

Gail Rebhan – ‘About Time’

27 Feb 2023 Leave a comment

Some time in late 2020, I started feeling uneasy about my photobook addiction predilection. It took another year before I did anything about it, and one of the first things I did was to stop opening emails from Mack. I got pretty good at this in 2022 and delete-before-reading helped me avoid buying many photobooks. Sadly or, rather, fortunately... I opened a Mack email in January 2023 and a couple of weeks later, [Gail Rebhan's *About Time*](#) arrived on the doorstep.

There's only one thing I have to say about this misstep, this relapse, this backslide: “Gail Rebhan? Where have you been all my life!”

Well... Rebhan is roughly my mother's age; her children are a bit younger than me, but not by much; and by the time I was born, Rebhan already completed a couple of incredible bodies of work. That it's 2023, at time of writing, and despite a long interest in serial work, in work that explores some hidden side of an individual's personal life, in public art and the uses of art in public spaces, and in different ways of mixing image and text, and that I'm only just now learning of Rebhan is somehow unsurprising. And that's something that Rebhan made work on throughout her long career.

The early serial work focuses mostly on Rebhan's home life, her husband Mark and his mother. In a handful of 4 image (drugstore print sized) vignettes, Mark watches television while his older mother serves him coffee or looks after Rebhan's young child. In one, the mother selects a turkey and Mark hefts it into a shopping cart. The Second Wave Feminist subtext is unobtrusive and probably only obvious in hindsight, and the environments look like my childhood. Or, rather, like the childhood of some wealthier schoolmates and people on TV.

<https://youtu.be/AGJoLjrXWk>

During her second pregnancy, Rebhan took a self portrait every day for 280 days. In the frame, Rebhan is small: hanging clothes, random things on the floor, and other closetware fills most of the image, with Rebhan down at the end, mostly smiling as she triggers the camera. And another early series shows a clothes hamper, dish drain, Rebhan's shoes at various intervals, usually over 3 or 4 days. The hamper fills, empties, and fills again; the dish drain is never empty; Rebhan isn't (or wasn't) good at putting her shoes away. And given her university job and two young kids, and a husband who seemed to mostly just watch television, who would even think to put shoes away?

These early sets are probably my favorite, if I'm honest. The feminism is in full effect and is deeply appreciated, but it's all tongue in cheek and fairly even handed. In the later 1980s and 1990s, Rebhan moved into more image/text collage work, and a couple made me laugh out loud. The feminism is much more obvious here, and I think it all fits the times (especially in the academy, where Rebhan spent her entire career). Early ones were of the text and images pasted on posterboard variety, and in the 1990s she moved into Photoshop and mostly stayed there. The text became integral to the image, obscuring and disappearing into the images behind.

In the later 1990s and early 2000s, Rebhan made work about her aging father, who suffered from Alzheimer's. This work hit me fairly hard, really. My own dad suffered from dementia in the last years of his life and he became impossible to deal with, and Allah forgive me. Part of me wanted to be a caregiver for him; we had him here for a weekend, and I won't go into it, but even two days and a night were very nearly unbearable. Even Samie, my wife's younger son (he's 26 now), recognized how stressed out I was, and he's largely oblivious to most things, as any good male in his mid-20s would be, or, rather, as I certainly was. I wasn't strong enough or committed enough to be present, let alone present and focused enough to make pictures and notes, to make the sort of memorial project that Rebhan made. She wasn't particularly kind: it was all just the facts. She's never one to mince words in her work, and coming from a two families (Mom's and Dad's) that never really said anything they actually meant, it's refreshing.

Once her father passed, Rebhan's sons moved into adulthood and Rebhan made work on that slow transition, photographing objects as they moved around a cluttered floor or bed, and making a few collages of things, like a collection of cables she found in the basement band practice space, untangled, and coiled neatly. Both the work with her father and the work about her sons sparks ideas for me, things I might look into more in my own work, makes me want to dig into Dad's (and Granddad's) archives more, get serious about scanning and all again.

Once the sons were sorted and on their own, Rebhan moved into the public art realm. She made placards featuring people and places in and around Washington DC, mixing archival and contemporary photographs, newspaper clippings, and various things to create brief stories of people and places over DC's history. This project morphed into work with DC activist groups working to protect an African American cemetery, making T-shirts and protest signs and things. The arc of Rebhan's career is really interesting: a focus on her self and home life, moves into a focus on her family life, caring for her older father, her children, and then moving out into the world, looking back and then moving into the present, and *About Time* is a brilliant overview of Rebhan's oeuvre.

Concept	★★★★★
Content	★★★★★
Design	★★★★★

Overall, I rate *About Time* a solid 4 stars.



I haven't even mentioned Sally Stein's excellent running commentary... In fact, *About Time* is subtitled 'Four Decades of Photographic Series with Running Commentary by Sally Stein,' and the text works to clarify and expand on the more theory-heavy parts of Rebhan's work. It's not entirely necessary, I think, but it works and I read every word twice.

Anyway, If you have any interest in series work, [About Time](#) should be on the top of your to-buy list. It's a good one. And for more on Rebhan, visit [her website](#), which has much more to explore.

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