

**Photography****Gillian Laub and Diana Markosian at the ICP — family albums**

The photographers' retrospectives at New York's International Center of Photography can feel like scenes from a soap opera

**Ariella Budick** 13 HOURS AGO

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Gillian Laub's 'Chappaqua backyard' (2000) © Gillian Laub

Do you ever feel like a character in the soap opera version of your own life? The photographers Gillian Laub and [Diana Markosian](#) turned their autobiographies into museum-quality *fotonovelas*, chronicling their separate family dramas in intimate, hyperbolic photographs that whirl together fiction and memory, love and rage, and the ever-vexed question of what is America, anyway?

The International Center of Photography, which has finally settled in the home it deserves on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, has mounted a pair of retrospectives that barely touch yet seem like pendants. Laub's series, "[Family Matters](#)", looks flamboyantly staged but (mostly) isn't; Markosian's "[Santa Barbara](#)" feels like a diary of snapshots, but was elaborately scripted and produced. (They're both also available as books, published by Aperture.)

"Family Matters" begins with a story. Scene: a winter's day in 1999, outside the old ICP on upper Fifth Avenue. Laub and a group of fellow photo students are huddled in the cold for a smoke when one of them sneeringly points out a group of "vulgar women in their fancy fur coats". Laub registers the garishly lipsticked gaggle and nods in agreement. Then, to her horror, she recognises them as her mother, aunt and grandmother, in from the suburbs for a day of culture.



Gillian Laub, 'My cousin Jamie with captive audience' (2003) © Gillian Laub





Gillian Laub's 'Mom and Dad and the wedding planner' (2008) © Gillian Laub

In the ensuing two decades, even as she used her lens to wrestle with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and racism in the American South, Laub struggled with an even more confounding set of problems: relatives. By turns hilarious, sad, intimate, angry, compassionate and excessive, “Family Matters” escorts the viewer into backyard get-togethers, holiday dinners and the photographer’s own muddled feelings. Her anthropological eye is tempered by affection and stoked with insider fury: these people are *her* people and, at the same time, utterly foreign.

Grandpa Irving, decked out in skimpy zebra-striped bathing trunks and gripping a plastic watering can, greets us at the entrance to his abundant vegetable garden. Thick white hair curls down to his chin, rose-tinted aviator glasses frame his friendly eyes. Flecks of gold around his wrists and neck gleam in the afternoon light. Laub relishes the mixture of flamboyance and tenderness.



Gillian Laub's 'Grandpa helping Grandma out' (1999) © Gillian Laub

Long-haired Irving is the star of the show's first act, a benevolent and sensual patriarch. He appears again on his 85th birthday in 2003, a lavish celebration in Naples, Florida, for which he imported more than two dozen descendants. He sits enthroned on a plastic beach chair, tanned belly tucked into a tight Gucci swimsuit, legs spread wide around a low table where a pile of fries waits to be consumed. Irving has just chomped on a burger and a crumb rests on his lower lip, yet somehow he manages to retain his look of regal good humour. When he died in 2007, the family lost its beating heart.

**Her sister sets her place  
with Trump/Pence cups  
and napkins, a poke that  
feels like a knife-thrust**



His death disturbed the balance that Laub had struck between censoriousness and acceptance, and her photographs became more acerbically critical. Act two begins with her marriage to the son of Israeli socialist farmers; the subtitle comes from her new mother-in-law's comment on the opulent wedding: "This is what happens when you raise your children in America."

From then on, Laub turned a cooler eye on her clan, though at times she obscures the chronology. In a photograph taken in 2009 but tucked into the book's first part, a grim-faced uncle in a turquoise bolo tie stands before an ornate fireplace, complete with marble putti. His equally sombre wife occupies one antique gilt chair with tiger-hide upholstery; a small dog takes the other. The atmosphere is one of deluxe misery.



Gillian Laub's 'Slater with Trump mask' (2019) © Gillian Laub

The saga's sundering climax is the election of Donald Trump, which horrified Laub and delighted her family. Suddenly, a battle over taste becomes a war about fundamental values. Rage on both sides spills over into Thanksgiving dinner, when her sister sets her place with Trump/Pence cups and napkins, a poke that feels like a knife-thrust. Laub grabs her camera and snaps a picture of the food congealing on her plate, surrounded by MAGA memorabilia.

She's disconcertingly honest about her own hypocrisy — she marches in Black Lives Matter protests and teaches her children to kneel in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick (at her father's 75th birthday party), but she sends her kids to a New York private school paid for by her parents.



Gillian Laub's 'Mom after yoga' (2020) © Gillian Laub

Although she presents her photos as documentary, she is not above restaging the occasional fortuitous moment. One day, Laub saw her mother, dressed in white and stretched out on a white carpet for a yoga session, a furry white pillow under her knees. The giant TV on the wall was tuned to Fox News, where her favourite white supremacist was holding forth. Laub didn't have her camera, only a phone. "It was such a perfect moment that encapsulated everything," she later told an interviewer. "You couldn't make it up. But then I had to recreate it."



“I had to recreate it” could also be Markosian’s mantra. Since her family life, a mixture of the improbable and mundane, went largely unrecorded, she reconceived it as a fan-fiction subplot for *Santa Barbara*, the long-running American soap she watched as a child in Moscow. To ensure stylistic continuity between history and fiction, she recruited an honest-to-goodness *SB* writer, Lynda Myles, to come up with the scenario.



Diana Markosian's 'Mom by the Pool' (2019) © Diana Markosian

Scene: interior of a dingy Moscow apartment, 1996. A young single mother, Svetlana, watches the sun-bleached show with her two children. “I want to be with those people,” she says. Soon, she advertises herself as a mail-order bride. One of the many men who responds has a return address in her idea of a magical kingdom: Santa Barbara, California. Svetlana and the kids take off, and seven-year-old Diana is transformed into an American kid, with a new American father.

Markosian’s chronicle of that dislocation has the feel of a homemade album streaked with a showbiz sensibility. Moody scenes mingle with blurry snapshots and pages of dialogue. The series opens with a jumble of house slippers on a worn wood floor, a trudge through a trash-strewn industrial landscape, a jostling crowd panic-buying loaves of bread. Then: azure pools, wall-to-wall carpeting, presents at Christmas and, finally, mother and daughter in a motel room, alone — another marriage ended.



Diana Markosian's 'My Father on My Birthday' (2019) © Diana Markosian



Diana Markosian's 'Mom Alone' (2019) © Diana Markosian

Perhaps the most poignant picture is the one of four heavy-set middle-aged men in a waiting room, perusing pages from a script; they are auditioning for a role in the very show we are watching. Together, they form a composite portrait of Markosian's provisional Californian dad, a beefy apparition who changed her life then vanished back into his own, like an actor going off duty.



Different though they are, the two exhibitions use candour and wit to exorcise old resentments. Laub felt betrayed by her parents' materialism, Markosian by her mother's fantasies. It took decades for both artists to develop empathy, to understand how hard their families laboured to become American, and to recycle the pain they inflicted into creative fuel.

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