

YOU KNOW, THINGS LIKE THAT

Catherine Spencer reviews Helen de Main's collaborative exhibition at Platform, Glasgow, 26 November 2017 - 11 February 2018

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There are two parts to Helen de Main's exhibition *You Know, Things Like That*, which has been created collaboratively over the past year with members of a knitting group—Brenda, Foxy, Isabelle, Jean, Lorna, Mags and Margaret—who meet regularly at Platform to work on communal and individual projects. The first and largest part, from which the exhibition takes its title, consists of prints made from personal photographs of the women in the group and their families, which they have shared with the artist. These have been blown up and fixed to the wall that runs down one side of the library space at The Bridge leisure centre, where Platform is based. They are printed in pale pastel greens, pinks, blues and yellows, colours instantly evocative of cardigans, jumpers, scarfs and mittens for babies and young children. Each image—a woman cradling a newborn baby; a woman holding a young toddler; a woman standing by a child in their school uniform; a family group on holiday—is also subtly patterned with designs used by the knitters, giving them a fuzzy, nostalgic quality.

You Know, Things Like That is no sanitized, saccharine family album, however; the images are combined with quotes from conversations between members of the knitting group, loosely guided by the consciousness-raising activities of the Women's Liberation Movement during the 1970s, which explore the physical and psychic demands of domestic labour and child care. Applied to the wall in green transfer text and unmoored from specific speakers and names, these words create a vivid sense of dialogue and exchange, which ranges from reflections on the loss of individual identity that motherhood can result in—'you're just mum. Mum. And even your husband will say, ask your mum'—to the isolation and enormity of the tasks faced and work needing to be done: 'I hadn't a clue, I really didn't'; 'I'm sure I'm not the only one who suffered like that.' Some sections of text, meanwhile, powerfully conjure epic life stories in a few words: 'Well I wouldn't know, 'cos I haven't seen him since the day that I told him I was pregnant.'

Yet the combination of texts and family photographs does not seem motivated by the desire to create shocking juxtapositions, or by the implication that the images are pure ideology or merely compensatory. Instead, *You Know, Things Like That* charts attempts by the women to challenge the status quo and normative gendered divisions of labour ('I was very keen not to be forced into that side of life. It was just expected of me, because I was female'), while also making a powerful case for the need to value, support, respect and repay the results of sustained domestic labour seriously ('it's nice to see that you've brought them up well enough'), and not with exploitative treatment or meaningless platitudes.

In her autobiography *Putting Myself in the Picture*, the photographer Jo Spence describes how in her 1979 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery *Beyond The Family Album*, she 'turned to an investigation of my own family and my class background, and what it meant to be a woman.' In *You Know, Things Like That*, a similar sense of self-reflexion and analysis focussing on class and gender infuses the women's meditation on their lives through the memories triggered by their own family albums.

The amplification of their thoughts and feelings on the walls of the library follows in the tradition of The Hackney Flashers, of which Spence was a member, who displayed their photographic projects in public communal spaces; it feels like there is more potential to spark on-going conversations in this setting than there might be in a gallery. While with participatory projects there is always the danger that the single named artist might subsume the group's collective labour, *You Know, Things Like That* feels embedded rather than extractive.

The second part of the exhibition, *What's Expected*, comprises six small grey-scale screen prints on glass, placed near the library's entrance. Like the photographs on the walls, the images also derive from the personal collection of one of the women in the group, dating from her childhood. The images have been printed on both sides of the glass and sections then peeled away, to create a strange, ghostly effect. They are physically deconstructed, yet despite this attention, they remain compelling sources of memory and emotion, evidence of subject-formation and individual expression within collectivity. De Main and the members of the Platform knitting group have opened up a generous space for reflection, which

combines structural critique with the specificity and particularity of intimate, personal gestures.

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