



***One of my first photographs that started me on my route... possibly taken, 1973... 1975? It is a doily. To put on furniture to protect surface. Probably no bigger than 6, 8 inches square. Found in Middlebury, Vermont. Colors a range of browns, yellows.***

NANCY SHAVER

*Iris* is one of the earliest in a series of images that marks the beginning of Nancy Shaver's work. These images consist of black-and-white photographs of textile objects, most of them ordinary children's garments laid on a surface. Washed and unironed, they may bear traces of folding. The texture of the otherwise neutral background they lie upon is clearly visible.

*Iris* brings a difference to the series: it is a doily, not a garment, and it is unmistakably hung on a wall, as evidenced by the protrusion of its slightly askew upper left corner, and the small cracks and blemishes in the white background behind it.

The doily belongs to the same domestic textile sphere as the T-shirts and sweaters photographed by Shaver, but its decorative function is more upfront. As much as it offers a protective cover, it is designed to enhance the surface it is laid upon. And it usually serves as a horizontal base for another object, such as a vase or a bowl, as manifested by its empty central area, void of any decorative pattern, which would be hidden in its ordinary usage.

In giving the doily a vertical setting that prevents it from fulfilling its usual function, Shaver assures that its central white area indeed remains empty. She thus focuses our attention on the folds distributed on its surface, emphasized by the lateral light that illuminates the wall. The most prominent creases form a cross, around whose vertical line two chevrons are symmetrically disposed in diamond shape, the whole figure somehow like the crosshairs of a gun. Around them more chaotic wrinkles, in lighter grays and whites abound.

Two darker frames enclose the whole area: the border of the doily provides a nearly square external one, softened by slightly rounded corners (the upper left one complicated by gravity, as mentioned above) and the continuous wavy line of the handmade edging (crochet or rickrack). Inside this near-square four embroidered drawings of iris plants (NW, NE, SE, SW), linked together by iris leaves, form a dancing circle. The plant on the upper left corner (again), more developed, provides a break from the otherwise

reigning symmetry, like a minor, too symmetrical version of Matisse's 1909 *La danse*. "Colors a range of browns, yellows," says Shaver. For us viewers of the photograph, multiple shades of grey.

This embroidered floral doily evokes domestic femininity and *Gemütlichkeit*. At the same time the shape of its convex and converging iris leaves cannot but conjure its namesake: the camera iris—or iris diaphragm—invented by Daguerre, long an essential part of the shutter mechanism of the machine. The embroidered iris thus mirrors the open iris that helped taking its picture (or is it the opposite?), creating a special link between the object presented and its mode of (re)presentation. In a first sense, this photograph of a doily thus functions as a modest allegory of the photographic process. The object we see hasn't just been captured by the photographer. It captures back, so to speak, the viewer.

In a statement composed for his 1971 exhibition at the Yale University Gallery, Walker Evans wrote of the new Polaroids of single objects he was displaying: "A distinct point...is made in the lifting of these objects from their original settings. The point is that this lifting is, in the raw, exactly what the photographer is doing with his machine, the camera anyway, always. The photographer, the artist, "takes" a picture: symbolically he lifts an object or a combination of objects, and in so doing he makes a claim for that object or that composition, and a claim for his act of seeing in the first place. The claim is that he has rendered his object in some way transcendent, and that in each instance his vision has penetrating validity."<sup>1</sup>

Shaver may not ultimately agree with the claim of transcendence expressed here. Yet *Iris* and the series of images it belongs to are strongly reminiscent of certain Evans photographs, such as *Floyd Burrough's Work Shoes* (1936). There the isolated object under consideration is firmly planted at the center of the frame and surrounded by a textured ground, which provides it with a distinctive location. But the presence of the doily points to another celebrated Evans picture, *The altar*, which looms high in Shaver's pantheon of images.<sup>2</sup> This 1936 photograph documents a section of the bedroom in a cabin occupied by poor farmers in Alabama, or rather the making of a both spare and elegant domestic décor through the placement of a few objects in space.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, a number of Shaver's installation projects in the 1980s stem from this picture, in which a doily made of cut-out white paper, placed on the chimney top, takes pride of place.

The mode of presentation used for *Iris* (object in isolation on textured background) still refers to the first type of Evans' pictures. Yet the iris doily, as much as it allegorizes the mechanical gaze of the camera, introduces



us, by contiguity, to a larger universe of domesticity soon to be explored by Shaver's installations. As such it is a transitional object: the iris of the camera subsides here as a metaphor, its materiality displaced by the embroidery, and brought into a solid object, a thing awash with the reality of space and place, now ready to shine without the support of photography.

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<sup>1</sup> Walker Evans, "Statement" (1961?), in *Walker Evans*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2000, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> The image belongs to a series of 31 photographs that opens *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the now famous book co-published by Walker Evans and James Agee in 1941.

<sup>3</sup> James Agee's commentary on the organization of the room rightly emphasizes this aspect: "[the rooms] are so great and final a whole of bareness and complete simplicity that even the objects on a crowded shelf seem set apart from each other, and each to have a particularly sharp entity of its own. (...) *this kind of spacing gives each object a full strength it would not otherwise have, and gives their several relationships, as they stand on shelves or facing, in a room, the purest power such a relationship can have.*" James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1941, p. 156 (my emphasis). In a statement made about her relation to Evans, whose classes at Yale she sat in during the seventies, and whom she then befriended, Shaver points to the particular temporality induced by these operations: "From Evans, I learned that by using formal framing devices, the artist can gain 'time' from the viewer. The artist can slow the viewer down so that other layers of meaning of an 'abject' object, object-subject can surface, accumulate in the viewer's mind; From the use of a formal structure, the complexity of relationships and position of an inane or dismissible object can be viewed in a complex manner."

Nancy Shaver

*Iris*, 1973–1975

Silver gelatin print

5 x 7 1/8 inches (12.7 x 18.1 cm); 9 5/8 x 12 inches (24.2 x 30.5 cm) framed

Walker Evans

[Floyd Burroughs's Work Shoes]

[Table, Fireplace, and Pictures on Wall of Floyd Burroughs's Bedroom, Hale County, Alabama]

1936

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