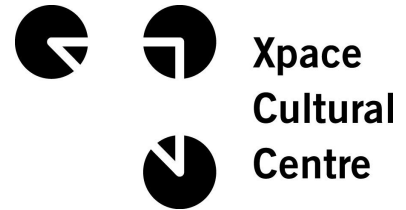


MAIN SPACE (WEST)



Your face, your eyes, and your mouth

Natalie Obregon

September 5 – October 17, 2026

Family photos and videos function as talismans against forgetting and being forgotten. These small images or short clips attempt to control the ephemeral nature of memories and the ease through which they dissolve into ether, acting as records of belonging or mementos of the passage of time as it was experienced by members of a group. On the other hand, it's been well explored that, like all reproductions, photographs contain the kernels of fiction. How these documents present family can be as telling as the unseen dynamics outside these borders: the objects, people, or events just out of frame.

Photo albums denote the idealized fantasy of happy families gathering to pour over shared decades, but they equally call to mind a closed binder collecting dust on a shelf. It is predominantly in horror movies like *Peeping Tom* (1960) where characters repeatedly watch their own home videos, or art films like *My Winnipeg* (2007) and *Stories We Tell* (2013) where this footage is obsessively remade. Old photographs are often revisited during periods of loss or transition. They may be displayed at weddings and birth related celebrations but are more common at funerals. In this way, family photographs can preemptively memorialize their subjects or, at least, attempt to

moderate the decay of time. We now accumulate photographs of ourselves and loved ones at an unprecedented volume, heaps of data that get quickly swallowed by the cloud, the feed, the algorithm.

Blending her own personal familial archives with those of strangers, Natalie Obregon's exhibition presented in the Main Space at Xspace Cultural Centre, *Your face, your eyes, and your mouth*, approaches memory as a slippery substance that perpetually escapes our grasp. Using online public archives to source photographs of families and interpreting their likeness via oil paint on wood or burlap, and image transfers on film, Obregon's work plays with the distinction between artificial and real intimacies as they pertain to family records.

Obregon's intuitive process of selecting archival source material projects a sense of care, intimacy, and love onto unknown individuals who become familiar to the artist through her course of reproducing their countenances. In hindsight, Obregon notes that those she's chosen to depict bear some kind of resemblance to her own family members. Driven by warm curiosity, sharp criticality, and an interest in spontaneous discovery, Obregon's process of archival 'gleaning' bears certain similarities with the French filmmaker Agnès Varda, whose work also hinges on a reconstruction of her own past—generated through video, photography, and found objects—in relation to encounters with strangers.

As Obregon's installation veers toward an archaeology of the self, she simultaneously turns away from the confessional intensity of excavating one's own personal history. After all, since memories are already a copy of the real event or experience filtered through our own subjective chassis, photographs are a further copy of this facsimile. This knowledge frees Obregon to take clever liberties with source images. Despite developing close affinity with the photographs she chooses to paint from, her

preparation involves selective cropping and re-framing. Such choices create further estrangement from the real person captured in the 'original' image, redrawing the uncrossable threshold between the artist and her subjects.

Portraits such as *counting your fingers* and *lodged in the gaps*, hung on the North wall, depict figures with closed eyes or turned away faces. Forms appear hazy or with blurred features, qualities which imbue their visages with a ghostly ambiance. Rather than a cool spectrality instrumentalized towards creating vibe-y ethereal aesthetics, Obregon layers warm earth tones and emphasizes the burlap surface she paints on to ground these subjects. Though they resist being known, they are undeniably rooted in the world; a dichotomy of found photography that gets retained despite the shifting medium.

The perforated weave of burlap is suitably symbolic for the porous nature of memory. Hyperabsorbent fibers work in tension with the oil paints, in places creating constellations of small apertures that expose the rough surface of the fabric. What began as a straightforward textural fascination revealed kismet overlap with the Chilean threads of Obregon's own familial history, and one of many examples in which this project doesn't force thematic associations but instead allows them to organically emerge. Burlap is a foundational textile in arpilleras—Chilean patchwork tapestries prominently sewn by women as subversive acts of protest during seventeen years of military dictatorship from 1973-1990. While developing this body of work, examples in Obregon's mother's home became newly noticeable to the artist.

Following these lines of inquiry, the film projected onto the front west wall of the gallery space, *Keyhole*, turns towards the moving image by way of gel transfers onto 16 mm film. Analogous to the natural imperfections created by burlap, the movement of lifting

archival images and transferring them onto film strips creates gaps, tears, or ruptures in the picture, which imply that memory itself is always incomplete and perennially changing shape. These fragmented montages self-reflexively confront their archival source material, raising the spectre of the normative, nuclear family unit in order to make it strange and illegible. Since dominant structures gain their power through repeated social cues, presentations, and conventions, the literal snags in these moving cinematic tapestries showcase the ways that all families are inherently fractured groups.

Curating family records may discipline the presentation of personal histories, but Obregon's pieces are a testament to ways in which the past evades decisive attempts to return to it. We rarely consciously choose when a memory erupts within us. In her essay film *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008), eighty-year-old Varda receives a surprising invitation to visit her childhood home in Brussels before it is sold. Standing in the nearly unchanged garden where she spent formative years Varda muses "the garden is here, but not the emotions."¹ Her reflective wanderings through old rooms are soon derailed by a conversation with the owner about his immense collection of miniature trains. Instead of resisting, Varda follows the thread, delving into a filmed interview with this collector and his wife. Much like Obregon's work on display here indicates, unearthing memory 'just as it was' might be an endless pursuit, but the act of this searching might move us towards unanticipated pathways and surprising connections.

– Katherine Connell

¹ *The Beaches of Agnès*. Directed by Agnès Varda, Ciné-Tamaris, 2008.