

Photographer takes on another life in self-portraits

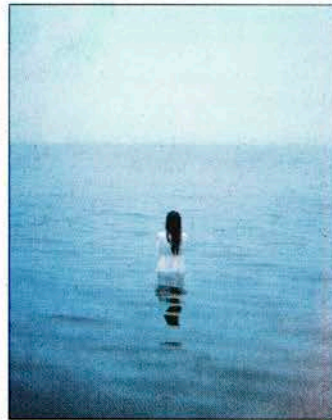
BRINGING A VICTORIAN WOMAN BACK TO LIFE

By Marshall Williams
Special to The Sun

THERE MAY BE A GHOST HAUNTING URI. If so, she seems benevolent, and anxious to reach out to us mortals. You can learn about her from her present-day friend, and even see her photograph, in an exhibit opening Jan. 30 at the Fine Arts Center Galleries.

To back up a little: About five years ago, New York photographer Stacy Renee Morrison came across a small, old tattered leather trunk on a trash pile on Crosby Street in Soho, near where she lives. Inside were daguerrotype photographs of a young woman, and personal items like dance cards and bits of lace.

"It was very happenstance and very random," says Morrison, "but it kind of changed my life. At first I didn't take it very seriously; I found the trunk in 2002 across from my apartment building, and I used a few of the things in photo projects. I



A photograph by New York photographer Stacy Renee Morrison.

loved them, but they were still anonymous for me. But after two years or so, I looked at the calling cards in the box, and other things,

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Shown above are some of Morrison's photos that will be on display.

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and realized that I might be able to figure out who the box belonged to."

Starting out at the New York Public Library, with those calling cards and other clues in hand, Morrison found out the likely original owner of the trunk was Sylvia DeWolf Ostrander, who grew up in a prominent Bristol, R.I., family, and divided her adult life between Bristol and New York City. She lived from 1841 to 1925, had a younger sister named Annie to whom she was devoted, fell in love with a Civil War soldier, and married his brother after he died at the Battle of Bull Run.

"Now, I really think of myself as a detective," Morrison says with a laugh. "Unfortunately I'm also an adjunct college professor (at Montclair State University in New Jersey), so I couldn't spend all my time on this project, which sort of began to take over my life. I would come up to Rhode Island during my school breaks, and I spend a week there every summer, doing research, making photographs, and learning all I can about Sylvia. In the past three years, I've devoted all of my available time and energy to discover everything in the world about my beloved."

Morrison has now met Sylvia's great-granddaughter, whom she found through her research, and who presented her with another trunk full of Sylvia's things, including diaries and clothing.

"The clothing fits me perfectly, and that's a little strange, but I think it's just part of this whole experience for me. In a way this project is also about me. Learning about Sylvia is helping me learn about myself."

One thing Morrison says she's learning about is why and how she became a photographer. "My work deals with women's history and memory, so this project fits into that perfectly," she says. "I kind of use photography as a way to express something coming from my imagination, not from the reality of what I'm taking photos of. My work resembles painting more than photography, I think. The pictures are previsualized. It's not something where I'm going in and photographing a scene, a street scene or something like that, which is already there. It's a different way to use photography."

Morrison's work resembles that of the renowned contemporary photographer Cindy Sherman, who dresses herself up as a character—often a film star or femme fatale—and places herself in the center of an elaborately contrived scene. In Morrison's photos of herself as Sylvia, the unfulfilled desire to become someone else is strikingly evident.

Perhaps inevitably, Morrison has titled her exhibit "The Girl of My Dreams." It is based entirely on her work with the Sylvia DeWolf Ostrander memorabilia. Morrison will give a talk about her work on Wednesday, Feb. 6, at 2 p.m., and there will be an opening reception the following day from 4 to 6 p.m. The exhibit and talk will be in the Fine Arts Center at URI in Kingston, where the exhibition will remain on display through March 16.

"There are two parts to the exhibit," she says. "The first photographs I made were photos of the objects in the box, and they are very literal. I couldn't believe they were so beautiful, and I lovingly photographed all the objects with this large, slow studio camera."

The objects include a daguerrotype portrait of the real Sylvia; dance cards; an invitation to a ball in Boston honoring the Prince of Wales ("How could anyone have thrown that away?" Morrison asks incredulously); and, perhaps most mysteriously, several fragments of Victorian wallpaper. On the back of one is written, in Sylvia's own handwriting, "pieces of paper from front bedroom in my house kept because Annie saw it last with this paper on. Wednesday Nov. 3rd 1886."

"That was just very strange to me, that Sylvia kept some bits of wallpaper because her sister had looked at it before she died," says Morrison.

"The second part of the exhibit consists of what I call translating her life for her, where I'm rebuilding and rethinking Sylvia's life. I have a bunch of books that Sylvia read as a teenager, and I've created photos based on the plots of these books. And a lot of the time I use myself, dressed in her clothing, and I really believe I am her. I photograph myself in her town, and I make photographs based on places and events in her life."

In one photo, "Revelation," Morrison, wearing Sylvia's dress, is standing waist-deep in Narragansett Bay on the Bristol coast. In another she's seen as a ghostly, half-developed image superimposed on a rock wall, as if Sylvia were struggling to come back to reality.

"It is not a fantasy world," Morrison says of her photographic creations, "but a very real place where we co-exist together. I float backwards, an apparition in a foreign time and place, slowly placing her life in context. She comes to visit me in the present, carefully supplying me with sacred details from her once life."

Considering the happenstance nature of her discoveries, Morrison has learned an astonishing amount about Sylvia. "There is a wealth of information about the male members of her family," she says. "Her grandfather was a professor at Brown. Her father was a slave trader, and a Rhode Island politician and legislator. For the women, it was really hard to find out anything, but now I've gotten diaries and letters from the family, and I know that Sylvia went back and forth between New York and

Bristol. She traveled a lot, and she lived in three different boroughs in New York. She was certainly a woman of social means. She had a sister in Kentucky and she'd write a letter describing a day of shopping with her mother in Providence. So I am beginning to know her life intimately from birth until death."

Morrison, 33, grew up in Morris Plains, New Jersey, and attended Rutgers University as an undergraduate, majoring in women's studies, and New York University as a graduate student, when she began taking up photography. She's lived in Manhattan for 12 years, teaches at Montclair State University, and her husband, Eric Weeks, is also a photographer. "It's been very patient with this whole project," she says, "and it's great to have someone to bounce ideas off."

Morrison began traveling to the University of Rhode Island during her early research into the DeWolf family. "Before I found Sylvia's descendants, I found out that URI had all the personal papers of Elizabeth Colt, who was Sylvia's sister, 17 years younger. She was called Dot, and Dot sort of became my portal into that world, because there were so many personal papers there—reading them told me how Sylvia would have thought and how she would have written. Dot married Samuel Pomeroy Colt, also from Bristol, of course, and their son Russell Colt married Ethel Barrymore. So I'm very excited about doing this project at URI because in a way it's bringing Sylvia home."

And has she finished her work on Sylvia, now that the exhibit's in place? "No, I'm not done," she says. "I'm still reading her journals. Sylvia had a close relationship with a gentleman in the Civil War. He died after the battle of Bull Run and she then married his younger brother. Something I have to do is photograph a Civil War reenactment, and I would like to find his grave, which is in Hartford. So I just feel I have a lot more to do."

"Sylvia will tell me when I'm done," she laughs.

At a Glance

"The Girl of My Dreams"
Stacy Renee Morrison
Photo exhibit, Fine Arts
Center, URI, Kingston
Feb. 6—March 16