



KEN OKIISHI

A MODEL CHILDHOOD

The Art Gallery, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

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Foreword by Maika Pollack
Introduction by Negar Azimi

The Art Gallery, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

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Foreword

In the exhibition *A Model Childhood*, there is a video that is a kind of found work. Cannily filmed by the artist's mother for insurance purposes, it documents everything that the Okiishis of Ames, Iowa, own. We see hours of cabinets opening and closing—in filming this Mrs. Okiishi is aided by the artist's father, whose hands can be seen drawing down the oven door, and turning over dishes to show their make. The camera glides soundlessly over basement storage shelves filled with Christmas ornaments, stacked sleds, orderly rows of canned foods, closets of ironed shirts, neatly folded sweaters in vacuum-sealed bags. There is a scopophilic fascination to watching this inventory reveal itself in the darkened gallery on its little, luminous Trinitron monitor: What do the Okiishis own? How do they care for it (look how well-kept their home is!)? Despite only catching a glimpse of the embodied Okiishis here and there, in a mirror or picture glass reflection, they are revealed almost intimately through their belongings: a self-portrait under capitalism.

From its very inception in the early nineteenth century, photography has been seen as an aid in authenticating ownership, in playing a role in the legal process by which property is established. The photographer and inventor William Henry Fox Talbot, in *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–1846), a work generally considered the first photographically illustrated book, prophesied the future use of the photographic process not for portraiture, but to document property. Fox Talbot imagined that photography would serve as a boon to private insurance investigations; the text accompanying his salt paper print entitled *Articles of China* (1844–1846) speculates:

Should a thief afterwards purloin the treasures—if the mute testimony of the picture were to be produced against him in court—it would certainly be evidence of a novel kind.

Mrs. Okiishi's video fulfills Fox Talbot's predictions of a future in which the technology of the camera enables a meticulous record-keeping of personal property. The video serves as a chiding example of good stewardship (perhaps you have never made such a visual inventory, but you are reminded that one probably should). There's also a sense of foreboding in watching the slow, glowing inventory of ranged items. To create such a video speaks to an awareness

of the possibility of a devastating fire, home burglary, or other indefinite disaster. It is made in anticipation of the destruction of this tidy home. In the context of Ken Okiishi’s exhibition, which examines the difficult history of Japanese Americans in the twentieth century, the video shows the Okiishis as haunted—unconsciously, irrevocably—by the memory of dispossession that accompanies Japanese American identity in the United States. These are people who know that you may, at any time, lose it all.

In the largest gallery space, *A Model Childhood* features an enormous archive of Ken Okiishi’s childhood possessions. The same artist’s parents seemingly saved everything from their son’s childhood: Doc Martens box; piano recital program; L.L.Bean backpack receipt; stuffed animals; high school art classes; all present. Keanu Reeves DVD; “Shaboom!” magic kit; light-up Christmas angel; accounted for. This physical inventory of American middle-class juvenilia is displayed alongside an imposing banner depicting a shadowy family photograph of the artist’s infant father in 1940 in front of dozens of Japanese Boys’ Day dolls. Of all that *is* present, the dolls—and the Japaneseness that they signify—are mostly absent from the artist’s childhood, and the Okiishi home.

Ken’s paternal grandfather threw this set of dolls into Māmala Bay, Honolulu, in 1942, after the nationalist Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The act of destruction—throwing inherited cultural artifacts away—was a deliberate attempt to get rid of any objects that would mark a home as having a Japanese identity, as this was suddenly made a severe liability in the war between America and Japan, at a time when entire families were being collected, dispossessed of their property, and thrust into concentration camps¹ for Japanese Americans. While on the West Coast of the mainland, all “racially” Japanese people were forced into camps, in Hawai‘i, the entire economy would have collapsed, so the police searched homes without a warrant looking for connections to Japan during the three years the islands were put under martial law. Those deemed “too Japanese” were detained first on the islands at sites like Sand Island, and then shipped off to the concentration camps on the mainland. Other Japanese American families in Honolulu at this time burned photos of the Japanese Emperor and family registers and correspondence in the Japanese language. Japanese American neighborhoods like Kaimuki in Honolulu, where the Okiishi family lived, were filled with smoke at night, a local resident visiting the exhibition recalled.

1 For a discussion of the use of historical terms related to Japanese American history, see <https://densho.org/terminology/>

The exhibition *A Model Childhood* precipitated an outpouring of oral history from a community that rarely shares these stories. Visits to the exhibition would evoke unsolicited but welcome memories and disclosures. In the face of “internment” and its aftermath, every family story felt hushed, felt almost untellable. Although homes and businesses disappeared and the character of entire neighborhoods changed, very little of this history is written down.

The exhibition also serves as the bildungsroman of an individual. While the artist’s paternal grandfather deliberately destroyed the objects which could signal, to the police, the Nisei/Sansei family’s cultural links to Japan, the artist’s parents preserved every physical scrap of their life on the mainland—and their child became an artist.

The series of photographs in this book—about three hundred in all, which were projected in a separate room in the exhibition—show the road trip Ken took after picking up these stored objects of their childhood from the family home. We see glimpses of the home. We see the childhood items loaded up in Ames, Iowa, in neatly labeled boxes—“Ken’s puppet head supplies”—sitting in a rented minivan. The majority of the images in the slideshow are of the drive: from Iowa, through Topaz, Utah, to Los Angeles, California. The resplendent vistas evoke the great photography of Swiss immigrant Robert Frank, whose book, *The Americans*, captured the expanses—and also the fractures—of the American landscape.

On a Guggenheim-grant-sponsored road trip, Frank created the iconic record of the America of 1958. With an introduction by Jack Kerouac, his photo book inaugurates the Beat sensibility. The book finds moments of lonely beauty in the American landscape, but also class inequality, racism, and consumerism so profound that these are its essential subjects. It was widely panned upon publication, with several reviewers arguing that the book was not patriotic enough. Certainly it spoke of a role for photography beyond the sweeping surveys of property and colonial territory that had come before.² Perhaps, the critics insinuated, it took an outsider, a Swiss foreigner, to find and reveal the cracks in American cultural terrain. We see the artist as someone tapped into the moment, someone who finds beauty but who is also deeply critical of contemporary culture.

2 In the 1870s, American landscapes photography realized Fox Talbot’s vision of photography’s role in establishing property, through geographical surveys which mapped the American vision of Manifest Destiny along the 40th parallel by Timothy O’Sullivan and other great immigrant photographers of the American West.

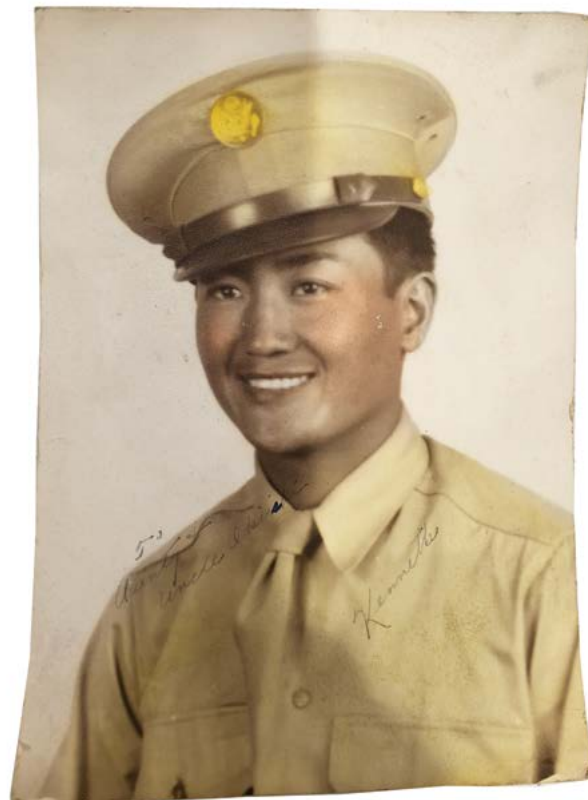
Okiishi's America evokes Frank's. We see the sublime beauty of the highway and landscape combined with car crashes, Halliburton trucks, suburban enclaves, and motel bedrooms. In Utah, Okiishi stops at the Japanese American concentration camp located in Topaz, which only exists as a ruin. We see photographs taken from within a historical museum, and photographs of the site where the camp once stood. Sometimes there's a Ford F-150-type truck leering down on this minivan full of neatly packed stuffed animals and childhood art, and I am reminded how threatened a solo queer and multiracial human might feel on this journey in America in 2018. Estranged or excluded in multiple ways from the America they traverse, Okiishi's photographs enter into the great, critical tradition of Frank's photo book. Photography is the site through which Ken makes both a claim to belonging in this landscape, and to feeling excluded and outside of its very systems of ownership and Americanness. As Kerouac wrote, "What a poem it is."

On the trip from Ames to Los Angeles, Ken's childhood possessions themselves make the journey from stored objects to art. When Ken arrived at Reena Spaulings Fine Art's gallery space near downtown LA, they spent an intensive week turning the journey into an exhibition. They edited a video that includes footage from walking around Topaz, cut with an animation made from a 3D scan of the family home basement storage situated in a virtual desert expanse. The boxes and objects, as well as 3D-printed sculptures made from the point cloud scan data of the basement, found an order in the room. They printed, banner-sized, the baby photo of their father with all the Japanese dolls. Pieces of the exhibition subsequently travelled to Pilar Corrias in London, and to Marseille for *Manifesta 13*, and now to Honolulu, for this expanded and most complete version of the work.

Okiishi's film (*Goodbye to) Manhattan* (2010) told one kind of story about Berlin and New York, and the people who we hoped and believed lived there. *A Model Childhood* tells the story of Honolulu. The Okiishi story, as an allegory of American identity formation, is accessible: Many of us have things in storage, and parents or grandparents who disavowed cultures and histories with the idea that their progeny would somehow be *more American*. Ken Okiishi asks us to think about dispossession as a history as central as possession. *A Model Childhood* speaks to the violent roots, the disavowals, the normalized destruction of cultural histories as simply a stage of becoming "American." Bringing these objects, and with them their braided histories and the ghosts of the Okiishi family history back here, to Honolulu—where this story began, with the first (paternal) Okiishis and (maternal) Tokushimas in Hawai'i over 130 years ago—feels inevitable. The exhibition wouldn't have happened without Ken's vision and artistry, however, and

the support of their gallerists—Reena Spaulings, Pilar Corrias, and Take Ninagawa—and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Department of Art & Art History, the Clifford Arinaga fund, the Student Activity & Program Fee Board, and the Dean's special fund in the College of Arts, Languages & Letters. Thanks to Wayne Kawamoto, Sharon Tasaka, and Olivia Ambo. Thanks most of all to Negar Azimi, the Jack Kerouac to Ken's Robert Frank, "taking rank among the tragic poets of the world."

MAIKA POLLACK, December, 2021, Honolulu, HI



INTRODUCTION

They always change the subject, says Ken Okiishi, when I ask him about how his Japanese American family speaks about the events of World War II. I tell him I'm interested in the games people play with language when it comes to the wounds of the past, the obfuscation and vaguery. I tell him that Lebanese of a certain generation tend to speak of their long civil war as *ahdath*, or "the events," while Iranians refer to their world-changing 1979 revolution as *jarian*, or "the incident." Ken says that any mention of the year 1941 in his family "is met with a 'cut'—like in a film."

**

I'm looking at a photograph of a young Japanese American man, a soldier, captured in the bloom of youth. The photo is hand-tinted in the 1940s studio style, the man's cheeks shaded the hue of ripe cherries, his teeth toothpaste ad white. He's wearing khaki military fatigues, a wholesome smile stretched across his innocent-looking face. A tender cursive on the image's surface reads *To Auntie and Uncle Okiishi*.

The photo is drawn from an archive belonging to Ken Okiishi's father. Reluctant to look in the rearview mirror of history, the elder Okiishi had only recently cracked open a long-sealed box of photographs drawn from a hazily sketched past. Inside, he found the pretty portrait of the soldier mentioned above—a certain Kenneth T.—but also traces of other things: a large family home in Hiroshima; a garden; a black and white photo featuring three generations of humans. The humans are Okiishi relatives via the maternal line. The experience of looking at the image is not necessarily a happy one. Not long after the photo is taken the house and its surroundings will be eviscerated by an atomic bomb. Only some of the pictured will survive.

**

Here is what we know about Kenneth T. of the rosy cheeks. He is a descendant of Japanese stock in Hawai'i, a tribe,



which by the 1940s, accounted for more than one-third of the future Aloha State’s population. Most of the first generation immigrants, referred to as “Issei,” came over as contract laborers, working the fields on the islands’ vast and fortune-making sugarcane plantations. Their children, second generation immigrants like Kenneth T., are referred to as “Nisei.” As a young man during the Second World War, Kenneth T. joined the 442nd Infantry Regiment, a segregated unit composed almost entirely of Japanese Americans. Said to be the most decorated regiment of its size, the 442nd made battle on the European front; some of its members, Kenneth T. among them, played a role in the liberation of Dachau.

As it happens, Kenneth T. is Ken Okiishi’s namesake.

**

The Okiishis were also Japanese immigrants to Hawai‘i in the 1880s. Ken’s paternal grandmother hailed from a family of merchants, the Tokushimas, who once upon a time owned a general store in Kapa‘a Kaua‘i—living a transnational life between Japan and Hawai‘i for two generations before the war. Ken’s grandmother, of the Nisei generation, was also “Kibei,” traveling for periods of time as a child to Hiroshima in order to receive a Japanese education. By the 1960s, she was running a cash register at a J. C. Penney store in Honolulu, where she was famous for being able to do all the numbers in her head. Her husband, Ken’s grandfather, was a Nisei born in a narrow tenement apartment in Honolulu’s Chinatown. As a child, he worked the family farm, raised rabbits which he sold for fifty cents a piece, and put in time at a pineapple cannery. All by age eleven. He was a restless soul; at twelve he changed his name to Clifford “Chin”—a Chinese sobriquet—and subtracted a few years from his birthdate in hopes of getting to serve in the First World War. The plan went to pieces when his mother discovered his army uniform, so he ran away not to the warfront but to Los Angeles instead, where he picked oranges for cash, puttered around in what was then called J-Town, and may or may not have been a gangster. He was, in the Hawai‘i-Japanese parlance of the time, a *waru-kuso*, or “bad little shit.” Eventually, he returned to Hawai‘i.

**



About the unspoken, we know some things: after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Japanese Americans on the West Coast of the United States were vilified en masse, forced—often at gunpoint—to abandon their homes, farms, businesses, and university programs. Some one hundred twenty thousand adults and children were herded into euphemistically-named “relocation camps.” More than two-thirds of these evacuees were American citizens who had lived in the land of the free for two generations. In Hawai‘i, the entire territory was put under martial law for three years. Those deemed “too Japanese” were sent away to camps.

“The evacuees cooperated wholeheartedly. The patriotic among them felt that this was a sacrifice they could make on behalf of America’s war effort,” reads the voice-over on a US government propaganda clip I find on YouTube. The Japanese Americans depicted are made to look like automatons, smiling on cue, piling one by one onto trains that will take them far away. “Naturally, the newcomers looked around with some curiosity. They were in a new area, on land that was raw, untamed, but full of opportunity. Here they would build schools, educate their children, reclaim the desert,” the narration continues.

For thousands of young Japanese American men, joining the military represented the only path out of the camps or the misery of life under martial law. Welcome to the Faustian bargain that is America. Others embraced the ways of the chameleon, performing their *loyalty* as a sort of patriotic shield. Ken’s grandfather, a welder at Pearl Harbor, scrambled to dump all traces of Japan in his family’s possession into the ocean. Among the items he drowned were a series of forty traditional porcelain warrior dolls, gifted to his only child on his first birthday. His son, Ken’s father, learned to shout “Kill the dirty Japs,” at the newsreels that played before the movies during the war. He joined the Mickey Mouse Club, too. An aunt was interned but never spoke of it. A great-uncle, whom the rest of the family called “Pumpkin Head,” was also moved away. Mental illness plagued the family for years. An eerie silence reigned. This is a story pockmarked with secrets.

**

Six decades ago, Ken’s father landed in Ames, Iowa, where he studied engineering, married a modern dance and psychology major whose Mormon pioneer family line could be traced all the way back to the Mayflower, and went on

to become a distinguished professor. When in 1992 the historian Ronald Takaki penned a landmark article entitled “Asian Americans: The Myth of the Model Minority,” he may as well have been evoking Ken’s father. (Takaki and Okiishi did, in fact, grow up in the same neighborhood in Honolulu and at the same time.) This model minority, as the cartoonish stereotype suggested, was America’s greatest success story: the wiz who surpassed his white peers in the academy and business, aced the SAT, etcetera. “Why are Asian Americans doing so exceptionally well in school?” asked TV personality Mike Wallace on CBS’s *60 Minutes*, echoing many popular narratives of the time. And yet this model minority was nothing more than a *myth*, Takaki argued, a twisted and fantastical projection onto a community that lived without access to anything even remotely resembling equality.

**

When Ken was a little boy, Japan occupied an ambiguous place in the family psychogeography. His father claimed not to speak any Japanese, which was a mostly unconscious lie. Japaneseness was embedded in everything he said and did, from the way he arranged his food on a plate or dipped his vegetables in mayonnaise; certain facial expressions; the manner in which he conducted himself in disagreements. Japan had seeped into the cracks of *This American Life*. There was this, as well: the idea that everything can or will be taken away from you at any moment. That, too, was quintessentially *Japanese American*.

**

Have you seen the Barbara Loden film *Wanda* about a young woman stumbling through life and love and a little madness? She’s a miner’s daughter and hers is a begloomed portrait of American desuetude. That’s the landscape I want you to hold in your mind.

**

Behold the detritus of a model childhood. On April 29th, 2018 Ken collected their childhood belongings from age zero to twenty-one and piled it all into a rented van. Gazing at photos of the event, I find a robot-making kit, sundry and ancient report cards, a childhood drawing of animals carrying supplies through the desert—an allegory?—a laser disc of the Keanu Reeves movie *A Walk in the Clouds*, books by Gary Indiana and Kathy Acker and bell hooks and John Cage, a pretty diorama of the Swiss Alps, a lovingly preserved copy of the *Village Voice*, “Queer Issue,” puppets, sheet music for piano (Bach, Debussy, Boulez). For years, these items had lived in the Okiishi basement, packed away in giant plastic Tupperware containers.

The destination for this Okiishiana was to be Los Angeles, an exhibition at Reena Spaulings Fine Art. But first, a detour to the village of Delta, Utah, a locale Ken happened upon while studying the map for possible routes to the West Coast. “It was only half-conscious,” they recall now of the decision to visit one of the war-time concentration camps that had loomed so large in their family history.

A random sampling of what Ken encountered en route: dust storms; car accidents; bleak coal miners’ country; a night spent at the seedy yet grand hotel where *The Shining* was filmed; Frank Ocean songs on repeat; right-wing talk radio; a truck labeled “Halliburton.” Arriving at what was once the Topaz Internment Camp in Delta, they descended upon a topography of barbed wire and desolation; earth like cracked terracotta; a watch tower in ruins; rusty decades-old nails; traces of what were once latrines; earnest signage, care of a virtuous Boy Scouts’ project. A set for a play in which all the principal characters have disappeared.

**

When Dorothea Lange, famous for her Dust Bowl photos of the 1930s, was commissioned by the US government’s War Relocation Authority to take photographs of one of the camps, her work was impounded, quietly stashed away. Brimming with pathos, the images did not reflect well on America. (Cut to propaganda voice.)

**

In American culture, going to camp is a rite of passage. I know this because my parents emigrated to America from Iran, and for a younger me, summer camp seemed like a sort of paradise, something I aspired to if only to better fit in. In my mind, camp was full of quintessentially American activities, like fishing and camping and eating exotic sugar sandwiches called s’mores. At age eleven, Ken’s parents sent him to Boy Scouts’ camp, where he projectile vomited upon arrival. He lasted exactly one night before asking to be sent home.

**

Stare at Ken’s road-trip photos long enough and the camp at Topaz begins to look like the archetypical American suburb. Linger over the bland uniformity, the fences, the grid, an architecture made for surveillance, an architecture that breeds depression. Think of Todd Haynes’ 1995 movie *Safe*, Julianne Moore stumbling through her gilded suburban cage, poisoned by ambiguous domestic despair. The camp/suburb is both holy grail and danger zone. Conjure the motif of white picket fences alongside lurid tales of kidnappings, tragic smiling-child-faces printed on milk cartons. Here it is again, the violence unleashed by euphemism: “relocation camp.”

**

In Mormon culture, one is encouraged to keep a year’s worth of supplies at home. You do this in case of natural disaster or, more pertinently, in preparation for the tribulations that will accompany the second coming of Jesus Christ. The supplies offer up a sort of insurance, a lifesaving infrastructure for when it all comes tumbling down.

**

In Los Angeles, Ken spread the Tupperware archive in a grid formation across a darkened gallery. A video entitled *Family History Video for Insurance Purposes* looped in one corner. Its contents: exactly that. The video is an incredible artifact; as Ken describes it, “a hard drive of life data” that came to be when the artist’s mother set out to

document every last item in their home. A video archive that is both tedious and fascinating, a completionist’s fantasy: mom’s daily journals from age ten to the present; boxes from the artist’s father’s season in Vietnam; synthetic tropical flowers; precious family silver; shampoo bottles; scraps of paper; etcetera. Elsewhere, projected onto a wall through all the childhood ephemera, there’s a 3D scan of the family basement. The image was prepared by a forensics company whose remit is scanning crime scenes. This feels like more than archaeology as metaphor.

**

While the exhibition was on view in Los Angeles, the Donald J. Trump administration was once again playing the villain in the movie about America, “putting children in cages” according to the prevailing media shorthand. The children were unlucky and undocumented, amassed at the southern border, fleeing conflicts that were almost always the legacy of American imperialism. Sanctimonious liberals screeched: *This is not us!* But historians knew better. What was playing out was not exceptionalism, but continuity. The past is not a foreign country after all.

**

One object in *A Model Childhood* especially stands out: a plastic angel effigy that hovers above all the life debris, a little like a surveillance cam. The figure’s hair is black, his cheeks rouged, his mouth open in a performance of awe. Swathed in a monkish white robe, he clasps a red book to his chest. I ask Ken where the figurine comes from, but they can’t remember. Perhaps they swiped it from a nativity scene somewhere. Perhaps it was a youthful Salvation Army find. The angel, beatific, more than perfect, beams with the hollow glow of the model minority. Looking at it reminded me of a plaque I had seen elsewhere in the gallery. It was for a high school all-state visual arts award. A blank space on it reads: *place your photo here.*

NEGAR AZIMI



12/25/47

CS31

Mother

PHOTOGRAPHS











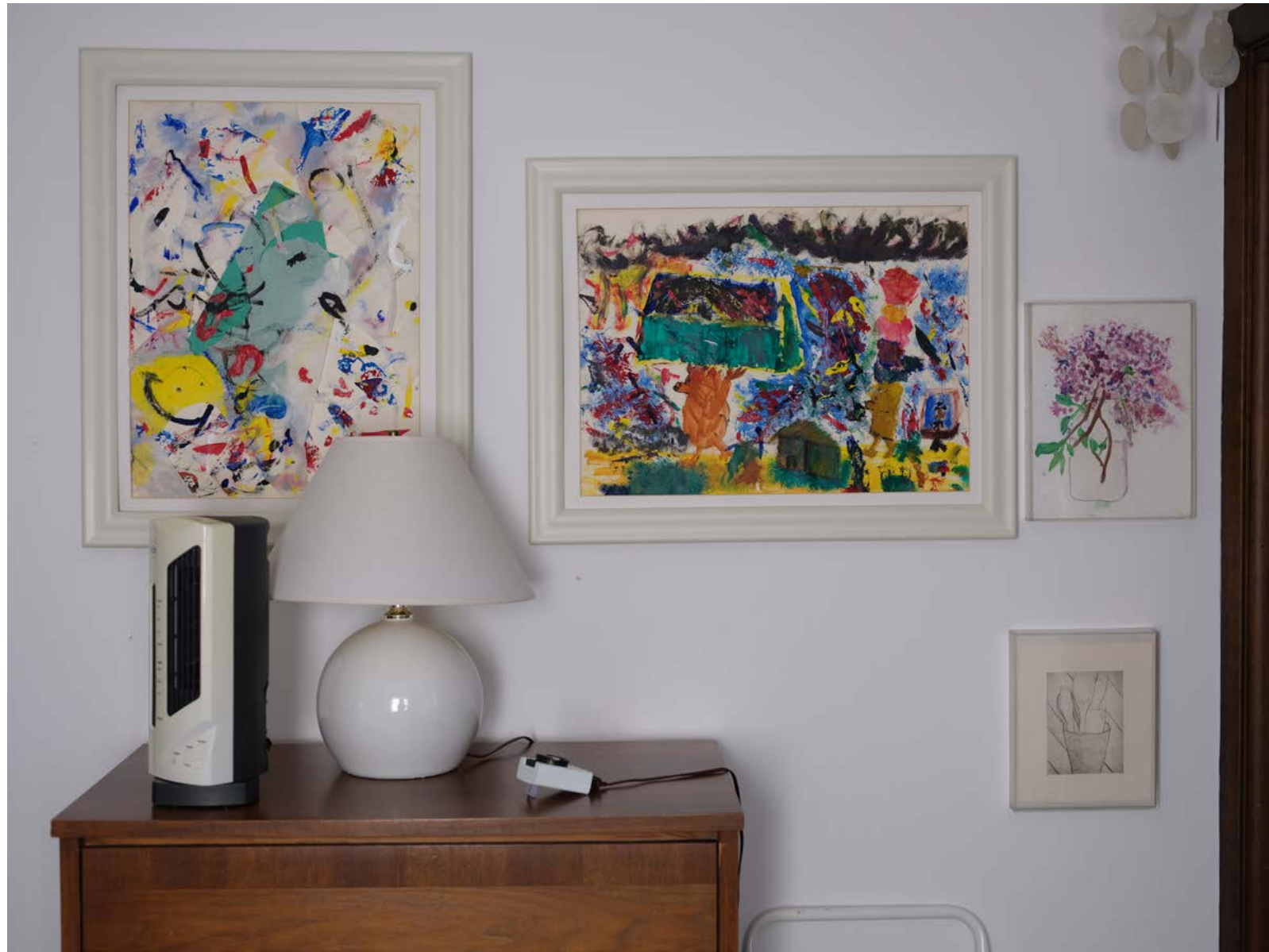




















































































































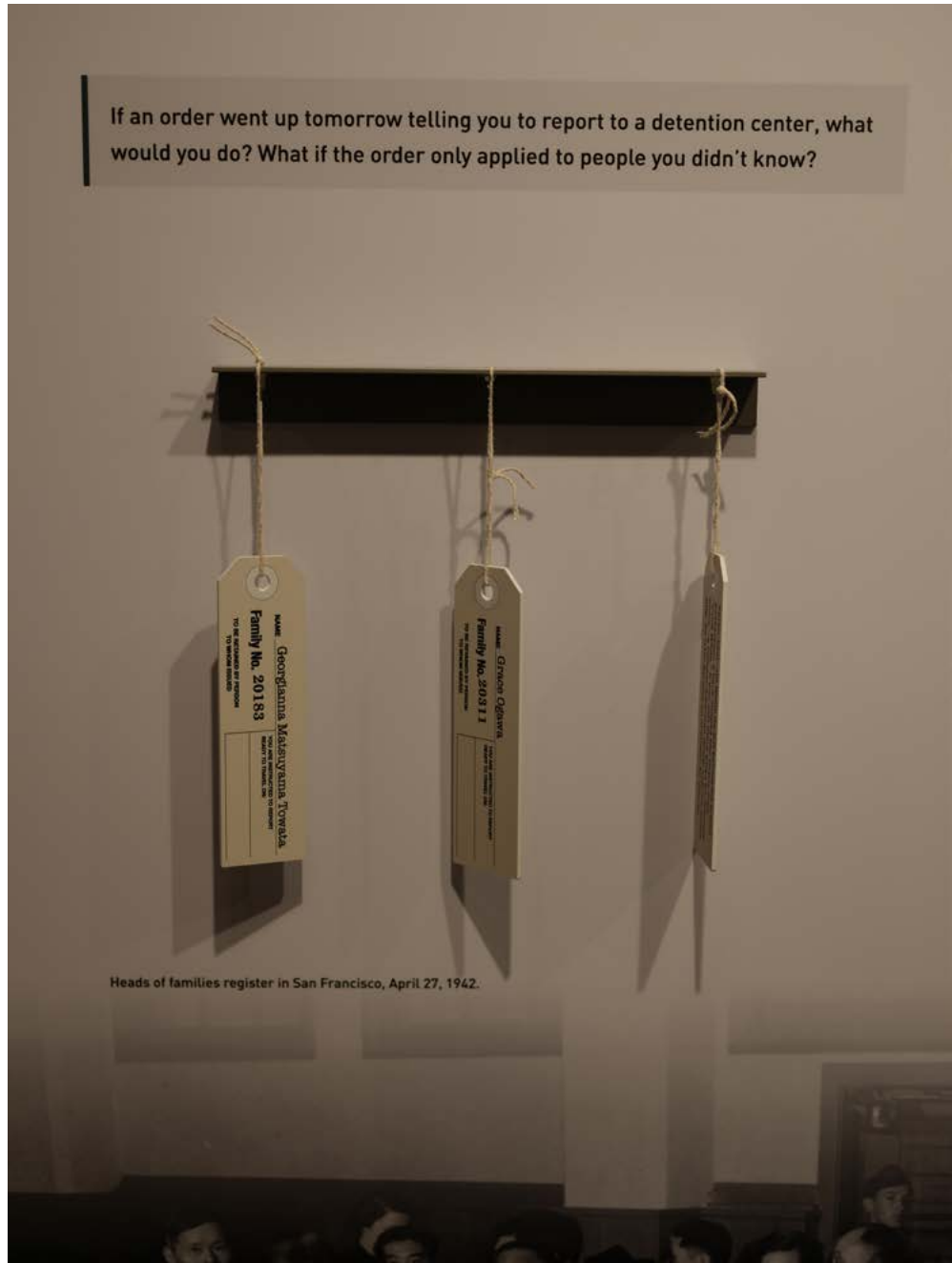
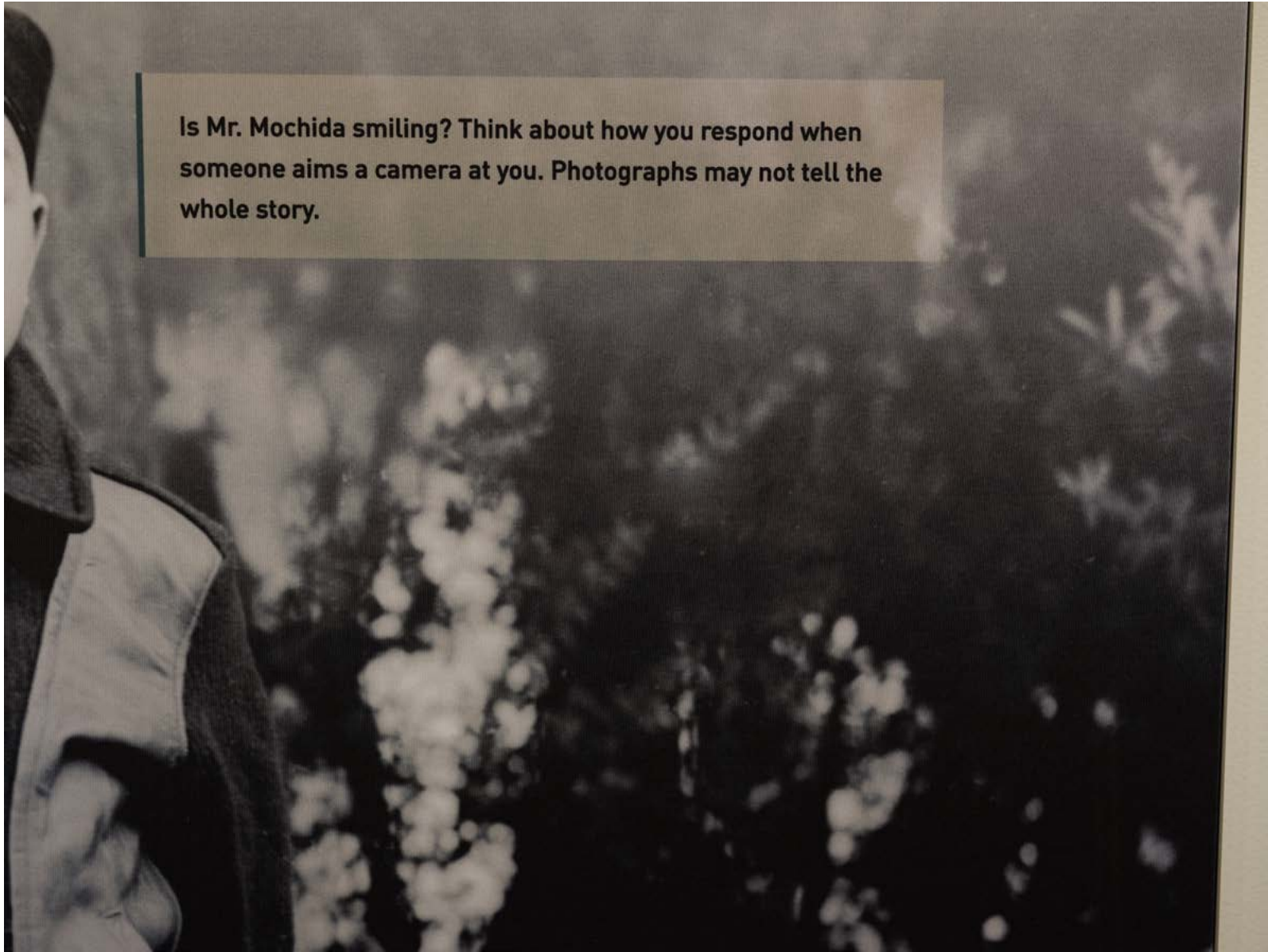




after a long cross-country journey

























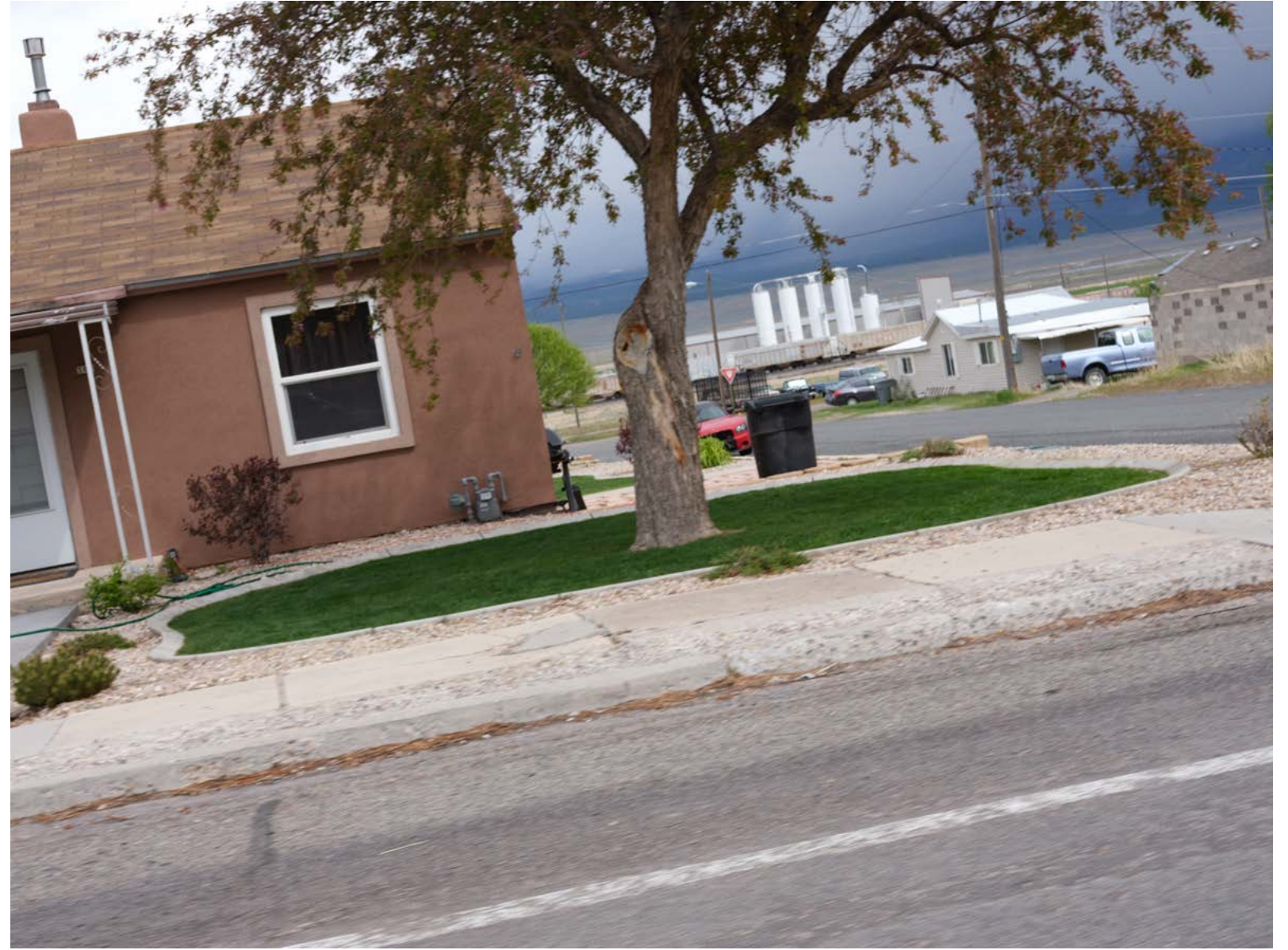


















































































INSTALLATION VIEWS

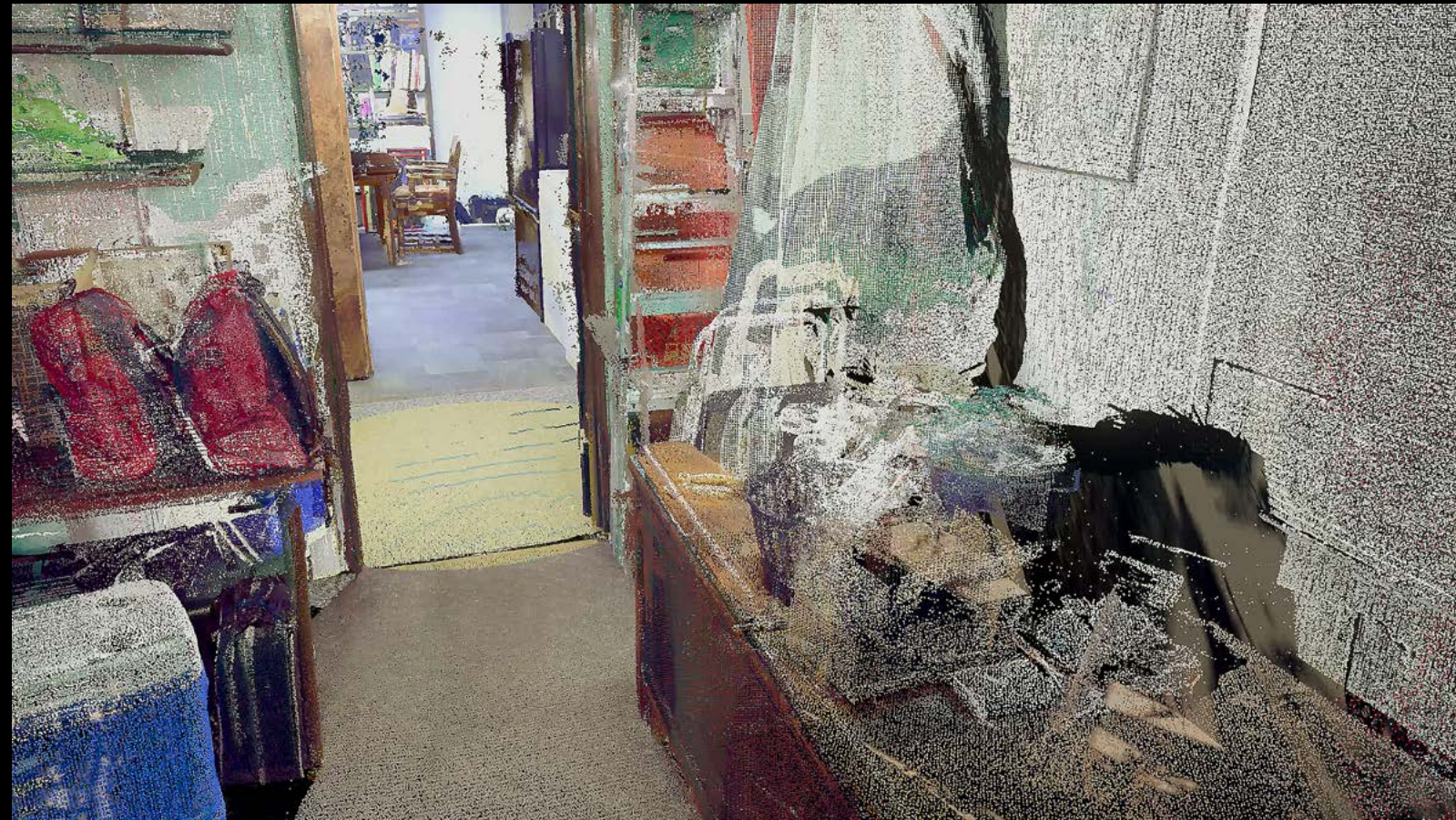
Reena Spaulings Fine Art, Los Angeles, May 12 – June 16, 2018

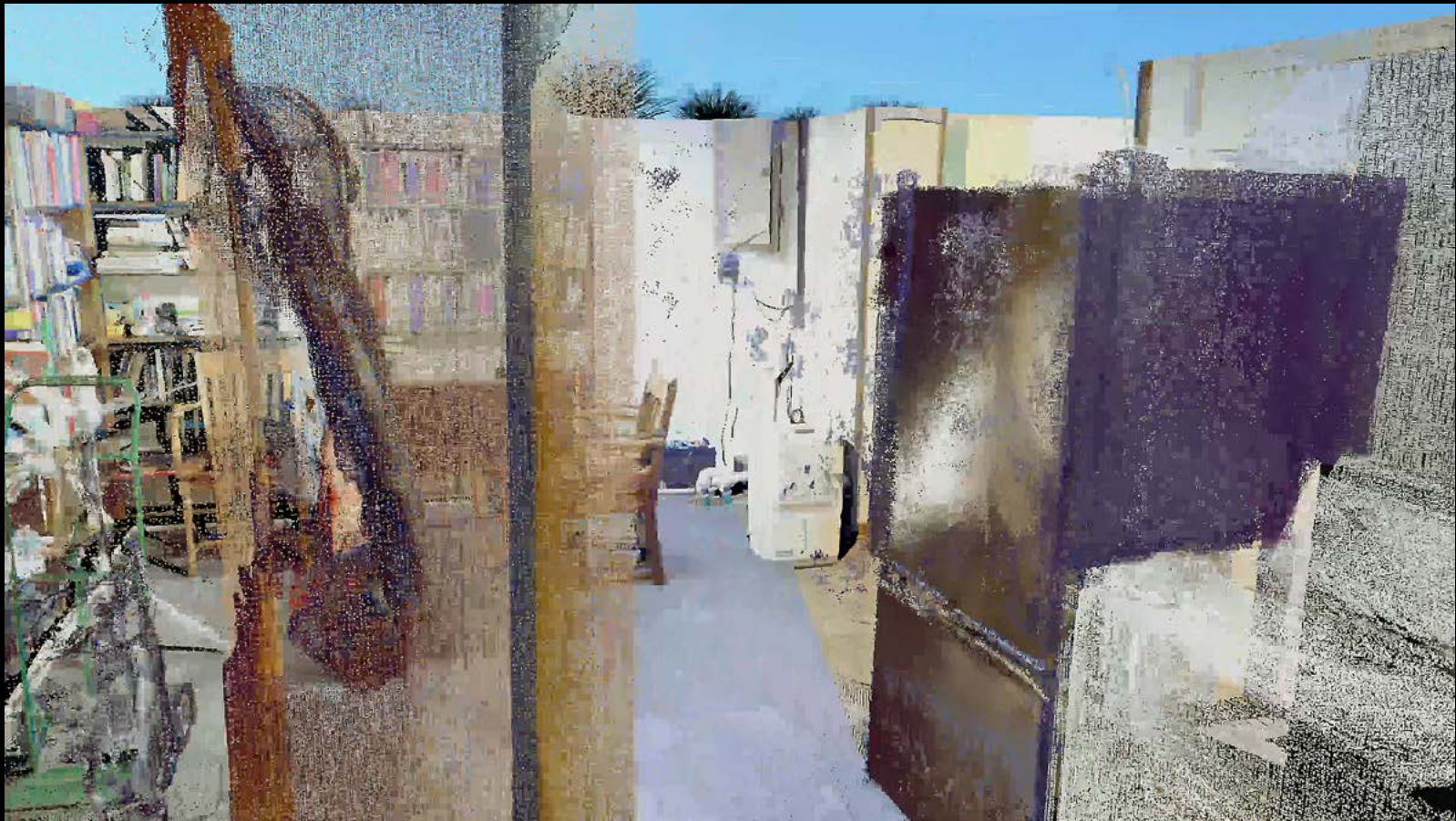


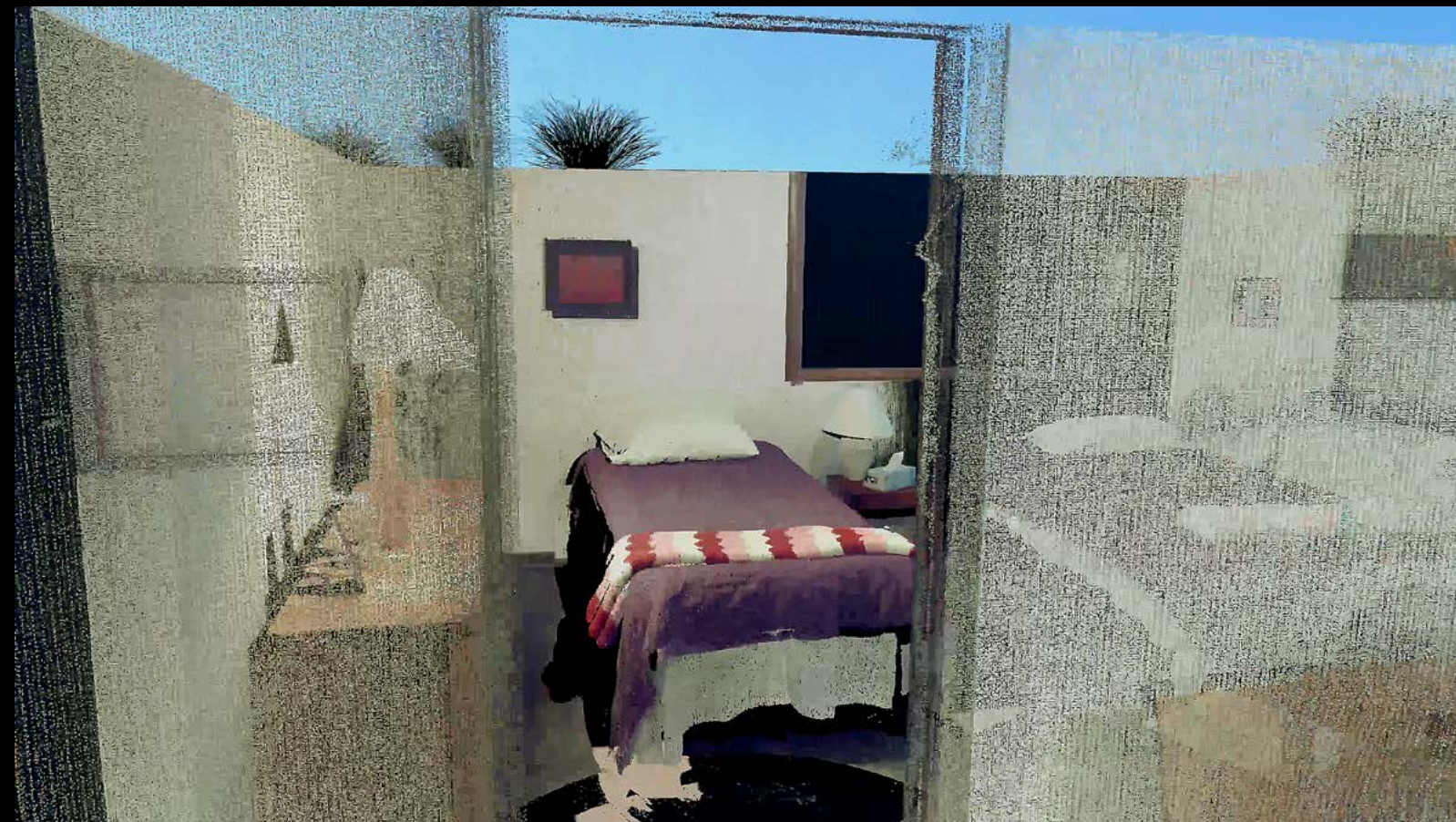














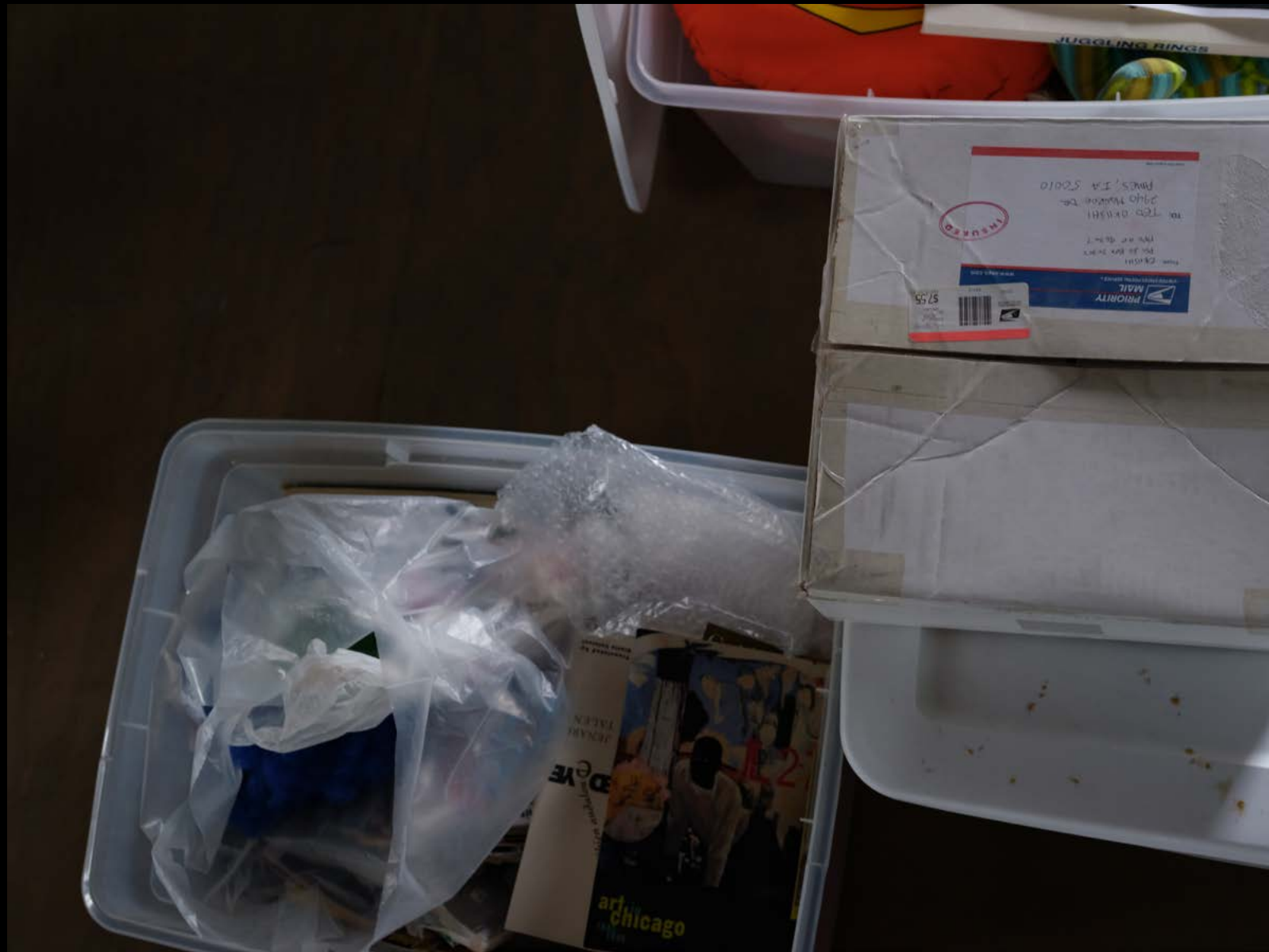




























Books

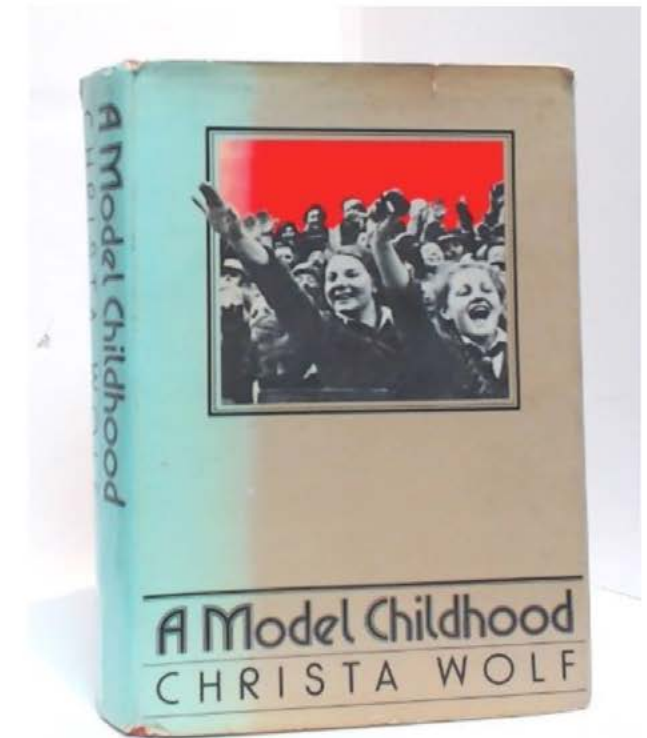


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