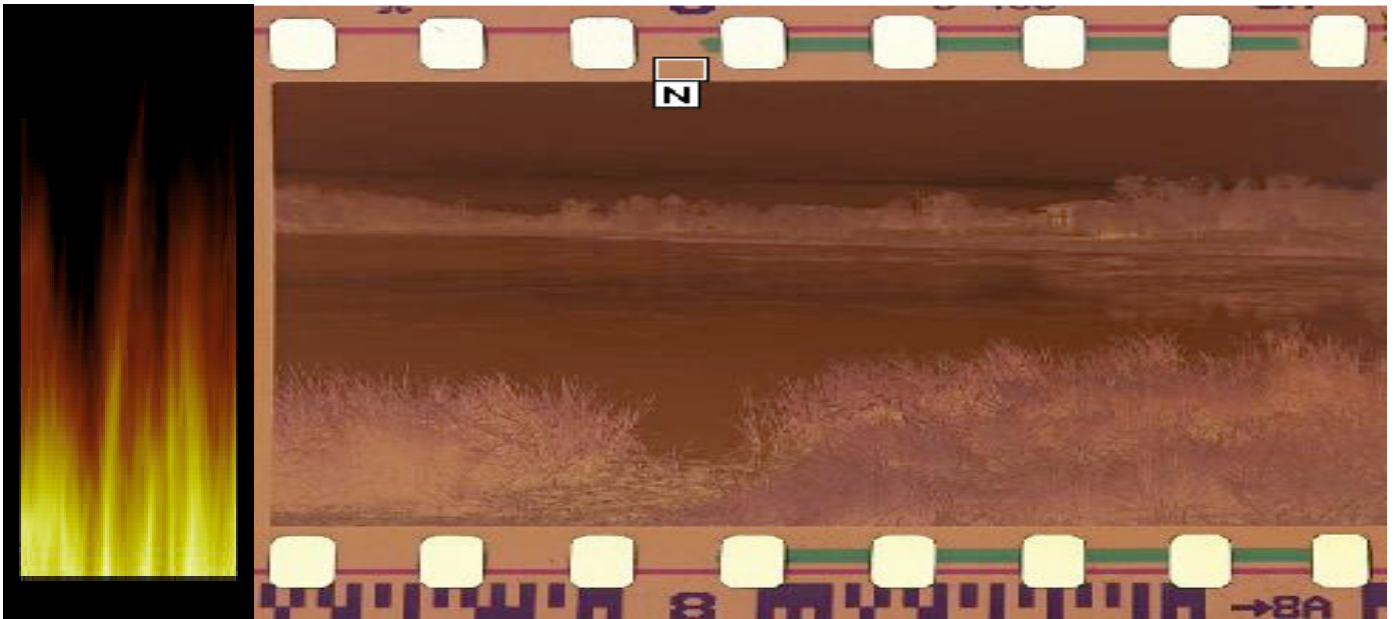


salvaged OBJECTS



Things We Think With glorianna davenport

I stare at the first photograph that I have pulled out of a small cardboard box labeled “Glorianna to make copies.” It is a picture of my father in his youth by a lake with a dog. I never knew my father had a dog. Three years ago, I promised my siblings that I would digitize a large collection of memorabilia—images and videos. For this, I recently added a scanner to my image processing setup at our cranberry farm. My promise still unfulfilled, guilt is balanced with the anticipation of new discoveries. As I continue to muse, the image of my father is transformed into bits.

The small cardboard box is filled with an unruly group of “most wanted” photographs selected by my siblings as we painstakingly divided up family heirlooms after selling my mother's house in 1999. My mother did not choose to be part of these final decisions. She already had her fill of dealing with the remains of her family heritage 10 years earlier, when the house my grandparents had built in the 1930's -- in

which we had spent our childhood summers, and into which my parents moved after my grandparents passed away -- was consumed by a devastating fire.

The reaction of survivors to the sudden and near total loss of personally meaningful possessions can create a sort of frenzy. In our family, my mother and all of her children contributed to clearing and then to combing the site, carefully freeing larger and smaller artifacts from the debris of our lost home. For the two months following the fire, we each, at different times, searched the charred remains for anything that might be recoverable and threw the rest into a large dumpster.

When I arrived at the recovery scene, the smell of wet char was overwhelming. My older sister and her husband had turned a small space in the old library into a conservation lab. This room was the least damaged by the fire; however, the water that poured through the floorboards as the firemen fought the flames above had flooded the bookshelves and drawers, the boxes with letters dating from the early 1800's forward, and almost a century of family photographs. The image of my father that I have just scanned is one of the few surviving fragments of this 20th century visual collection.

The salvaging of paper artifacts requires a different kind of patience from that required by larger objects such as pianos, sofas, and china. With paper, the injury caused by heat, water, and falling debris are soon augmented by mildew if the paper is not properly dried. In this fire, the damaged pages numbered in the thousands; conservation required each page to be separated and dried before sorting into collection categories. That any paper trail of our family history exists today reflects the painstaking work of my older sister and brother-in-law.

The fascinations of our youth give shape to our future passions. As I began my efforts to digitize my family's history, I realize anew that this box holds not only a collection of photographs but keys to many of my later life decisions. Photographs led me to cameras and over the years cameras became an object I could think with. I could think about light and shadow, about composing the frame, and about what it meant to document the world. I could think about the chemistry and the mechanics of editing. I remember the brown leather case of the Rolleiflex sitting on my mother's bureau. I can smell the chemicals that pervaded the photo shop on Madison Avenue. I don't know how old I was when I first looked into the lens and

noticed the sight and sound of the cu-chunk-click made by the shutter mechanism. The mystery of this mechanism continued to fascinate me for many years.

Slowly I separate a few large square black and white prints that have stuck together. Who is this strikingly beautiful woman wearing a luscious lipstick and bending over two young girls and a boy dressed in party clothes and wearing paper party hats?. The youngest girl -- possibly three -- plays with beads. The older of the two, perhaps five, holds the hand of an older boy in a checked jacket and bow tie. Another boy stands in the distance. Only the eldest girl looks toward the camera: where are the others looking? What was the event? I think my mother may have taken photographs for other families; perhaps this photograph was not even taken in our home.

Other pictures seem more familiar. A laughing child about to spray water across a familiar terrace. This is clearly me. A woman bounces a laughing baby on her knee. I easily identify my aunt, who later died of cancer in our home; an image of my father on a sailboat; a picture of my youngest sister acting as Mary in a school play.

Reaching into the box once more, I pull out a narrow album of Polaroid portraits, its covers long since lost, its pages formatted with cascading plastic envelopes held together by a plastic binding. This album used to sit on the piano in my grandparents' living room. Most of the portraits were taken by my grandfather. In a moment, I am back at the site of the fire: the buckled floorboards, the drenched piano, the charred Polaroid camera. And then just as quickly, the album becomes a prism through which I see that house and its objects before anyone imagined there would be a fire: the framed documents dating back to the founding fathers, the music chest, the way my grandfather hid modern electronic contraptions in two-hundred year old chests.

My mind flashes back to my [interactions with my] grandfather and his Polaroid. By the time I was eight or nine, my grandfather had become mentor to my technological bent. For years it had been my grandfather's practice to take portraits -- group shots of the family celebrating one of many summer birthdays, as well as individual portraits of each grandchild year by year, ususally taken out on the grass "circle" in front of the house. My brother John sits next to a large pumpkin in the circle; my younger sister Sharon hugs a pumpkin and stares wistfully into space; my sister Ann sits on a large rock in Maine; my older sister Susie is posed next to the sewing box

she had won in a sewing competition. What do these images tell of the uneven, often difficult roads that lay ahead for each of us?

I do not remember exactly when, but one summer I discovered that the way to avoid being in the picture was to take the picture. My grandfather, an electrical engineer trained at MIT, loved gadgets and regularly purchased and experimented with the latest Polaroid cameras. I must have enticed him to let me borrow one. He seemed to enjoy teaching me about the nature of the lens and how best to frame a shot. However, he soon tired of my using up the costly Polaroid film packs for experiments that did not yield images that he found meaningful, and gave me my own 35 mm camera -- a PONY IV -- for my birthday. With this, I was able to control depth of field with focal length and shutter speed and could experiment more freely with composition and subject.

Several summers of intensive photographic activity ensued. Since sending photographs away for factory processing was expensive and did not allow maximum control over the image, my grandfather decided to set up a small darkroom in the bathroom across from his lab. This experimental operation irked my grandmother who -- especially in the heat of the summer -- could not tolerate the smell of the chemicals that overran the house. My grandfather prevailed: I spent the next two or three summers avidly recording the world in black and white, processing rolls of negatives, and exploring the disciplines by which one selects and then controls the printed image.

Raw images, like all other artifacts, can be flawed in execution or in the context; the editing function allows us to pick, choose, and modify content as we examine each image for its evocative value. These early explorations served me well in my adult career as I moved into film and interactive video, seeking a better understanding of how stories are made and shared.

The process of recovering from the house fire has brought me in touch with old lessons: Not all documents are worth salvaging, but most are, or the next generation of our family will have less physical evidence to reconstruct the tale of our past.

I will no doubt digitize all the images that were "most wanted" if for no other reason than it offers some flexibility for reconsideration. However when it comes to

printing and framing the "story" I will no doubt be more selective. The editor would in me, picking through the debris after the fire, is uniquely positioned. Having found the charred but no longer functioning Polaroid camera, I could choose, if reluctantly, to relegate it to the dumpster as I now can navigate through its images, developed, digitized and jostling for position in some future album.



glorianna davenport is Principal Research Scientist at the MIT Media Laboratory