

# ***Volver (The Return)***

## **Judith Martinez Estrada**

*Volver (The Return)* presents an exploration of memory, identity, and the migrant experience through a mixed-media collection. The artist interprets and documents her ancestral apartment in Madrid through photography, video, and installation.

This space becomes a site for examining the complex layers of migration, trauma, and the fragmented self. Estrada's work invites viewers into a personal journey of reconnection and introspection, offering a reflective lens on the spaces we inhabit and the stories they hold.

### ***Layers of Memory***

*Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased.*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1974)

In June 2017, artist Judith Martinez Estrada decided to document the apartment her paternal family had been renting for over a century in the neighbourhood of El Retiro, Madrid. Having witnessed three births, two deaths, and all that the human life endures in between, the apartment as *lieu de mémoire* is where histories and memories overlap. As the relationship between the apartment and Martinez Estrada's grandparents, aunt and parents altered, so did the sheets of memories affected by decay, movement, and loss. The apartment was a cocoon sheltering Martinez Estrada's family from physical and emotional wear and perhaps the only unchanging entity in her parent's circular migration between Spain and Australia. What was a one-off documentation of the family's apartment became the catalyst in Martinez Estrada's practice that brings together personal and political histories alongside archival and digital artistic techniques.

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Although Martinez Estrada is primarily a digital printmaker, her process requires painstaking work with physical archives, including photographs, objects and documents, and extensive post-production work. Working with layers, she creates a temporal and spatial juxtaposition of memories and objects. Each layer in the works creates spaces for remembrances to be added, including ones that we do not know of yet. Layering allows multiple entry points and numerous recollections and half-rememberings to coexist. Arrangement of papers, digital photos and objects produces coatings that one needs to see over, peel through or imagine; perhaps looking a little longer might reveal something previously inconspicuous in the work.

Martinez Estrada acknowledges that memories are networked and co-created by individuals, institutions, and society. Her practice is not limited to her familial space of the Madrid apartment but burgeons to institutions, history, archives, and cartographic journeys. The works are larger than her family's history and encircle the social, cultural, and political consequences of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), a precursor to the Second World War. The images speak of the mnemonic price people pay for civil and political unrest, persecution, and censorship. While the Francoist dictatorship authorised what and who is memorialised, Martinez Estrada's process takes an expansive approach, including numerous people, organisations, and even landscapes. The tiering of memories then is not about factuality but devising affective and embodied spaces of Rilkean memories.

The expanded focus technique used in the production of *The Family Biography* provides the images with dimensions and depth that one did not think a photograph could provide. The collated documents and photographs present a collage offering fragments of information. Photos, notes, reports, and other documents held together by the rubber band are traces of the same person. It seems as though someone has tied the objects together with an intention that is not revealed to the audience. Perhaps the piles were put together in a hurry, like a bundle ready to be taken from one place to another or returned to the person to whom they belong. The deliberate prominence of the rubber band emphasises that the house in Madrid, where all these objects were found, binds together the erstwhile occupants and that its elasticity keeps them coming back.

A similar technique in *Unknown Portraits from a Family Archive* has a different effect. Here, the identities of the people are not known. There is a deliberate obscuring of the faces in these photographs as though too much visibility could harm them. They resist being known and, therefore, preserve their identity. On the other hand, the *Projection Prints* are images of Martinez Estrada's grandparents, Emilia and Ramon, projected on their bedroom curtains. The delicate curtains bear the weight of time and memories. Like a half-remembered or a half-forgotten memory, the spectral images of Emilia and Ramon could be fading or emerging, but nevertheless, their presence persists.

Martinez Estrada is an artist archivist embedded in time and memories that refuses the certainty of events and the lives of those she seeks to discover. By layering ephemerality in the fixity of photographs, a clear, whole picture refuses to emerge because there isn't one.

**Charu Maithani**

March 2024

**Judith Martinez Estrada** is a Spanish/Australian artist. Her creative practice explores the creation of counter-archives through the use of collective and historical memory and the retelling of narratives through the use and interpretation of documents, images, and artefacts found in the archive.

She is a PhD candidate at The University of New South Wales (UNSW), from which she also has a Master of Philosophy in Fine Arts and a Bachelor of Design. Her most recent exhibition is at L'Etno, Museum of Ethnography of Valencia in Spain.

## List of works

- 1 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Living room IV*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 33 x 50 cm, ed. 1/3, \$300
- 2 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Unknown Portraits/Retratos Desconocidos II*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 3 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Unknown Portraits/Retratos Desconocidos XIV*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 4 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Unknown Portraits/Retratos Desconocidos XVI*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 5 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Unknown Portraits/Retratos Desconocidos XXI*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 6 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Unknown Portraits/Retratos Desconocidos XIII*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 7 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Unknown Portraits/Retratos Desconocidos XI*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 8 Judith Martinez Estrada, *The Expedition*, 2023, video, NFS
- 9 Judith Martinez Estrada, *When God Left I*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 58 x 82 cm, ed. 1/3, \$350
- 10 Judith Martinez Estrada, *When God Left II*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 58 x 82 cm, ed. 1/3, \$350
- 11 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Family Biographies/Biografías Familiares IX*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag , 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 12 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Family Biographies/Biografías Familiares XI*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag , 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 13 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Family Biographies/Biografías Familiares III*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag , 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 14 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Family Biographies/Biografías Familiares VI*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag , 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 15 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Family Biographies/Biografías Familiares IV*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag , 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 16 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Family Biographies/Biografías Familiares VII*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag , 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 17 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Family Biographies/Biografías Familiares XII*, 2018, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag , 81 x 61 cm , ed. 1/3, \$400
- 18 Judith Martinez Estrada, *The Contract*, 2018, sublimation print on poly-cotton, 150 x 90 cm, ed. 1/3, \$600
- 19 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Picnic*, 2019, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 58 x 82 cm, ed. 1/3, \$400
- 20 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Ramon II*, 2019, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 58 x 82 cm, ed. 1/3, \$400
- 21 Judith Martinez Estrada, *Emilia*, 2019, archival pigment inks on Hahnemühle photo rag, 77 x 110 cm, ed. 1/3, \$500