

Isabelle Boccon-Gibod



Structure

“How do members of families relate to one another, and how are those relational structures revealed—or occluded—by the image we present to others?”

Daniel Mendelsohn

PHOTOGRAPHS: ISABELLE BOCCON-GIBOD
TEXT (INTRODUCTION): DANIEL MENDELSON
GRAPHIC DESIGN: VALÉRIE GAUTIER
BILINGUAL ENGLISH-FRENCH

TECHNICAL FEATURES

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PRESS

The Book

From 1839 when it was invented, photography has served to create portraits of individuals, and soon thereafter portraits of families, later placed in photo albums. Photography, collected and archived, entered the intimate sphere, enabling people to arrange the fragmented images of their lives as they saw fit. Following its forerunners (miniature portraits, silhouettes, physionotrices), the photographic portrait also served the new expectations of the emerging urban bourgeoisie and its need for **social representation**. Studios opened up in cities everywhere to meet the fast growing demand. In addition, the new medium distinguished itself with its esthetic superiority. “Even as it emerged, although the technique was still very primitive, photography enjoyed an exceptional quality of artistic finish (Gisèle Freund)”. **What can photography show us to day of the visible and invisible aspects of family sociology? “How do the roles we expect them to play betray the emotional realities and complexities of lived life?” wonders Daniel Mendelsohn, in his introduction entitled “Unknown Faces/ Redeeming Structures”.**

With **Structure**, Isabelle Boccon-Gibod reinvents the family portrait and provokes us, in these times of digitalization and shared images, to reflect on the fundamental cell on which every society is based: the family, subject at the center of heated debates when we legislate on parenthood in the context of new

technologies of procreation.

By creating this corpus of fixed black and white images, each composed in a large 5'x7' frame, the photographer has produced **a work of anthropological scope**, reaching beyond representation by placing the subject at palpable distance, thereby objectifying it. What should we think of these seemingly impassive faces and their hypnotic gazes, what should we think of these postures, seated or standing? What goes on within these families and outside the frame? The use of a rigid protocol similar in all sessions makes every family portraits intriguing, and encourages our reflection.

Inspired by the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose esthetics of objectivity tended towards minimalism, Isabelle Boccon-Gibod, a self-made artist, with an interest for technique, has played with a frontality quite similar to that of the Bechers, resting on the idea that our bodies, when joined together, form a sort of architecture. The idea, also, that a face, deprived of its smile, offers a neutrality of expression worth considering: masks fall and reveal a nakedness (naked truth?) to be admired and deciphered beyond the appearances of social games. She was guided, yet not limited, by this principle: the image of a family seen as a façade-like structure, in which faces are the windows.

The Photographer

Isabelle Boccon-Gibod began making use of photography when she lived in England, and has largely devoted herself to it since her return to Paris in 2004.

She has taught History of Photography at the Paris College of Arts. A graduate of the Ecole Centrale School of Engineering and a former student at Columbia University, after a brilliant career in the paper industry, she now serves as non-executive director on the boards of six industrial companies. In addition, she has made a career as an author : she has published *Fors intérieurs, rendez-vous avec des mathématiciens* (Leo Scheer, 2011), which received a special mention from the d'Alembert Prize (2012) and *Entre leurs mains, enquête sur l'exercice du pouvoir* (Plein jour, 2014).

Structure is her second book of photographs, after *Sous les ponts, Paris*, published in 2014 by Editions Verlhac. She has shown her photographs and videos in Paris, Brussels and Haifa.

The Author

Daniel Mendelsohn has won numerous awards including the National Book Critics Circle in 2006, the French 2007 prix Médicis for foreign literature and the Book of the Year prize (given by Lire magazine) for his book *The Lost*. His latest works are *An Odyssey: a Father, a Son and an Epic* (2017) and *Three Rings* (2020). For his introduction to **Structure**, he wove together links between Isabelle Boccon-Gibod's work and his own family history. It comes as no surprise that a writer such as Daniel Mendelsohn would be so moved by these portraits. It can clearly be stated here that literature is a photograph without images, and photography, a fiction without words.

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Extracts

I wish, now, that I had been able to see Isabelle Boccon-Gibod's "Structure" twenty years ago; for I had, I may well have found solace, even pleasure, in that ramshackle and anonymous assortment of my family's photographs, instead of feeling only grief for the information they could never provide. In this powerful new work—a series of arrestingly formal, seemingly plain black-and-white images of family groups—Boccon-Gibod calls into question any need to label or "identify" the people you are looking at."

Daniel Mendelsohn, introduction *Structure*,
Unknown Faces / Redemptive Structures

Unknown Faces / Redemptive Structures

Daniel Mendelsohn

About twenty years ago, in a sunlight-drenched living room in Haifa, I sat looking with grief at a box full of darkened family photographs. The grief was only partly because I was aware of the terrible fate that awaited some of the faces I was looking at. Solemnly staring into the camera's lens, unsmiling (as faces in nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs always are), these faces hovered eerily over bodies that were perched on the edges of cane chairs or standing stiffly in front of potted palms, the gray-bearded *paterfamilias* in a high fur hat framed by his dark-eyed sons, the newlywed husband and wife uncomfortably clasping each other's forearms, memories of the visits to the marriage-broker still fresh in their minds; four girls lined up behind their mother's bustle, like ducklings on a pond; all of them clearly ill at ease, tightly stuffed into the military uniforms and wedding dresses and borrowed fur coats, alternately embarrassed by and proud of their top hats, the ostrich feathers, the boots with their many buttons up the side.

I had come to Haifa to look at these photographs as part of research I was doing about my family's history in Poland during the Second World War; this is why I knew the destinies that awaited some of the faces I was looking at that summer's day.

But the sadness I felt that day stemmed mostly from the fact that I had no idea who these people were—a frustration compounded by the fact that I had waited forty years to hold these photographs in my hand. From early childhood, when I first started asking my relatives about our family's past, I would occasionally pester my mother to get access to the photo album that had belonged to her parents, which lay decaying in a cardboard box in our basement, its stiff black pages crumbling in your fingers as you anxiously turned them; an album that contained a handful of photographs of our Polish relations who had disappeared during the war—the ones I was especially eager to know about, and to look at, since of course they had vanished off the face of the earth.

These pictures, both the stiff studio portraits and the snapshots with their strange frilly edges, all bore two sets of labels: first, the carefully inked captions that my Polish great-uncle had written on the back when he first sent them to his brothers and sister in America ("Shmiel, Ester, Bronia, 1939"), and then the much later addition, scrawled in bold felt-tipped blue pen by my grandfather: UNCLE SHMIEL AND FAMILY, KILLED BY THE NAZIS. Of these, we had only a handful; the album I really needed to consult, according to my elderly relatives during the early days of my research, was the enormous one belonging to my great-aunt Miriam in Haifa. Far older than the one in my mother's basement, this album contained the most ancient photographs of our family, photographs going back to the mid-nineteenth century, pictures that had been brought out of our ancestral town in Poland by Miriam and her husband to Palestine, where they settled in the 1930s, before the town and everyone in it disappeared from history.

And so, four decades after those first steps, I made my way to Haifa, to the bright apartment where Miriam's daughter now lives, and asked to see the famous album. Smiling, Bruria—who bears an uncanny resemblance to my mother, her first cousin—brought out the box that now holds all the photos in her late mother's album; the album itself, those black pages to which the white corners had been glued, having long since fallen to pieces. Trembling, I began to pick up the curled, browning photos—only to discover, as I turned each one over, that not a single photo had been labeled.

None of these faces, I realized, could ever be identified. They were as anonymous and lost as if they'd never been.

Dumbstruck, I sat on Bruria's sofa, noisily expressing delight at having been granted access to these family photographs, not wanting her to perceive how crushed I actually was by the realization that there was no way to make these beautiful images part of the story I wanted to tell. It was, I thought, a kind

Isabelle Boccon-Gibod has said of her work on *Structure*, which spanned three years, from 2017 through 2019:

I realized along the way that the technical and formal constraints I had chosen for this work allowed me to keep in check the strong emotions each of the sessions set off in me. I hope that *Structure*, in addition to what anyone may freely project into it, may demonstrate that rigor can produce gentleness and that formalism and emotion can happily hold hands.”



20



21

