

This interview was originally broadcast July 12, 1989.

GROSS: Can you tell me about the range of emotions that you experienced looking back at pictures of your parents when they were young?

Mr. LARRY SULTAN (Photographer): Boy, that's interesting because there's this phenomenon where there's a double vision. All photographs in the sense are historical because the moment is gone. And so here I am looking out peoples who are actually younger than me. And seeing that they had a life outside of me, you know, they're not only my parents, they had this independent existence, which is a fairly frightening notion. And it leads to all kinds of speculation that one doesn't want to get into, you know, about their intimate life.

And so that was an interesting thing to see them independently. And then to also see, I think, the melancholy I felt around the aging process. How certainly the vitality of my parents and, I mean, it's inevitable the body changes. And it's not a sad phenomena as much as it is an opportunity to watch this transformation of the body through time.

GROSS: In addition to old photographs you also have some old documents in your piece, letters, for instance, welcoming your father into the Eversharp family when he started to sell razor blades. Why did you include some of these old documents, old business letters and things like that, and where did you find them?

Mr. SULTAN: Well, it was very important to include those because what I felt I was doing and I think what I've done is try to create a pattern of public life and private life, of family and business, of success and perhaps conflict within the family. And so, my father's business documents to me, they not only document his career, I think they really in a way indicate a time. I mean, welcome to the Eversharp family...

GROSS: Mm-hmm.

Mr. SULTAN: ...and you're team player. And, I mean, it was this sense of '50s that was so full of that optimism and so full of that hope that one would enter a family and be taken care and be part of a team and be a team player and believe in the product and

blah, blah, blah, you know, it goes on. And it's a phenomenal record not only of that specific event in his life but I think of a time that's no longer available to us. So that's interesting to me about how you can document a time through a very biographical personal point of departure.

GROSS: Now you've had to take a lot of new photos of your parents for your project. Your parents, I'm sure, are used to smiling for photographs and you tried to get candid shots. I think you in fact you told them not to smile...

(Soundbite of laughter)

GROSS: ...what were their reactions to the kinds of photographs you wanted?

Mr. SULTAN: Well, you know, I became at real pain.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. SULTAN: I worked on this for seven years and I really strained my parent's generosity. In the beginning I think it was, you know, I would follow them around. In fact, I went on vacation with them to Hawaii and photographed them and then as they got more and more accustomed to me being around, I followed them into their bedroom.

And after a while, they, in terms of the daily photographs in which they weren't necessarily conscious or posing, although there's always something to propose, that was fine. I think the problem really occurred when - we would set up a photograph and some of the photographs were staged. And there was always this dilemma. My father has a standard, I think, successful businessman pose that he's been practicing for years, you know, this kind of steely look...

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. SULTAN: ...steely look and, you know, look them in the eye and rigid body, and in fact, I think he'd cock his head looking off to the left and to the future. And that's not what I wanted. And there was quite a disagreement about that. And in fact, part of the book is his response to my photographs and his response to the way I photograph and the way I represent him, which I think is a real crucial part of this work because I have no - I wouldn't presume that I'm telling the truth. I'm telling my version of the truth but it's not the objective version. There is no objective version.

GROSS: Your father said to you that he doesn't like what you call introspection. When he sees one of those photos he says, for the most part, that's not me I recognize in those photos.

Mr. SULTAN: Yeah, well, the side of my father that interests me the most is that vulnerable introspective side. Now that's not a side that comes out very often and it's certainly not a side that one shows to the public. And perhaps to be fair there is somewhat of a lost look in one of those photographs and that was important to me. And maybe I'm being accurate to my point of view and not so accurate to him. So he could be right. Maybe that isn't him he recognizes, maybe that's more me.

GROSS: Did you say a lost look?

Mr. SULTAN: Yes, a look that has a taste of melancholy to it.

GROSS: Let me describe a photo that I think is exactly that, or at least that's how I read it. And it's a photo of your father all dressed up in a dinner jacket, and it looks like he's probably on the way out. But he's sitting on the bed, just kind of looking off in his dinner jacket. And to me, it reads all dressed up for a kind of let down. (Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. SULTAN: Mm-hmm.

GROSS: I really like that photo a lot.

Mr. SULTAN: Yeah. He hates it.

GROSS: Oh, really? No, okay. How come?

Mr. SULTAN: Well, because he says that he created the analogy that it was like having - doing a film, and the actors are taking a break and that's when you photograph them. And we were actually - I asked him to get dressed up, and we were doing a - he was riding on the wall for me, kind of a mock Dale Carnegie program, and he sat down on the bed just to rest. And you're right. It is all dressed up with nowhere to go, in my mind. And that's an ideological photograph. It relates, in my point of view, to, I think, memory and one looking back on their life. Maybe most of the challenges have been in the past, at least in terms of one's business life. And so, yeah, it's taken out of context. It's a fiction.

GROSS: Another photo I have to ask you about. There is a picture at the kitchen table in your parent's house. You father's

seated at the kitchen table. His eyeglasses are on the table. And I think he's entering something onto his calendar. And your mother has just come in, the grocery bag is on the table, and she's unpacking it. I recognize this photo.
(Soundbite of laughter)

GROSS: You know what I mean? And I could say that a lot of the photos that you've taken. This seems to me the kind of shot that is almost a daily ritual, but it's not the kind of ritual we think of photographing.

Mr. SULTAN: Yeah. I mean, it is - it's the daily thing that interests me. It's the familiar that I think is so phenomenally rich with innuendo, and, I guess, the aroma of daily life. I think that that's where we live our life, right? We don't go out to these great, huge events. We live our life, you know, walking up the street and coming in the house and setting down our coat and unpacking groceries. And that's the sight that I'm most interested in.

GROSS: I want to quote something that you write toward the end here. You say: Behind all the peering, the good pictures, the rolls of film and the anxiety of my project is the wish to take photography, literally, to stop time. I want my parents to live forever. I think that's beautiful.

Mr. SULTAN: Thank you. Thank you. There was something that happened to me in the middle of this project that I think was very significant. And, you know, when I begin work, I have, really, no idea where I'm going to go. But I need to think that I know where I'm going to go. And so I invent all these notions that what I'm doing is sociological or whatever. And in the middle of this project, I had a photograph that I had made that was particularly moving to me. It was a close-up of my father as he was sleeping on a couch, taking a nap on Palm Springs. And I looked at the picture on my desk, and it struck me that there's a chance that this picture will outlive my father, that I'll be looking at this picture one day, when, perhaps, he is not here.

And it really changed my whole notion of what I was doing. I moved from the sociological drop way down to the sense that I was making pictures that came from, I think, a need to not only understand parents, but to let them go in a certain fashion, almost like an adolescent lets things go. I'm a late bloomer in that sense. So, from that, of course, you know, photography does stop time, and it's a very - it's an exterior form of memory. This existed. I

mean, that's its greatest truth, is to leave a trace of what has been.

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