

# L'OFFICIEL

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## Photographer Talia Chetrit Decodes Domesticity

The family comes into focus in photographer Talia Chetrit's work, revealing the characters and connections those closest to us offer.

05.10.2021 by Julia Trotta



"Seated Portrait," 2019. All photographs courtesy of the artist.

In 1996, Americans with Internet access spent less than 30 minutes a month online and Google didn't yet exist. It was the year Tupac was shot, JonBenét Ramsey was strangled, and Bill Clinton was re-elected for a second term as president. It was also the year I took my first photography class, from which a photograph—of my mother in a wheat field, eyes gently closed, with her face in the sun—still hangs in my family's living room.

Talia Chetrit and I are both "Xennials," a term referring to people on the Gen-X/Millennial cusp who grew up in an analog world and entered adulthood at the dawn of the digital age. So when I first saw an exhibition of the artist's work with photographs sourced from film she had shot as a teenager in the mid-'90s, I recognized my own pubescent "practice" and thought back to that photograph of my mother from the same era, briefly questioning its status. Kids today take, share, and communicate in photographs innately, but to pick up a camera at that time felt like a deeply adult act.



"Untitled," 2020.

Chetrit's (very) early work, shrewdly edited and re-cropped, was included in an exhibition at the Leslie Fritz Gallery in New York in 2013 alongside recent photographs of the same subjects nearly 20 years later. Those subjects were, for the most part, the artist and her immediate family. There is a banal quality to the images, and, upon first view, they read as snapshots of a white, attractive, well-to-do family, more suited for a photo album than a gallery wall, but Chetrit's preternatural talent and transgressive relationship to the material made for a tenacious and generative study. As a girl, she most likely recruited her family as subjects due to their availability and easy consent, but they later provided a prism through which to explore intimacy, eroticism, gender roles, humor, the absurd, and photography itself. She has explored these themes in a way that is more clinical than biographical, and rarely sentimental, although moments of tenderness break through.



"Mom around Dad," 2014.

In a double portrait of Chetrit and her mother, dated 1995/2013, a woman looks warmly into the camera, her head fused with the head of a teenage girl whose gaze is downward, mouth agape. That detached girl is, of course, the artist herself, but at the time the piece was shown, she was closer in age to her self-possessed mother. Both, in a sense, are Chetrit, who has mastered the duality of connection and ambivalence. In "Parents (Stacked)," 2013, we see the mother again 18 years later, this time head-to-head with Chetrit's father. It's a more polished, studio photograph and the attractive middle-aged couple exudes the good looks and emotional depth of Hollywood stars who know how to play themselves. Their disembodied heads float in a black background, amplifying their expressions, like handsome clowns.



"Portrait," 1995/2013.

When LA><ART commissioned Chetrit to conceive a billboard on La Cienega Boulevard in 2014, she chose an image of her mother by the sea, looking wistfully off into the horizon. (I am again reminded of the photo of my mother in the wheat field.) The exaggerated scale of the billboard provided new possibilities for familial exhibitionism, while passersby likely read it as a discrete form of advertising.

The parent work crescendoed with a covert video Chetrit made of her mother and father while they were being photographed. Presented as fragments shot over several sessions, Chetrit's role behind the camera rendered her parents coy, insecure, playful, and image-conscious—qualities typically revealed only among intimate relations. Tricking her parents into being filmed harkened back to the youthful spirit of her early photographs, but it also disclosed the complex power dynamics—psychological, sexual, and familial—emblematic of Chetrit's work. She both loves and provokes her subjects. The same goes for her viewers.

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Billboard on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles, 2014.

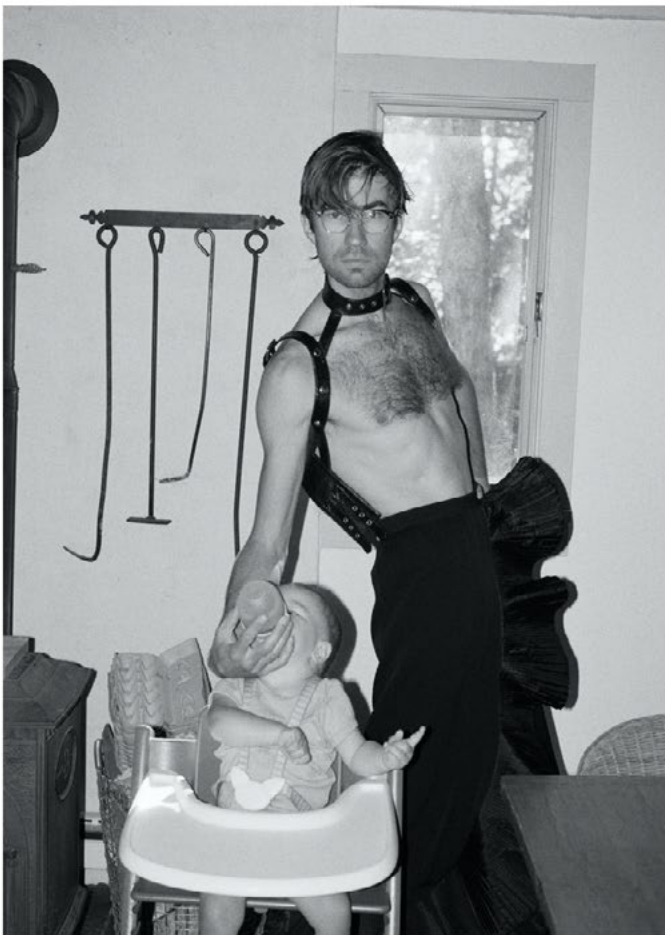
Enter Denis.

I happen to know Chetrit personally, but we rarely get a chance to see each other. When I came across large-scale images of her frolicking in an open field with a svelte man, I recognized this new character as family. The photographs, so big and bright they're almost delirious, were shown in her 2018 exhibition at the Kölnischer Kunstverein. In "Untitled (Outdoor Sex #1)," and "Untitled (Outdoor Sex #2)," Chetrit is merrily copulating with a man I'd later come to know as Denis. She brings her camera and, evidently, he's game. He is tethered to her and she to the camera via the shutter release that winds its way from the foreground to the action, a reminder that the artist is at work. Flash forward to a year later and we get a better view of the couple in a piece titled "Seated Portrait." Here Chetrit reclines partially nude with a white T-shirt pulled up above her pregnant belly and the shutter release in hand. She is lying on the legs of her partner, who is fully nude aside from a pair of stylish glasses. Both figures are staring directly into the camera; her belly button and the top of his erect penis also seem to be staring at us.



"Untitled (Outdoor Sex #1)," 2018.

In her new role of parent, Chetrit revels in subverting domestic life with scenes of kink and camp glamour: glamour that is absurd when chasing a toddler in the best of times, but particularly anachronistic for 2020, when no one had anywhere to go. "Guys" is a portrait of father and son. Denis, in a high-fashion white tulle dress, holds an awkward, animal-like pose supported by a leopard-print chaise lounge. Chetrit's son, about five months old, is on all fours in the foreground, mimicking his father's stance. They are both looking into the camera, which is to say, looking at Chetrit. The baby's expression and features are so like his mother's that he could also be the artist's proxy. In another scene we see Denis, this time in black bondage, feeding his child a bottle in the kitchen. Antique iron tools hang in the background as he arches back and locks eyes with the camera. He's definitely game. (Seeing Chetrit's partner in frilly drag makes me think of one of my favorite paintings: "The Bride (Lawrence Alloway)," a Renaissance-style bridal portrait of Alloway by his wife, Sylvia Sleigh.)



Left: "Untitled," 2020. Right: "Boot/Baby," 2020.

I have cherry-picked works from the last decade that reveal a chronological timeline inherent to aging and the evolution of the family for this text, but it is important to note that Chetrit resists seriality or linear narratives. In her last show at Kaufmann Repetto gallery in New York, she presented new work of her son and partner alongside "Chetrit Family." Mined from her teenage archive, the black-and-white photograph depicts a family gathering in Queens to celebrate her grandfather's birthday. The image's disarming sincerity and old-world charm recalibrates the more sensational works and speaks to the complexity of lived experience. While the work could be easy to pass with only a glance, I found it to be the most vulnerable in the exhibition. A photograph from the same roll reveals a view of the Twin Towers in the Manhattan skyline. Both the grandfather and the towers are now gone. I think of Svetlana Boym in her 2001 book *The Future of Nostalgia*: "Nostalgia (from *nostos*- as in "return home," and *algia*- meaning "longing") is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface." While Chetrit wields her formal and conceptual prowess to keep the audience at a critical distance, she can't help but make us ache.

<https://www.lofficielusa.com/art/talia-chetrit-family-photography>