

## Other People's Memories

By [GLORIA KESTENBAUM](#)

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How do you transcribe memories that aren't your own and pain you never felt? These are the subjects that [Miriam Mörsel Nathan](#) addresses in her moving and elegiac works, "I First Saw the World Through a Mosquito Net...", now on exhibit at the [Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association](#).

Nathan's palette of memories – both those that she remembers and those that she doesn't – ranges from her parents' pre-war lives in Czechoslovakia, to the Dominican Republic where she was born, to Virginia where she spent her childhood. Nathan is the child of survivors – her father escaped to the Dominican Republic, while her mother was sent to Theresienstadt – and her parents reunited after the war in the Dominican Republic.

The mosquito netting that covered her crib is the metaphoric center of her work, the veil that Nathan obsessively attempts to uncover in order to lay claim to the past that was denied her. A box of old family photos is her madeleine; sorting through these photos, she reincarnates the family she never knew, calling up, as Nathan describes it, "inherited memory."

In the Wedding Series, Nathan recreates her Uncle Josef's wedding – a wedding she never attended because he was killed before she was born. Nathan writes, "I became an interpreter of these images, trying to piece together a story." From a small photo, Nathan has created a series of images so enlarged that the original has disintegrated and only a blurry sense of occasion remains. Over and over, she examines this same event, superimposing a different detail in each piece; in one, white flowers such as a flower girl niece might throw overhang the canvas; in another, a proper Mitteleuropa doily establishes its presence and in yet another, a small stone sits atop the frame, a cemetery left behind. A scrap of white netting overlays each work, a wedding veil, a shroud, or perhaps the cloth hiding the mirror

in a house of mourning.

In another series, hearkening back to her own childhood, Nathan takes an opposite tack. Instead of the enlarged photos, which encourage inspection of each detail, the etchings of her Virginia life are small – only a little larger than snaps from the ubiquitous ‘50s Brownie camera. Unlike the Wedding Series pieces, however, these works are unpeopled. To this viewer, the pieces felt like images of desolation and death. The artist, however, sees them differently. “The series in the beginning are darker because I don’t remember them exactly but they get lighter as I remember more. They’re nostalgic but not sad.”

*“I First Saw the World Through a Mosquito Net...” by Miriam Mörsel Nathan is on view at the [Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association](#), 321 East 73rd Street, 3rd Floor, New York City, through July 14, 2014.*

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