

## **Keeping Watch:**

### **A Conversation with Frank Rodick**



Detail from *Joseph (who can be trusted?)*, 2016

*Born to a family of booksellers in Montreal, Frank Rodick creates photo-based work that engages the worlds of acute subjectivity and intense emotion. The issues in his imagery, coming from the intimacies of his life, are elemental and primal: fear, mortality, and trauma, all seen through the lens of memory and the subconscious, and manifested in expressionistic representations of the human face and figure. For years, he has plied the photographic medium unconventionally, integrating analogue and digital photography with film and video, and drawing inspiration from multiple art forms, particularly painting and literature. [From <https://frankrodick.com/about>]*

Looking at Rodick's photographs, I've never been able to forget them; but also, I've never been sure whether I was a spectator, a witness, or an uneasy participant in the larger drama of mind and body that his work presents. While we've had many discussions, the conversations here took place in June of 2023, and I began by asking him specifically about three recent and highly personal projects: **Frances** [2011-2014], **Joseph** [2016], and **untitled selves** [2017].

#### **Frances**

*When my mother died in June 2010, something opened up. Until her death I had no idea I would do this project. But both my parents were now dead, and this was somehow a catalyst—as someone once said, “you need to make art as if both your parents are dead.”*

*They called me in Toronto at about 3:00 pm and I got to Montreal around 11:00. My mother had just died, but I was able to photograph her on her deathbed as I had my father, six years before. That earlier image had somehow broken the ice; and looking at these images of my mother I knew I wanted to do something with them: starting with her death, I went back to her life.*

*Doing this, I felt a solemnity, but not a reverence...I felt I could pull something from all this that would express something about myself and my relationship with my mother, which had been much more intense than that with my father.*

*I had already started looking through my parents' archives: "Revisitations" came out of this, and later, "I live there now", two smaller, somewhat transitional projects. With "Frances" I wanted to try something else, and I began by using techniques of adding texture and altering color. I wasn't tied to reality, and I worked on one piece at a time, starting with a grid image created from her death portrait [see "97532, no. 1" at <https://frankrodick.com/frances>]. By finishing that image, I knew where I was going; I was able to start on the next five, layering type and quotations almost chaotically onto photographs of my mother as a much younger person.*

*Layering an image gives you incredible power: it's something you can only approximate in the darkroom, and it gives you infinite possibilities—it mirrors dreaming, but you can also get lost in anxiety or uncertainty.*

*A year after the first grid images, I had five layered portraits and three vertical diptychs; two years after that, I made the images for "persona", and then "parade for the blind", which completed the series. The images expressed what I wanted them to—and also, I had reached a state of finality.*



**Detail from *Frances (red pearls)*, 2012**

### **Joseph**

*Again, I never thought I would do it—I didn't want to give him that; our relationship had been very difficult. But I kept seeing photographs of him in the archive. Family life—my family life—the pictures were there. And I had been working with photographs of myself as a kid that my father had taken, as well as exploring the idea of two-dimensional sculpting, covering a sheet with blackness, and then scraping it away to reveal an image.*

*I started to try things and used the deathbed image as a catalyst. While it goes last, it started a series: I kept asking myself what I might make from it. He had left notes of his last words: “It’s all over”; “I wanted to see”; “Who can be trusted?”; “Did I fall?”; and lastly, “I am not ready to go”—this was the one element I used to unify the five pictures that went with the death mask, including one image of my father as a boy, holding a teddy bear.*

*I was a bit more confident with this work, and the process was somewhat more linear, but I was still experimenting. The use of color was instinctive rather than calculated: I was trying out blues and greens—partly because our relationship was colder, partly because I was trying to approximate the pallor of a corpse without being garish. The work is subjective, not realistic, but it expressed what I felt, both when my father died and in the years after.*

Rodick’s 2019 essay, *Notes on Making My Father’s Portrait*, can be accessed on his website at <https://frodick.medium.com/notes-on-making-my-fathers-portrait-7bd923e0d747>.

Toward the end of this essay, he wrote:

*When I look at the six Joseph images, what do I see?*

*I see the human face of time, that what looks and feels like a long life is just one more cipher. I see the past and present, coexisting and coalescing, swimming through each other. I see that the child — standing stiffly next to a borrowed teddy bear — is also the dying old man who wants to see one more day. That we try not to think of these things because we’re afraid we can’t bear them, though we can, and much more.*



*I am not ready to go*

Details from *Joseph, Last Words, 2016*

### **untitled selves**

*I had worked through projects on my mother, my father and myself as a kid; I wanted to construct something with me as an adult. I started by trying the same techniques, and then experimenting. My question was how to titrate something down, down to essentials; but I was working back from white as opposed to black. At first, I was trying to find out if there was anything there—there are not that many comparators to my work—and eventually I thought, “there is something here.” I was exploring how to literally strip back the image as another way of sculpting, uncovering things that felt very dissociated and difficult. In a state of exhaustion, you don’t censor yourself; you work towards expressing a condition.*

*This is different from creating a narrative: it's not as tangible, or as resolved. I didn't really finish this series, but I did say, "I have worked this long enough," and did not feel any need to make any more images or to simplify them any further. I thought this might be the ending of personal work; I wasn't sure.*

Again, Rodick's statement about this project provides clarity, particularly about the reversal of his method: see <https://frodick.medium.com/untitled-selves-5acf2f123f65>.

Here, he writes:

*I eliminated colour. I gave up on text, which I'd considered at first. I discarded or crippled other elements that some people say are key to portraiture: pose, background, lighting, context, objects. What wasn't there was as definitional as anything that was. What was left I could move around as I pleased, like the white sand I remember those monks in Kyoto gently pushing with their rakes.*

*I sometimes say that my work beginning with the Frances pictures makes up an "alternative family album." But there's nothing in the last self-portraits that returns to my family. I wonder if I'm proclaiming my rejection using that most disparaging and disrespectful of methods (in photography and life): erasure.*



Detail from *untitled self #40*, 2017

*There was a four-year gap between this work and my next project, "The Moons of Saturn". I wanted to work again, and during the pandemic had been looking at vernacular prints; over time I did about seventy studies of a small number of found images. I wanted to do something more peaceful, yet at the same time life was very difficult. And it was the fastest I had ever worked even though the ideas had been percolating for a long time... the project felt like some kind of dream that I had pieced together—I was laying down something for myself to see, and maybe for others as well.*

*You go through everything, work the image, strip out what is inessential, amplify what is essential. In the end, everything is meant to be there, whether intentional or not. Images reflect life, but they are also unlike life...art exists in a rectangle that you try to control. And pictures should have a secret—I like it if an image tells me something I didn't know, or had forgotten.*



For more of Frank Rodick's work and writing, including information on his newly-published monograph of work from "*The Moons of Saturn*", with text by Nancy Brokaw, please visit <https://frankrodick.com/>



Frank Rodick, *tall-girl-v1.02*, 2023