

family



# family

May 19 – September 4, 2002

Curated by

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Poetry selected by

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The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art

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## introduction

Our families—eccentric or mainstream, supportive or trying, present or absent—define in large part who we are. Whether resolving conflicts, caring for ill parents, or committing to a life partner, we are constantly negotiating relationships to maintain the family unit in one form or another. Over time, the idea of what defines a family may have changed, but our dependence on it has not. These intimate and complex relationships impact our character and the decisions we make about our lives.

Artists navigate the same waters we all do. *Family* is composed of the work of thirty-seven artists who have made objects or images that reflect on the idea of family. The works could be thought of as falling into one of several categories: building a family, maintaining a family, or making sense of a family. Although certain works in the exhibition may be surprising for the honesty and boldness with which they are made, they do not reveal anything particularly exotic or surprising about family life. Rather, the works in this exhibition reflect certain conditions and observations—good and bad—of the contemporary, and, for that matter, the timeless, family.

### Building a family

Perhaps it has always been hard to find the right mate and build the family you imagine. Chrissy Conant's *Chrissy Caviar* gives that pursuit a 2002 spin. For this work, Conant had a dozen of her eggs harvested by an embryologist, sealed into tiny tubes filled with human tubal fluid, and then packaged as caviar. The label on the jar essentially advertises her as, simultaneously, an eligible mate, object of desire, and producer of a delicacy. She writes, "I am trying to manifest, and be productive with, my highly emotional desires to find a Mr. Right, and create a family together." Despite advances in medical technology, women waiting to have children are still heavily impacted by their age. *Chrissy Caviar* gives this very private fear a public form. Rather than wait passively to be approached by a man, Conant's sculpture is an individual marketing strategy to connect herself with a mate. She uses all of the devices of the commercial sphere that are so familiar in American culture, including slick packaging, using sex to sell, and the suggestion of a limited quantity.

Patricia Cronin has created not just a sculpture, but a monument, to commemorate her relationship with her partner. The form the work takes is inspired by mortuary sculptures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that depict full-length portraits of the deceased carved in marble. Cronin's *Memorial to a Marriage* depicts her sleeping with her partner in a loving embrace. The bodies of the two women are draped with a sheet that falls into elegant folds, recalling the elaborate drapery that sculptors throughout time have indulged not only for the way it demonstrates their skill, but also for its abstract beauty. Cronin's ambitious sculpture celebrates and makes official in death her "marriage," which cannot be made legal in life.



### Maintaining a family

Much of family life is quite mundane—shopping, eating, potty training. Jonathan Seliger is adept at translating mundane objects of daily life into larger metaphors. *For A Family* (1995-96) appears to be five pizza boxes stacked on a table. The sculpture is in fact made from folded canvas, skillfully painted to mimic cheap cardboard. The sculpture immediately starts us guessing about the family it describes. A big family, maybe? Five eight-slice pizzas, allowing three pieces per person, could feed thirteen people. From the topping selection, we might be led to believe that there are not too many little kids, since they're not likely to eat anchovies or mushrooms. The sculpture might be thought of as a family portrait in food—a family reduced to what it eats. Seliger's sculptures can be read as both telling artifacts of contemporary life, and still life paintings, where ordinary objects take on poetic meaning.

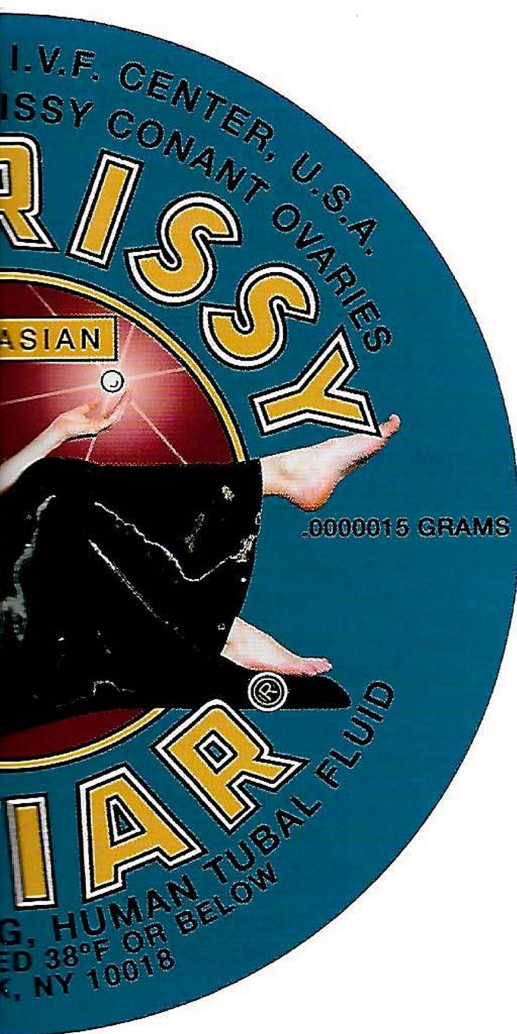
Tatsumi Orimoto's and Sophie Calle's photographs both document difficult realities of their daily lives, although not in ways we are accustomed to seeing the family recorded. Orimoto's often humorous, posed photographs are in large part a strategy in the day to day struggle to both entertain and stay engaged with his ailing mother. When making his mother smile became increasingly challenging and increasingly necessary, Orimoto began bringing empty cardboard boxes and discarded automobile tires on visits to use as absurd props. His work is an example of the way in which art can sometimes respond directly to life. It also captures the ambitious efforts of a devoted son and the importance of play and humor in daily life.

Sophie Calle's *Autobiographies (The Rival)* reveals a horrible moment in the artist's marriage. On finding a love letter her husband wrote to another woman, "H," she scratched out the woman's initial and wrote in her own. She made other alterations to the letter, irrationally editing it as if trying to make improvements. Blowing the letter up to almost six feet high is probably no exaggeration of the impact it had on her. The artifact writ large is a painfully revealing snapshot of a marriage in crisis.

### Making sense of a family

Alan Berliner's film about his father, titled *Nobody's Business*, introduces us to a father and son who are emotionally close, but are having difficulty understanding each other's lives. The film begins with Berliner's father resisting the idea that his own personal history has any importance. The senior Berliner says, "I'm just an ordinary guy who's lived an ordinary life... My life is nothing." The film highlights the relationship between adult child and parent, and the way in which generations differ in attitudes about personal history and identity. Unlike his father, Berliner feels compelled to come to terms with who his father is and make sense of the decisions he made about his life.





**Chrissy Conant**  
**Chrissy Caviar**, 2001-02

Giclée print, #1/100  
 33 x 23 1/2  
 Courtesy of the artist

Robert Melee has created a body of work about his wildly eccentric mother and his relationship with her. *Mommy and Me* is a collection of family photos taken over the years, matted, framed together and covered in a yellow, plastic sheath reminiscent of tacky, protective sofa covers. While there are a few rather ordinary snapshots of mother and son, others are shockingly strange. His mother appears to be everything the stereotypical mother figure is not: she is sexual; she is altered dramatically with makeup and wigs; and she dresses provocatively, giving the viewer a sense that this is not an ordinary mother/son relationship. Melee's work expands the notion of what the supposed nurturer and pillar of family can look like. Melee's *Mommy and Me* frames and packages this eccentric life into manageable form.

In American culture we have a particularly heightened sense of the "normal family" — how they look and how they act. This idea is largely communicated (some might argue "marketed") through television. While the idea of what is normal has changed with the times, we still often compare our own home lives with the more glamorous, interesting, or stimulating ones we watch for entertainment. Mark Bennett's hilariously detailed architectural plans of the fictitious homes of famous television families make the lives of these characters more real, while at the same time making us more acutely aware of our absurd level of involvement with them.

For the British (and Anglophiles around the globe), the royal family provides another point of comparison to our own lives. Perhaps the original inspiration for reality television, the royals, who historically have been a source of envy, in recent times have made us happy to be commoners. While tragic drama after tragic drama unfolds in the media, it has become increasingly clear that the royals, despite efforts to protect their image, are as flawed as the rest of us. In Mark Wallinger's *Royal Ascot*, footage from four years of the procession as the royal family arrives at the famous horse races is played on four monitors. The stilted and routine pageantry is exaggerated through repetition. Each year's footage is remarkably similar. The family members more closely resemble a clip from a BBC miniseries than the dynasty whose tribulations have been made so public.

Whether king or commoner, our ability to adequately respond to, resist, or accept our families and their needs is in many ways the foundation upon which our characters are built. Tied to us by bonds of blood or solemn promise, love or hate, habit or shared experiences, they are our proscribed challenge—a certain set of qualities or circumstances to which we must rise. It is impossible not to reflect on our own families and relationships when looking at the works of art in this exhibition. Although highly personal, much of the artwork in *Family* also reveals universal and timeless truths about the family relationships we want so much to perfect.

**Jessica Hough**, Associate Curator





**Patricia Cronin**  
**Memorial to a Marriage, 2001-02**

Cast and carved plaster  
17 x 27 x 53  
Courtesy of the artist