



Fun Home

August 1 – October 4, 2015

NASHER
MUSEUM OF ART AT DUKE UNIVERSITY

nasher.duke.edu/funhome

Copies of *Fun Home* are available for purchase in the Nasher Museum Store.

COVER IMAGE: Patrick Hughes, *Rainbow Draped Over Chair* (detail) from the portfolio *The Domestic Life of the Rainbow*, 1979. Screenprint on paper, edition 45/120, 7 x 4 ¾ inches (17.8 x 12.1 cm). Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Gift of Mr. Jerome Singer, 1980.107.1.1. © Patrick Hughes.

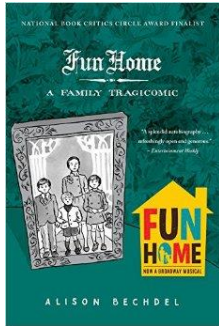
This installation was inspired by Alison Bechdel's graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), the 2015 Common Experience summer reading book for incoming first-year students at Duke. The works on display here reflect themes found throughout *Fun Home*, including family, death, gender, sexuality, feminism, and identity. Members of the Duke community from a variety of academic and administrative departments have offered their personal reflections on some of the works. Their thoughts are shared in the following pages. The installation checklist can be found at the end of this booklet.

Merging the genres of comics and memoir, *Fun Home* follows Bechdel's fraught relationship with her father, an English teacher and director of a small-town Pennsylvania funeral home. Alison and her family call the funeral home "Fun Home." As a child, Alison struggles against expectations of how girls should dress and act. In college, she comes out as a lesbian. Shortly after telling her parents, her father is killed by a truck, and Alison discovers that he was a closeted gay man. She must then re-evaluate who she understood her father to be.

Caption information about artworks featured in this booklet may be found in the checklist on pages 20-24.

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College is a time where young adults can engage in self-exploration as they gain independence and start to become authors of their own lives. In Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, the theme of authorship pervades on multiple levels. The young Bechdel uses literature and the authors that craft such art as channels through which she can comprehend her family dynamics and express her emerging identity. Throughout the novel, Bechdel connects with her father and explores her sexuality by drawing parallels with the written art of literary greats. She is both able to understand her father and herself more

deeply with the help of literature. As she makes discoveries related to her self and her family, it is also important to remember that Bechdel is a college student for much of the text.

In college student development theory, Marcia Baxter Magolda defines self-authorship as “the capacity to internally define their own beliefs, identity, and relationships” (p. xvi). As college students journey toward self-authorship, they begin to answer the following three questions: “How do I know,” “who am I,” and “what relationships do I want with others?” (p. 4). While college students wrestle with those questions, Baxter Magolda argues that they move through phases that begin with “following external formulas” where they look to others for approval and move closer toward “becoming the author of one’s life” (p. 40).

By coming out as a lesbian and confronting her father’s secret truth, Bechdel grapples with these very questions while she simultaneously moves through the phases of her journey toward self-authorship. Though the Bechdel depicted in *Fun Home* arguably spends most of her time questioning aspects of her life and identity in the “crossroads” (Baxter Magolda) phase of her journey toward self-authorship, the Bechdel authoring this graphic novel has indeed reached a true sense of self-authorship by using the artistic medium of text and graphic elements to define herself and her story in a way that only she can.

Work Cited:

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004). *Making Their Own Way: Narratives for Transforming Higher Education to Promote Self-development*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

– Nicole Ponticorvo



Like several pieces of art in the installation, Matisse's *Reclining Woman* suggests female eroticism. But it remains mixed, ambiguous, even mysterious, in part because its medium offers few details and in part because the image scans differently on the vertical, as it is hung here, and on the horizontal. Please take a moment to look at it from both directions to appreciate the change.

The woman in the drawing appears comfortably unaware of the artist's gaze or of the viewer's. Fringed with luscious lashes, her downcast eyes regard what at first seems to be a mirror image of herself but instead (note the curved edges), must be a drawing of herself or, perhaps—though it seems less likely—that of another woman with similar hair. We have, then, a lovely woman in a negligee (viewed vertically, she might be nude) regarding not the artist or the viewer, but herself. *Reclining Woman* contrasts with celebrated paintings such as Ingres' *Odalisque* or Manet's *Olympia*, in which an eroticized woman gazes frankly back out of the canvas.

With the simplest of gestures, Matisse generates the kind of repetition we see when we look into a mirror with a mirror behind us. The French call such repetition a “mise en abyme”—a potentially infinite regress. The theme recalls the contemplation of herself and of the past that Alison Bechdel undertakes in *Fun Home*, a graphic novel which, like Matisse's sketch, has been drawn in black and white, with pen and ink. From one angle, the novel tells the story of Alison's coming of age; from another, it reveals her father's secret history: that doubleness resides as well in the book's subtitle: “A Family Tragicomic.”

Despite its compact size, the drawing includes Matisse's typical use of pattern on pattern. The background echoes, for example, the forms of the woman's body and her strikingly rendered, stylized hair. The center contains a frieze-like motif that evokes the lush oriental carpets that surround many of Matisse's painterly nudes. If you view the image on the horizontal, the frieze becomes the border of a pillow on the woman's bed. But *Reclining Nude* reminds me most of the striking frames in *Fun Home* when the ten-year-old Alison sees a butch-looking delivery woman wearing “men's clothes,” a mannish haircut, and a ring of keys and feels “a surge of joy.” Like the woman in Matisse's drawing, Alison contemplates parts of herself of which she may previously have been unaware.

– Marianna Torgovnick



I saw my dad for the first time when I was 28 years old. I mean really saw him. I saw the lived experience in every dimple of his face, his eyebrows are my eyebrows, and his fingernails are shaped exactly like mine. His hand rested in mine for the first time since I was a kid.

Somehow, I ended up in the post-surgery intensive care unit with my dad after the magicians/superheroes (read: surgeons/doctors) removed much of his cancered liver in a ten-hour surgery. Not my brother who grew up in my dad's house or my sister who is the epitome of a daddy's girl, but me—the oldest daughter of the ex-wife. The first team of doctors said hospice should be called in for dad's stage IV colon cancer that spread to his liver. This team took out five-eighths of his liver. I didn't know the liver could be divided by eighths—it can. I watched my dad sleep/rest/writhe in considerable discomfort for a long time that night, probably two or three hours, before I dozed off. I really saw my dad that night and saw myself in him like never before.

Viewing the Warhol photos, both *Steve Rubell* and *Nude Model (Victor Hugo)*, I imagine Alison sorting through old family photos—finding snapshots of him and Roy. Alison saw her dad. She identified herself in her dad. The photos helped Alison understand her father the same way a night in the ICU did with my dad. She and her dad connected in ways she never imagined. However, their connection was not fully realized before his death. She described her relationship with her dad as, “Close. But not close enough.”

Like Alison and Bruce, dad's ICU reunion with me “was not the sobbing, joyous reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus.” My dad and I are close, but not close enough.

– Kati Cadenhead

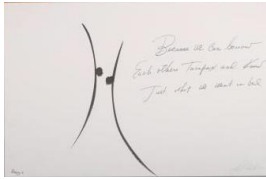


According to Michael Cerveris, who won the 2015 best actor Tony award for playing the closeted gay father in the Broadway musical *Fun Home*, “Our show is about home; it’s about finding who you are.” Both Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and the Patrick Hughes’s *Rainbow Draped Over Chair* resonate with this statement. Perception and reality are at play in both works, in much the same way a towel may simultaneously be a colorful rainbow and a funeral home also a fun or not so fun home. Things in life are often less, more, and sometimes profoundly different than what they seem to be, changing from moment to moment.

In Hughes’s screenprint, we see a brightly colored towel on a chair in an empty room—with the simple juxtaposition of elements posing questions about perception, reality, subjectivity, and objectivity. As part of a portfolio Hughes labeled *Domestic Life of the Rainbow*, this piece resonates in an interesting and artful way with Bechdel’s graphic novel, with a central unifying theme of discovering complicated and constantly changing identities, whether with objects or individuals.

In some of his other work, Hughes utilizes the “reverspective” artistic technique he created, an optical illusion on a three-dimensional surface where the parts of the picture that seem farthest away are actually physically the nearest. This reminds us how we might feel when reading *Fun Home*, with its treasure trove of stories within stories and the exploration of thought-provoking themes involving sexuality, family relationships, and coming of age. Ultimately, in both *Rainbow Draped Over Chair* and *Fun Home*, we experience a continuous change of perspective for the writer, artist, reader, and viewer. As the 2015 Duke summer reading for incoming first year students, Bechdel’s intensely personal and autobiographical graphic novel should definitely elicit thought-provoking discussion, so let the show begin!

– Vicki Russell



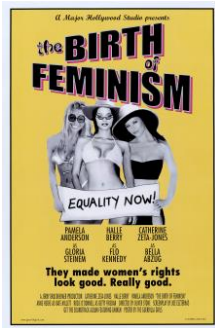
Flying, a book referenced on pages 217 and 218 of *Fun Home*, narrates the year of author Kate Millett's life after her landmark book, *Sexual Politics*, transformed her into the spokesperson for women's liberation movement of the 1970s. In addition to describing her strict Catholic childhood and narrowly

circumscribed early years, Millett "reveals a turmoil of memories, fears, and triumphs; her doubts about her own strength in fulfilling the role of visionary for the women's movement, pressure from the movement when she reveals her bisexuality to the press, and, finally, a renewed determination to live and grow as an artist and writer." Millett recounts her realization that she isn't and can't be a good enough feminist or queer person in this famous line from the book: "I'm slammed with an identity that can no longer say a word; mute with responsibility." I imagine this line might have resonated with Bechdel as she created her own memoir in which she reckons with her sometimes strict and often confusing upbringing, her emerging identities as lesbian, artist, and writer, and her relationship with her father. It's also worth noting that both Millett and Bechdel went on to pen memoirs about their mothers.

Towards the end of *Fun Home* Alison looks for Kate Millett's 1974 memoir, *Flying*, in her college library. The panels depicting this experience show her searching the stacks, opening the book for the first time, and commenting on the cover art. The next panels offer a quote from the book and show her reading it during a visit to her childhood home. In the very next frame, as she's polishing silver with her father, she's trying to broach the topic of her sexual identity. Given the prodigious number of literary allusions in *Fun Home*—many of which co-exist in single panels—this is a lot of ink for one literary reference. The significance of *Flying* to Bechdel might be explained by noting the similarities between her style and story and Millett's as depicted in their memoirs. For example, *Flying* has been characterized as "kaleidoscopic, almost cinematic," a phrase that also might be used to describe *Fun Home*. The *New York Times Book Review* called *Flying* "an autobiography of dazzling exhibitionism" while *New York* magazine described *Fun Home* as "utterly intimate."

The cover art for the University of Illinois Press edition of *Flying* published in 2000 is reminiscent of the series, "The Lesbian Body," the group of drawings from which this piece comes. These drawings were first exhibited at the Chuck Levitan Gallery, New York in 1977 three years after *Flying* was published and Kate Millett received this card from Gloria Steinem to commemorate the occasion.

– Laura Micham

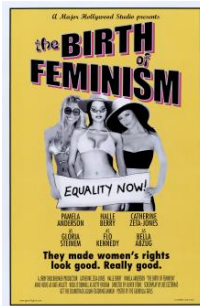


The Guerilla Girls are a feminist art collective dedicated to fighting gender inequity in the art world. Anonymity is crucial to their impact—each of the girls wears a gorilla mask—and the playful pun in their name (gorilla/guerilla) highlights their combative stance. In their posters, billboards, and performances, the Guerilla Girls wield humor and statistics like weapons to draw attention to the fact that museums and galleries foster the idea that white men are the real artists, and women are valued not for the artwork they create, but their visually pleasing bodies.

It isn't only museums and galleries that perpetuate this assumption. *The Birth of Feminism* shows that popular culture also plays a definitive role. A sarcastic commentary on the commercialization of feminism, the poster mockingly presents “hot” female movie stars substituting for the women who fought for women's rights. Blocking feminism's complex histories from view, these images of hyper-sexualized bodies—complete with bikinis and cleavage—underscore the pervasive idea that sexuality (and particularly heterosexuality) is the primary way for women to claim freedom. By composing *The Birth of Feminism*, the Guerilla Girls want us to see that this “freedom” is a ruse.

In *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel also confronts the consequences of habitually putting women's sexualized bodies on display. She renders her former self finding and looking at a naked woman adorning a calendar. The sexy pin-up represents a form of sexual vulnerability and exposure girls are expected to embody. Like the Guerilla Girls, Bechdel challenges this expectation. She renders sexuality as a fraught and complicated unfolding that is intimately linked to artistic practice.

– Kimberly Lamm



Where Alison Bechdel's graphic novel *Fun Home* presents the autobiographic narrative of a specific individual, the works of the feminist art collective Guerilla Girls (founded in 1985 in New York) originated in criticism of the art world in the format of protest art, posters, pamphlets, and later on, books. The group derives its name from the fact that the individual members hide their identities behind gorilla masks to put their message into the foreground.

The mock movie poster *The Birth of Feminism* was inspired by the following musings:

Hollywood producers have come to us over the years, saying they want to make a movie about the history of feminism in the U.S. Then, we never hear from them, again. One day, we were sitting around and we started wondering what would a Hollywood film about feminist history be like? So, we decided to make our own satirical movie poster. (www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/birthcolor)

The poster is, as they say, “dead on”: Cast in the roles of prominent second-wave feminists Gloria Steinem (*1943), Flo Kennedy (1916-2000), and Bella Abzug (1920-1998) are Pamela Anderson, Halle Berry, and Catherine Zeta-Jones. All three actresses are shown in skimpy bikinis, holding a sign “Equality Now!” Their bodies are highly sexualized, and the protest sign draws the “male gaze” (as coined by feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey) toward their pelvis region. Moreover, the slogan “They made women’s rights look good. Really good.” stands in full opposition to the feminist principles that the three great ladies of the women’s movement have fought for, reducing women once again to pure corporality and the expectation of attractiveness of the female body in typical Hollywood fashion.

As in all works of postmodernity, though, there are numerous layers to the representation and utilization of stereotypes. Is this really just a criticism of the patriarchal and sexist Hollywood film industry? Are we as the audience not buying too easily into that kind of judgment? After all, all three actresses are Hollywood stars, powerhouse figures of their own, most notably Berry, who was the first black woman to receive an Oscar award in 2002. In a sense, they do have control and ownership of their bodies, employing them in and for their successful careers; seeing them simply as sexy puppets of Hollywood masterminds would disregard the power they hold over their own physical and intellectual identity. Owning and utilizing their bodies and careers can very well be read as a post-feminist statement rather than an

anti-feminist subjugation. In short: There is not just one kind of feminism, and the onlooker is challenged to question her/his own preconceived notions of what it means to be part of the feminist continuum.

Bechdel's graphic novel and the fictitious movie poster have numerous elements in common, in form, themes, and the questions towards which they lead their audience. Gender identity, power structures, societal norms, and sexual identity are investigated in an interplay of both image and word. Most importantly, though, they literally and figuratively queer stereotypes regarding identity and agency in presenting inversed, even juxtaposed positions of what it means to be feminist and/or gay, invoking the intersectionality of these often very black-and-white portrayed identity markers.

With this in mind, I would like to invite you to examine your own concepts and ideas about feminism in relation to this mock movie poster: Which questions arise? What notions may you start to query? Which new ideas and answers may you take away from this work of art in particular and the exhibit as a whole? Enjoy the exploration...!

– Corinna Kahnke

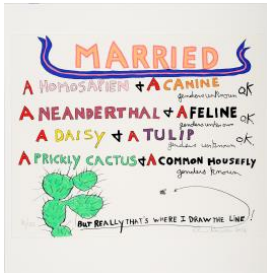


Atlas repurposes panels from a vintage romance comic to imagine a modern conversation presumably between a boyfriend and girlfriend about his reasons for not wanting to get married—he protests that he's boycotting marriage until all people can marry the partner of

their choice. In this case it seems like a flimsy excuse, but for some straight couples, marriage equality has been a real concern that has led them to resist the institution themselves. I selected this piece to respond to in relation to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* a few days before the Supreme Court decided in favor of marriage equality on June 26, 2015, rendering the reluctant boyfriend's argument void. *Fun Home* paints a picture of a seemingly traditional marriage that is revealed as an unhappy relationship between a woman and a man who is attracted to other men. If homosexuality had been less stigmatized and marriage between same-sex couples had been legal when Bechdel's parents were younger, would this story have had a different narrative? Is marriage something worth fighting for when so many marriages are unhappy or end in divorce? Now that the societal and legal benefits of marriage are available for same-sex couples, what are the next steps towards for full equality and citizenship for LGBTQ people? *Unwedded Blitz* remains relevant even after marriage equality is a reality in the United States—the future of marriage will have our culture putting our hands to our foreheads for generations to come.

To learn more about Nava Atlas, please see her papers at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. For more information about LGBTQ research, literature, and film at Duke Libraries, please visit this research guide: <http://guides.library.duke.edu/lgbtstudies>.

– Kelly Wooten



The transformation of America's marriage laws has been one of the historic changes of Obama's second term in office. It's astounding how the path suddenly cleared—as though our attitudes toward gay relationships, and to the institution of marriage, had shifted over the years to such a point that a final resolution just suddenly became possible. This image takes a humorous and even a mocking approach to the issue. Its bright colors and playful calligraphy give it a feeling of

child-like simplicity, while the relationships it describes suggest that love is the only possible criterion for judging whether a marriage is acceptable. By emphasizing the unknown genders of the species it includes, the image suggests that gender itself is the least important criterion. The image of the cactus, and the playful example of it wanting to marry a housefly, are perhaps an acknowledgement of the prickly nature of the issue. But the absurdity of the example seems to make fun of any serious debate on where lines should be drawn. Overall, the simplicity and brightness of the image give the viewer a sense of obviousness—of course we should be allowed to be who we want and to marry whom we want!

The format of the image seem to parallel that of *Fun Home*. Both mix text and graphics, and both use styles that are easily accessible and quickly draw in the viewer. But the contrast is also striking. *Fun Home* is dominated by complexity and pain: the complexity of deception and double lives; the pain of submerged identities, of living a lie, of longing, of loss and grief. Perhaps this speaks to the different historical moments reflected in these works. *Fun Home* illustrates an era when sexuality was far more subject to social censure, when family relationships were more prescriptive, when identity was more likely to be suppressed. *Married* reflects the dramatic shift in our society within the past decade.

– Simon Partner



There is a deeply human experience that is both mythic and everyday. It's one you are starting right now as you embark on your first months of college. In the Western world it has been enshrined in a riddle told by a Sphinx. Learning to walk on your own two legs (a metaphor, it can mean four wheels, etc.!) is a process of figuring out how much of your parents you carry with you and how much you have to resist, fight off, even (metaphors again) kill. And someday it will mean meeting them on more equal ground, where you can acknowledge they had complicated lives that weren't all about you (even as that's painful). Even as it also means remembering the fun of home.

Some of their struggles—maybe to put food on the table, for racial justice, for gender and sexuality equality, for clean air and water, living undocumented, fighting in wars—may seem like heavy burdens, or even hard to understand because we live in the wake of their successes (tho' clearly much remains to be done!). Becoming your own self will mean alchemizing them with your own experiences, struggles, art, love, angers, politics, and desires. You best honor them by loving and honoring yourself. Alison Bechdel has given us a beautiful guidebook for this journey. There will be someone there to catch you when you leap, but you're probably getting pretty good at swimming yourself!

– Diane M. Nelson



Sometimes who we are and who we think we need to be don't align very well. Sometimes we don't want to be who we think we're supposed to be, and sometimes we want to be that person very badly but

feel like we're failing. Sometimes the person we aspire to become isn't worth our aspirations at all. *Fun Home*, in part, is about the tragedy that can come from trying too hard to wear a full-personality mask, to conceal essential parts of our identity—elements that ultimately cannot be suppressed or denied. The novel shows how

significantly the pressures can change over the course of a single generation but how deeply other pressures to perform, conform, and “fit in” endure.

The two pictures by Mike Disfarmer, particularly juxtaposed, elicited a similar sense of tension for me. In *Two Little Boys*, the girl sits framed by boys “in matching outfits.” The boys themselves display a striking conformity with each other—at the behest of parents?—even as their physical presence both highlights and confines the girl. Masculine conformity frames and contains feminine difference. The three children, sitting still in their poses, seriously and carefully conform to the expectations of the photographer and family. And yet, bodies of the three children offer hints of independence: the legs suggest a bit of wiggleness, and perhaps their feet kicked. The confinement of three children in a single chair conveys a sense of repression that must have generated squirming and resistance. No one could keep up that pose for long.

The man and woman in the second photo (*Officer with Arm Around Woman*) initially appear more at ease. But again, there is a sense that the woman is confined: the man's arm encircles her, but her posture suggests some kind of resistance—not necessarily to the man, but perhaps to the experience of being photographed, or the context for which the photograph was taken. Was the man leaving for the war, and she didn't want him to go? Did she perhaps resent having to take a “goodbye” photo? Or perhaps they had quarreled about something less fraught; or perhaps she simply wanted to sit in a way she felt made her look her best. In any case, the man in the photo seems to be asserting a kind of ownership of the woman, and her body language suggests at least a hint of tension, of independence.

This tension isn't new, and it isn't resolvable. According to Jewish tradition, this friction goes back to the very creation of the world. When God created the heavens

and the earth, God imposed creation on top of pre-existing chaos—the “wilderness and waste” of Genesis 1 (translated by King James as “formless and void”). The Rabbis compare this to a king who built a palace atop a dump. Eventually, bad odors and unsavory leakages start to ruin the palace and the king has to rearrange his palace to accommodate his building site; so, too, God had to reevaluate divine expectations of creation—a process that involved flooding the world to provide a cleaner slate and, more importantly, decreeing a more realistic set of expectations for how the world would work. As one ancient source says, “You can’t give a lion sharp teeth and ask it to eat grass.” God had to acknowledge that nature was violent and free-will unpredictable. The created world could not live by laws that assumed peaceful perfection. The effort to do so almost doomed the whole enterprise.

In this world of selfies, we are highly attuned to self-presentation. We “curate” our social media “presence.” We attempt, with greater and lesser degrees of success, to manage how we appear to others. But we still imagine our audiences, and we shape ourselves for these imagined viewers, in opposition to them or in conformity to their expectations of us. Few of us would mistake a person’s online presence for the “real” individual. We all still wear masks; we try to live as if we know something about perfection, for at least the nanoseconds that it takes to snap the pic and share it. But somewhere in our pictures, too, if we look closely, perhaps we can see the feet kicking, the body squirming, the spine straightening. Perhaps we can catch a glimpse of that space between who we are and who we think we ought to be. In that space, there may be danger. In that space, there may be despair. But in that space is a luminous truth.

– Laura Lieber



Mike Disfarmer and Alison Bechdel both invite their audiences to peer more closely at the family portraits that proliferated in the United States through the twentieth century. Countless photographs, films, and television sit-coms offered up depictions of families—and roles within families— that bore little resemblance to what actually took place within the homes and bedrooms of the country's expanding middle class.

The feminist movement and feminist thinkers of the 1960s and '70s challenged these images, pointing out that for many women home was not a place of security, refuge, and light-hearted family fun but rather the place they were most likely to be demeaned or battered or sexually assaulted. Until 1974, most women could not get credit cards in their own name; until 1977, sexual harassment was not legally recognized; until 1978, women could be fired for becoming pregnant. Marital rape remained legal in North Carolina until 1993. In 2014, women working full-time in the United States earned 82.5 cents for every dollar earned by a man.

For many women, the idea that they had options beyond getting married and having children came as a revelation, a revolution. Some took to heart feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson's quip, "Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice." Others sought ways to restructure family relations— some modestly with a more equitable distribution of childrearing and household duties, others more radically by setting up collective living arrangements that dispensed entirely with nuclear families.

While some of these endeavors worked out better than others, they all demonstrated the salutary effect of dispensing with the fiction that everyone— or anyone— had a family that looked like the Cleavers on *Leave It to Beaver*. Opening closet doors and shining a light into the darker corners of family life went some distance toward mitigating the shame and fear that haunted Alison Bechdel's father Bruce.

There is particular poignancy in Warhol's photographs of Steve Rubell, whose closeted homosexuality and death from HIV-AIDS conjure precisely the fate Bechdel suspects might have befallen her father. The apparent carefree joy in these images seems to offer a glimpse of those rare moments that Bruce Bechdel might have enjoyed during those brief episodes where he could feel comfortable in his own skin.

– Jocelyn Olcott



The pencil drawing from the *Saturday Evening Post*: do you know this family? And in old photo albums among your kin's possessions, aren't there prints like the Disfarmer children's portrait from the 1920s or the 1940 photograph of the couple? We use such realistic images to capture not only a likeness of individuals, but a likeness of their relations. Alison Bechdel's brilliant *Fun Home* plays with the truth of images and texts as ways to know our family. After 25 years of chronicling the lives of "families of choice" for a circle of lesbians in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*—a series that I and my own circle followed installment by installment—the adult Bechdel turned to her own family of origin, also queer in its own way. Part of *Fun Home*'s astonishing popularity is its fresh take on enduring ancient, soulful questions: *who was my father? And who am I too?* Her tragic-comic memoir opens and closes with Deadelus and Icarus, with ancient Greek myths of father and child. Inside, panels abound with representations: 1960s TV shows, old snapshots, canonical literature, typewritten letters, an Oscar Wilde play, lesbian political texts, psych reports, and the logo of a brand of white bread. Indeed, novels, plays, and architecture were currencies in her family, courtship and coming out epistolary matters for them. The cartoonist Bechdel is painfully self-aware that images and narratives have limits in determining a final truth about her father. There are angry scenes like the *Saturday Evening Post* illustration; there are portraits like the hopefully heterosexual couple and the obliging three children. But Bechdel's graphic narrative does not offer a full story, any more than these images do. *Fun Home* is that quest for knowing we see in the bereaved one's searching, longing look at the captured likeness of their departed.

– Ara Wilson



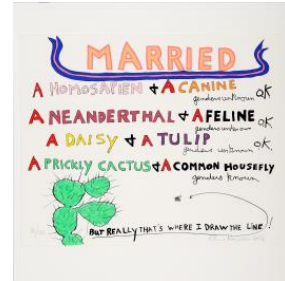
"In my earliest memories, Dad is a lowering, malevolent presence." (*Fun Home*, p. 197)

There is something almost secretly thrilling about taking a peak into the private lives of others. As a voyeur, we want to know what goes on behind closed doors; the dynamics of familial relationships; the truthfulness of appearances. In Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* we get more than a peak into her life and the complexities of the relationship with

her father. In Fir Bregar's illustration we can only guess as to the circumstances of this private bedroom scene. What accounts for the almost fearful faces of the girl and the woman? Why are their bodies turned away from the man? The woman appears to be steadying herself on a piece of furniture while her hand is reaching up to her neck, suggesting an expression of surprise or a reaction to something threatening, perhaps both. The girl has her hands in her pockets and looks as if she's just taken a step back. The man, presumably the girl's father, is an imposing figure, commanding the space. Whereas the girl and the woman are leaning back, away from him, he is standing straight with one hand almost casually in his jacket pocket. But what accounts for his stern expression? Is he angry? Upset? Disapproving?

In *Fun Home*, Alison writes "In my earliest memories, Dad is a lowering, malevolent presence," and if I had to choose a caption for this illustration, that would be it. Whatever may have just happened, it is undeniable that there is something amiss in this picture, something not quite right. This is not a happy family scene with smiling faces. This is that glimpse behind closed doors, a view that is both unsettling and unknowing.

– Andrea Spain



The specter of the rose window of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris dominates Arsen Savadov and Yuri Senchenko's *Untitled* photograph, over which a text drawn from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* advises that the soul cannot be eliminated from the world even if the body and spirit are destroyed by death. As Senchenko explained about this work of art: "Sometimes that which appears to be a metaphor turns out to be more real than reality itself." This comment summarizes, while it reverses, the content of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, in so far as she recounts the "real" circumstances of her family as a metaphor for realities of life. Chris Burden's *Married* compliments Bechdel's story for his satire of the inconsistencies, contradictions, arbitrariness, and folly of sanctioning only some kinds of marriages but "drawing the line" at other kinds of marriages. Indeed, the view of coupling presented in *Fun Home* is the failure of a heterosexual marriage and the resulting suppression of sexuality that simultaneously saturates and isolates the family. The Manteño disc with raised death head draws us full circle back to the theme of the ghostly haunting of death in Savadov and Senchenko's work, and the ghost that permeates *Fun Home*, from the funeral parlor and the mating and dying of locusts to suicide and the repression of an individual authentic self, which can lead to the sense of being dead in life. These sobering works of art underscore the sorrowful, but vital, messages of *Fun Home*.

– Kristine Stiles



It is hard for baby boomers to explain to those who came of age after us exactly how the HIV/AIDS pandemic changed our world. We had worked hard to break through the stifling conventions of sexuality and gender, to love whom we wanted and how we wanted, to claim our right to sexual pleasure as an expression of

that love or just for its own sake. Our bodies, our selves. We had worked hard against the accumulated taboos of generations past, weathered the withering disapproval of parents, religious leaders, teachers, peers, even struggled with our own inner selves, always in dialogue with the world. Then came a virus that some proclaimed to be punishment for our sins, which is to say our transgressions against cultural norms.

It is hard to describe the devastation of the pandemic, not least because it affected communities variously. Although the scale and horror of the wasting disease registered the violence of inequities everywhere, the shock among some communities in the global north underscored the rare privilege of living in a time and place in which the experience of death among the young was relatively rare. The pandemic forms a subtle background for *Fun Home*. The virus surfaces briefly, in Alison's musing on the opening of Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On* occasioned by the memory of seeing the tall ships on a family trip to New York. But throughout *Fun Home* we read the story of Alison's coming to terms with death as a personal and collective experience.

The Bechdel children grow up with death in a way most children do not. The title of Alison's tragicomic springs from their resilience, as they manage to create a playground in the funeral home that is the family business. The tragicomic is her *memento mori*: her contemplation of mortality as fundamental to the human experience.

The death's head reminds us of how fundamental that contemplation is, and of the connection between ritual and art. It is human to contemplate the world, to try to

understand and influence it. Against the inevitability and seeming finality of death, ritual and art express the complementary desires to remember and transcend.

Or, for Savadov and Senchenko, to “control.” In the viewer’s straining to discern the outlines of the faint cathedral, they convey the experience of the futility of control. That impulse, like Allison’s obsessive compulsion, hinders, where art should release. From the destruction of death comes the liberation of the soul: not the preservation of what we know, but transformation into something new.

Even remembering is a re-membering. An old Russian radiator in the foreground of the photograph replaces the rose window of the cathedral. The absurdity reminds us of the nature of transformation. The lines between art and ritual, high and popular culture all blur in the effort to make sense, to remember. Allison turns similarly to the genre of the tragicomic to challenge those lines.

Death is absurd, which is to say it disrupts the coherence of lives constructed around its denial. It is senseless for those who equate sense with what they can understand. Alison and John’s “ghastly, uncontrollable grins” acknowledge that absurdity. It is the absurdity of their father’s death; it is the absurdity of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is the absurdity that inspires the tragicomic.

– Priscilla Wald

Installation Checklist:

1. Ernst Neizvestny
Born in Yekaterinburg, Russia (formerly the USSR), 1926
Figure (Russia), 20th century
Marker pen on paper
Gift of Jeff Bliumis
1996.11.22
2. Charlotte van Pallandt
Dutch, 1898 – 1997
Study of a Female Nude, 1938
Charcoal on paper
Museum purchase with funds provided by the Elizabeth Von Canon Foundation
1973.40.1
3. Charlotte van Pallandt
Dutch, 1898 – 1997
Study of a Nude Woman, 1959
Charcoal on paper
Museum purchase with funds provided by the Elizabeth Von Canon Foundation
1973.41.1
4. Philip Pearlstein
Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1924
Girl on a Striped Rug, 1971 – 1972
Lithograph on paper
Museum purchase with funds provided by the Estate of Nancy Hanks
1972.44.1
5. Henri Matisse
French, 1869 – 1954
Reclining Woman, 1941
Ink on wove paper
Bequest of Nancy Hanks
1983.10.16

6. Andy Warhol
Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1928 – 1987
Steve Rubell, 1982
Gelatin silver print
Gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts
2008.9.125
7. Andy Warhol
Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1928 – 1987
Steve Rubell, 1982
Gelatin silver print
Gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts
2008.9.124
8. Andy Warhol
Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1928 – 1987
Steve Rubell, 1982
Gelatin silver print
Gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts
2008.9.126
9. Andy Warhol
Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1928 – 1987
Nude Model (Victor Hugo), 1977
Polacolor Type 108 print
Gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts
2008.9.103
10. Patrick Hughes
Born in Birmingham, England, 1939
Rainbow Draped Over Chair from the portfolio *The Domestic Life of the Rainbow*, 1979
Screenprint on paper
Edition 45/120
Gift of Mr. Jerome Singer
1980.107.1.1

11. Kate Millett
Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, 1934
Untitled drawing, 1977
Pen and ink on paper
On loan from the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library
12. Gloria Steinem
Born in Toledo, Ohio, 1934
Greeting card produced by *Ms.* magazine, c. 1974
Pen on greeting card
On loan from the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library
13. Guerrilla Girls
Artist collective, active 1985 – present
Birth of Feminism from the portfolio *Guerrilla Girls' Most Wanted: 1985 - 2008*, 2001 (printed 2008)
Print on paper
Edition 8/50
Museum purchase
2011.6.1.25
14. Guerrilla Girls
Artist collective, active 1985 – present
Bitches, Bimbos and Ballbreakers: The Guerrilla Girls' Illustrated Guide to Female Stereotypes, 2003
Book
Museum purchase
2011.6.4
15. Nava Atlas
Born in Israel, 1955
Unwedded Blitz, 2010
Screenprint on paper
Edition 7/12
Gift of the artist
2012.6.1

16. Chris Burden
Born in Boston, Massachusetts, 1946 – 2015
Married from the portfolio Artists for Obama 2012, 2012
Screenprint on paper
Edition 76/150
Anonymous gift in honor of Julie Mehretu
2013.4.1.3
17. Hugo Robus
American, 1885 – 1964
Family Albums (Family Grouping; Five Heads on One; Four Ages of Man),
1947 – 1949
Paint on plaster
Gift of the Hugo Robus Testamentary Trust
2001.7.5
18. Mike Disfarmer
American, 1884 – 1959
Officer with Arm Around Woman in White Skirt and Jacket, c. 1940
Vintage gelatin silver contact print
Gift of Sarit Rozycki and Robert Cromwell
2014.28.8
19. Mike Disfarmer
American, 1884 – 1959
Two Little Boys in Matching Outfits Seated Beside Little Girl on Settee, c.
1920s
Vintage gelatin silver contact print
Gift of Sarit Rozycki and Robert Cromwell
2014.28.1
20. Fir Bregar
American (dates unknown)
Illustration for *Saturday Evening Post*, c. 1900
Pencil on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry L. Dalton
1976.48.1

21. Arsen Savadov
Born in Kiev, Ukraine (formerly the USSR), 1962
Georgii Senchenko
Born in Kiev, Ukraine (formerly the USSR), 1962
Untitled from the series *Controlling of the Inorganic Control*, 1992 – 1993
Photo emulsion on linen
Gift of Robert E. Falcone
1998.21.4
22. Anyi Peoples (Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana)
Funerary heads, 20th century
Terracotta
Gifts of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph and Virginia Neely
1979.43.70, 1979.43.73, 1979.43.82
23. Minnie Black
American, 1899 – 1996
Snake, 1991
Paint on gourd
Gift of Bruce Lineker, T'86
2008.11.1
24. Manteño (Ecuador)
Disc with raised death head, 900 – 1400
Copper
The Paul A. and Virginia Clifford Collection
1973.1.332
25. Maurits Cornelis (M. C.) Escher
Dutch, 1898 – 1972
Ringsnakes, 1969
Woodcut on paper
Gift of Professor John Staddon
2006.2.4

