x24 Land camera. Elsa’s is one of a half-dozen built by Dr. Edwin Land and his talented crew—the first one was hand-crafted by Dr. Land for the 1976 Polaroid shareholder’s annual meeting. (I actually attended that meeting and witnessed the unveiling of that remarkable machine.) Starting in the early 1980s, Elsa rented her camera from Polaroid—the only one in private hands at the time. Sadly, Dr. Land underestimated the power of digital photography to put his infinitely more gorgeous product out of business. When Polaroid went bankrupt, Elsa’s friend Dan Stern bought the cameras and the film from the bankruptcy estate and made it possible for Elsa, and for her friend and cohort John Reuter, to continue their collaborative work on the 20x24, along with Nafis Azad. In 2008, Dan generously gifted Elsa the camera she’d by then been working with for several years.

Elsa’s self-portraits on display here are selected from her complete body of work on the 20x24. These are “A-side” prints, so-called. What does Elsa mean by this term? Well, when she took portraits for clients, she typically took two shots. The client chose to keep what became, by definition, the A-side print, and Elsa retained the B-side (or several B-sides if she took more than her customary two shots). This concept of the “B-side” print was popularized by her friends (who also happened to be her regular portrait subjects) Errol Morris and Julia Sheehan, who made the 2016 documentary film *The B-Side: Elsa Dorfman’s Portrait Photography*. (You can see excerpts from that documentary at the Museum, as part of the Dorfman display.)

Elsa still has many A-sides done for herself rather than for clients, other than her self-portraits. These include portraits of our son Isaac Dorfman Silverglate and his wife Annette Morales and their two children Sarah and Seth, her husband (yours truly), the late poet Allen Ginsberg, and lots of other dear friends and colleagues who posed for her in either Cambridge or New York City.

Elsa's *self*-portraits are unique in that she has retained virtually all of them. And so the MFA crew was able to select, with assistance from Elsa's friend and cohort Margot Kempers (who probably knows Elsa's archive better than anyone), what they deemed the best of the Polaroid self-portraits, as well as a selection of black-and-white prints from *ELSA'S HOUSEBOOK*, to add to the Museum's own collection. From that group, the Museum staff, led by Anne Havinga, and with the assistance of her associate James Leighton, selected the prints included in this show. And, I should add, Museum Director Matthew Teitelbaum has been supportive of this project, as well as long-time Dorfman friend and essential MFA staffer Cliff Ackley. And one cannot omit thanking four donors who likewise have helped make Elsa's show possible—Dorfman friends and long-time photo subjects Lang Wheeler and Kathy Metcalfe, and Joe Azrack and Abigail Congdon. Additionally, Elsa's niece Elizabeth Power Robison has been essential in coordinating the establishment of the **Elsa Dorfman Fund for Photo Preservation**, to ensure the long-term survival of Elsa's work in the MFA's esteemed collection.

I cannot close without noting a particularly sweet aspect of this museum show. It seems Elsa has always loved the notion of "museum archive photographs," and so this day bears a particular resonance. Allow me to explain.

In her life before the Polaroid 20x24, Elsa worked in black-and-white, and she always says that she will be forever grateful to George Cope who, 55 years ago, handed her a Hasselblad camera to use. She developed and printed many hundreds – more likely thousands – of pictures, and then sold many of them from a pushcart in Harvard Square for anywhere from \$2 to \$5 each. When the police tried to chase her away, I had the duty—indeed the privilege—to come to the rescue, successfully arguing to the city's lawyer that photographs are *not* ordinary merchandise requiring a peddler's license, but rather are an *intellectual* product protected by the First

Amendment—hence no license nor permit from the city was required for this determined street vendor. Elsa then became somewhat of a fixture in the Square for several years, and she was able to bring in modest revenue that was critical at that time for her economic survival as an artist without, as she delicately put it, a *real* job.

And here is a framed black-and-white print that has been in our house for several decades, most recently reposing on my desk, staring me in the face day-in and day-out as I sit down to work. Elsa says that she does not know who took this excellent image—maybe it was Charlie Olchowski, she says, maybe someone else who gave her the print? It shows Elsa selling her prints out of her supermarket wagon in Harvard Square. Notice the promotional sign that she put up next to the supermarket wagon (thanks again to the First Amendment). The sign reads:

Elsa Dorfman / Museum Archive Photographs

Singular Opportunity / Harvard Square Only



“Museum Archive Photographs!” It is wonderful to know that dear Elsa’s life’s work really does include, finally, a substantial array of museum archive photographs! She has arrived!

Elsa and I thank all of you for showing up here today and helping Elsa celebrate this capstone of her career and her life’s work.

To quote Elsa, in her frequent use of a phrase she borrowed from her dear friend and photographic subject, the late poet Robert Creeley: Onward!