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'Mama said. . . ' / Nine women artists explore the advice-good and bad-handed down by the women in their lives

BARBARA KARKABI Staff

The day Amita Bhatt was born - the third daughter in a family with no son - her grandmother wept. A third daughter was considered a liability to her extended family in Gujarat, India. But not to Bhatt's mother, who loved and nurtured her, stressing her power as a woman.

A generation earlier, in the small-town Houston of the 1940s, Patsy Cravens listened to her mother's rules. They went something like this: Be good, be sweet, be a nice girl. Never go out without a slip. Don't raise your voice. Always wear a hat and gloves to town.

The messages passed on by mothers and grandmothers and the other women in our lives - both good and bad - are explored by nine artists in **Mama Said**, on display at Don Foster Studios through April 1 as part of FotoFest 2000.

The artists, all of them women, say the project brought them closer to their mothers, or at least gave them a better understanding. They hope it will affect the audience in the same way.

"That always makes for the best art," said Jean Caslin, executive director of the Houston Center for Photography, whose homage to an aunt is called Bloom Where You are Planted.

The work includes objects and photographs, along with her aunt's words of wisdom. One of the photographs, taken last year after her aunt's death at age 94, shows the aunt in her coffin.

"My sister said that would offend people. But art shouldn't make us comfortable," Caslin said. "It is best when it challenges us and makes us think and reflect."

Mama Said does that. Composed of photographs, video and mixed-media installations, it is a show to be savored.

The nine visual artists, including Bhatt, Caslin, Cravens, Carol Gerhardt, Mary Margaret Hansen, Maud Lipscomb, Betsy Siegel, Scottie Stapleton and Carol Vuchetich, are members of W, an artists' cooperative formed to allow women from diverse backgrounds to share ideas about art and philosophy.

One of the women suggested putting together a show for FotoFest 2000. But they needed a theme.

"We began talking about things our mothers had said," Hansen said. "The passing on of wisdom from one generation to another, though sometimes it's wisdom, and sometimes it's not. We each had a different take."

Hansen's eye-catching installation is titled Purse Stories, built around several dozen purses

arranged on a wall, accompanied by the stories women told about them, and by one of the mounted statements the artists wrote as part of their work.

We love our daughters, mourn our mothers. We give roses, and unknowingly pass along mere buds and fallen petals. Does love sort it out in the end?

Hansen hopes that it does. She is still sifting and examining the "trash and treasure" passed on to her, and what she is passing on to her daughters.

The project began with the memory of something her mother told her as a little girl - women always had a good purse for church and an old purse that they kept at home, for letters and messages.

Hansen began talking to women about their purses. Some of the purses in the exhibit were given by the women, who also shared their memories.

There is a purse filled with letters; another has red roses in it, while a third represents one carried by Hansen's daughter during her senior year in high school.

"Most have the generic Queen Elizabeth look," **said** Hansen, who views the purses as a metaphor for women's interior spaces. "But what I really like is that the purse stories tell more about the women and their milieu than they realize."

For Vuchetich, one black-and-white picture **said** it all.

Ma's was a world of cook, iron, clean, Vuchetich wrote for the exhibit. I don't think she allowed herself to hope for more than she had; she came from a long line of Poles who knew they had to lie in the beds they made.

The photo shows her mother in the foreground, a hand over her mouth and a sad look on her face. She seems somehow disconnected from her husband and son standing behind her.

"The idea was that my mom's life was pretty small," Vuchetich **said**. "She was a woman, not uncommon in her generation, who didn't have much power in the family. It's a comment on her and that generation of women."

A broom and a pile of folded laundry are next to the photo, representing the work her mother did in the home. Vuchetich says she is sad that her mother didn't experience more in her life.

"I always loved my mom and trusted her," she **said**. "She never lied to me, and I look at that as a pretty big gift. But it was more what she didn't say to me. Her gestures **said** more than her words."

A rebel who more often than not rejected her mother's teachings, Cravens' tongue-in-cheek installation includes a green chest of drawers from her childhood, draped with long pink and blue ribbons, with the "Be Good, Be Sweet" instructions written on them.

"Never argue with your man," her mother once commented when Cravens was in the midst of an argument with her husband.

Under the glass covering the top of the chest are family photographs of Cravens as a young girl, in

"good-girl" poses.

Hanging from an overhead beam are black-and-white photographs of other women, some with the "dejected housewife" theme of a series Cravens started in the '80s.

There is a woman staring sadly out a window at a mountain range. Another photo shows a woman with a pot over her head and a broom, standing at the ready.

Bhatt, too, incorporates photography in her installation, delving into issues of gender, politics, power and religion as she combines painting with photography.

The painting allows her to be lyrical, she said, while the photographs deal with "real" issues such as Hindu-Muslim violence.

"My work is a celebration of womanhood," Bhatt said. "My mother always felt that, and I got it from her. I want every woman to know how powerful they are. It's an inside power."

Stapleton explores another mother-daughter connection in her exhibit of black-and-white photographs.

As a daughter, I grew up believing that my mother had all the answers. When I became a mother, I believed I had inherited this wisdom and I now had all the answers, she wrote.

The photos, she said, show how she learned that mothers don't always have the answers after all.

Her daughter had just moved to New York for college, and Stapleton feared that she was studying too little, having too much fun. Her own mother had taught her that failure, for women, meant life on the streets, on drugs, on welfare. She illustrated those fears with documentary-style photographs of her daughter posed on the streets, doing drugs and going through the garbage.

"I got to see my fears, and she understood mine," Stapleton said. "Now she is OK. Settled down and focused."

Siegel's installation explores the relationship between her mother, the gentle, sophisticated wife of a diplomat; herself, the '60s rebel daughter; and her 17-year-old daughter Lily.

Bonds between mothers and daughters are so emotional that the generational skip makes it easier to see the similarities between granddaughter and grandmother, she wrote.

Siegel has set up two chairs, one with a needlepoint seat made by her mother, a table and a trunk packed with gloves, handkerchiefs and dresses. Family photos are everywhere.

"It's about two extraordinary women who shaped me," Siegel said. "My mother suffered terrible losses, two of her children died. She had a very public life, but in private she spent lots of time in her bedroom, reading and needlepointing. That gave her the strength. She said a lot to me in the way she lived. Perhaps that time alone gave her the courage to keep on living."

Gerhardt's interpretation of **Mama Said** involves a two-minute video triptych, set to a haunting Chippewa lullaby, showing her aging mother constantly touching her face and hair. It shows the

female body as a silent but important communicator of personal and cultural expectations, Gerhardt **said**.

"It started out to be an interview with questions," she **said**. "But it turned out she was saying more to me in her gestures."

Lipscomb chose to explore a classic paradox.

The legacy my mother left me was a wealth of wisdom, love of nature and faith. . . . She also left me with a propensity to worry over those things over which I have no control.

Lipscomb's mother, who died in 1979, loved children, constantly worrying about their fates during reports of wars and epidemics in faraway lands. In her collages, Lipscomb uses pictures of her mother, herself and her children, layered with her mother's college diploma and a magazine story about orphans.

"I had a great relationship with my mother," Lipscomb **said**. "She was very Victorian in her thinking, but respected education and wanted to see women succeed. But wherever she is, I'm sure she is still worrying."

Mama Said will be on display at Don Foster Studios, 1101 East Freeway, through April 1. Gallery hours are noon-6 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, or by appointment at 713-529-4755.

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