

Nita's Archive

Ellen Nolan

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Four years ago my Aunt Brenda gave me a suitcase containing my Great Aunt Nita Harvey's archive. In 1933 Nita was discovered through a beauty contest in London, summoned to Hollywood and signed to Paramount Pictures, USA. Before, during, and after her signing, Nita was prepared for performing by her mother, Ma Harvey, who photographed her constantly.

I have been working with Nita's archive in my photographic practice to create a meditation on photography and performance, from both a family and an industry perspective. Nita's archive is extensive; Paramount Studio press photographs and negatives, industry press photographs, hundreds of posed portraits of Nita taken by her mother, family photographs, and a two-minute 35 mm nitrate Hollywood casting film.

Nita's rich archive also consists of newspaper and magazine articles, an album of press cuttings made by Nita, personal letters, love letters, fan letters, address books, passports, business cards, telegrams, diaries, a commissioned weekly diary for *Film Pictorial* magazine, notebooks, menus, bills, work contracts, work correspondence, drawings and personal effects (including ten pairs of assorted arm-length gloves) and still scenes taken from Nita's film performances whilst signed to Paramount and Columbia Pictures.

I am exploring the difference between the commercial and domestic approaches to making photographs within the archive, and questioning if they change the reading of the photograph, and exploring the performance aspect within it. The project is an ongoing exploration of Nita's archive.

My interest in Nita's performance aspect within the commercial element of the photographs and films stem from my 15-year professional experience as a portrait and fashion photographer for magazines including *British Vogue* and *i-D*, where I began to understand the labored construction involved in the making of the commercial image. Being related to Nita, my interest in Nita's domestic family portraits taken by her mother has developed alongside my experience as a mother photographing my own daughter, who, like Nita, *performs* for the camera.

The force behind the lens depends on the relationship with the subject and the vision of the photographer; as does the shift that takes place during shooting between the subject and photographer.

The exchange is dependent on many things but the ultimate goal is perhaps the same; to get the best, most lucid and most magical performance possible. I have been there, photographing up-and-coming performers and models, and the image depends on the dynamic achieved together. Of course technicalities are important but it doesn't matter how much production value goes into the shoot – if the magic isn't there between the photographer and their subject, it shows in the resulting images, whether commercial or not.

Is it about understanding your subject, perhaps offering them a safe platform on which to perform? How does that platform differ according to the context of the photograph? How is the performance then tailored?

The subject usually grasps at keeping their vision of their own image, whilst the photographer powerfully pushes forward their own interpretation. The negotiating that takes place “in camera” will be greatly aided by an agreed (or unspoken) vision beforehand that is honored both in camera and in the edit.

The images here begin to explore the use of commercial and domestic photography both as a means of representation and as a meditation on photography and image performance itself.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

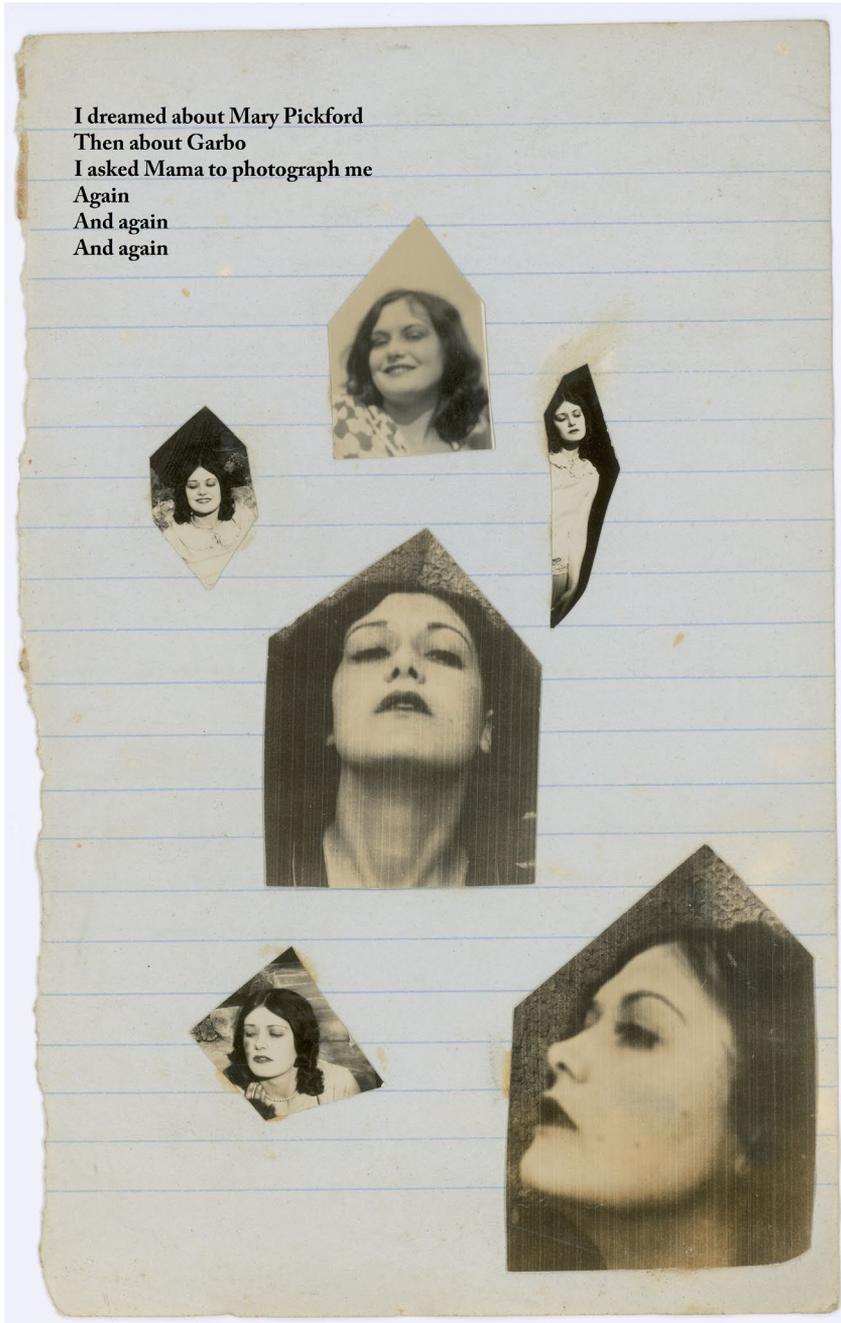
Notes

Ellen Nolan is an artist and lecturer. Her practice explores representation and performance within the domestic and constructed image. These ideas are explored here within her latest body of work, *Nita's Archive*.

She has exhibited photographic works in the UK and internationally including at The Photographers Gallery, Four Corners Gallery and The National Portrait Gallery, where she has five works housed in their collection. She lives and works in London.



I was born in Golders Green. Neither of my parents was connected to the stage, though my mother has admitted very secretly to having a passion to be so when young! You see, my grandmother was a famous singer, but she never would let mother go near the "terrible" boards.









Platform stop en route to L.A.
The train rocks crazily
Today I saw my first real cowboy
And he looked so sad



