

Old Age Is a Mirror, and That's Why "It's Difficult to Accept the Elderly"

Ten years ago, Vida Yovanovich decided to "take on" old age. As a child, this professional photographer was both fascinated and repelled by the idea of the "passage of time." Though not a self-declared feminist, her work has always addressed women's issues, concerns and changes. "I began photographing old age as a continuation of my work, as my own fear and my way of confronting it. [...] In retrospect, my work has always had to do with time, wear and abandonment." Rather than looking for the theme's "positive side," Yovanovich focused her work on a small nursing home behind the Basilica of Guadalupe, where "the doctors appreciated photography and allowed me to spend time there."

She recalls, during her visits, her many small victories: "Vida! You're sitting on one of the beds! You've managed to touch one of them!" Four years ago, she presented an exhibition which is still touring, and in 1997 she published her book *Cárcel de los sueños* with text by Elena Poniatowska.

The circular installation *Spent Time*, presented last year at the Havana Biennial, deals with the general theme of old age.

Yovanovich explains: "After my self-portraits, this circle is perhaps closest to my heart because it is my own family. I appear with my mother in a very small image within the piece. I had never worked with installation before. I did not take the photographs with the idea of unifying them, but rather to create a document. When I started to work on the project, the images began to come together. I did my first photomontages for a show in 1993. I had no experience with cutouts, and I remember what it felt like the first time I took scissors to one of my photographs. It came easier after a while, but the first cuts were hard to make. When I started to think about how to work with the piece, the photographs started to coalesce.

"I need to take distance to be able to really look at my images. I've always worked this way. At first they come as a shock, until I bring them out a second time again."

Spectators go through a black curtain to access the exhibition space at the Centro de la Imagen, where they find themselves on the threshold of a world of naphthalene and loneliness recreated by the photographer. Once their eyes adjust to the dark, on the left they can see a section of a living room complete with lamp, candles and a flower vase whose contents Yovanovich changes on a regular basis. A mirror is hanging overhead.

After overcoming the initial feelings of “anxiety” brought on by entering a dark space and ducking one’s head, one finds oneself in the middle of “ an image spinning around and around. It is a circle of time, that has no beginning or end.” The spectator has been “encircled.” Music also helps to create a certain mood. On the way out, who can resist the temptation of looking at oneself in the dim light mirror?

Inventing the Notion that Nursing Homes Are for the Best

“I’m fascinated by mirrors. I use them in a lot of my photographs and self-portraits. For me, old age is a mirror, and this I feel is why we have a hard time accepting our elders, because we see ourselves reflected in them. Subconsciously, perhaps, this is why our close relatives may end up in homes for the aged. We invent the notion that care will be better there because there will be a doctor available. But in truth, it is we, who cannot deal with this constant mirror image.”

If addressing the subject of old age started out as a kind of therapy, over the years it has become a neurotic obsession. Yovanovich recalls approaching the National Institute for the Elderly in the early days of the project. “In the end, this project obtained its funding from FONCA (National Fund for Culture and the Arts). But you have no idea how many doors I knocked on.”

(Spent Time has extended its run until July 5 at the Centro de la Imagen, Plaza de la Ciudadela 2, Historic Center, Mexico City.)

Merry MacMasters, “La senectud es un espejo, por eso ‘es difícil aceptar a los viejos,’”
La Jornada (June 30, 1998).

Translated by Michelle Suderman.