

## Family secrets



**"There Are Some Things You Don't Need To Know . . ."**  
Multi-media installation in a Battersea terrace house tells the history of four generations of the artist's family. At 75 St Philip Street, London, SW8, UK. Open daily until Dec 6, 1998, 12-8 pm.

Although Natasha Kerr is categorised as a textile artist, this description should not detract from the conceptual power of her current installation, in a 19th century terrace house in Battersea, London, UK. Paradoxically, given that the artist has moved on from her craft-based origins to fine art, she has chosen not to show her work in a white-walled sterile, minimalist setting.

Lent by The Peabody Trust, the unoccupied property retains traces, in peeling layers of wallpaper and unfaded rectangles where pictures have previously hung, of the family that lived there until recently. To these domestic marks, Kerr has added the stories of four generations of her own family, including her grandfather's experiences as a refugee surgeon in Birkenhead, during World War II and afterwards, when he had to overcome discrimination to secure a permanent post.

Kerr's family-tree is inked above the fireplace in the front room, and its legends are retold, without sentimentality, in the sequence of rooms devoted to individual ancestors. Works are hung throughout the three-storey house, even in the water closet and primitive bathroom. Kerr captures physical appearance by printing sepia photographs onto antique linen sheeting. These pieces, which are dyed and stitched with variously coloured and textured fragments of cloth and related ephemera, are also inscribed with the artist's own text.

Kerr's language is as mordant as the dyes she uses, and she deftly defines the behavioural quirks of family members with candour and wit, classifying and displaying them as lovingly as any Victorian lepidopterist. An angelic tod-

dlar, *Onkel Dieter*, is a typical example: "What a cute little boy, hard to believe he grew up to be a tyrant". Most works are displayed under glass, in frames which complement Kerr's fusion of image and text, while some larger works are constructed as banners, which float from staircase walls.

A first floor room is devoted to Otto Herschan, Kerr's maternal grandfather, a Viennese surgeon specialising in gynaecology, who fled to England from Breslau in 1937. When he was interned



**Otto the Photographer**

as an alien, at the beginning of World War II, his wife wrote to him consolingly: "You must just have some patience. Believe me, all doctors will be released". This happened in 1941, when bombing raids on Merseyside

meant that Otto was freed, and sent to work there as a surgeon.

Kerr skilfully evokes Otto's working life, by suffusing the room with the cloying smell of disinfectant and playing the rasping sound of a respirator. A four-panelled hospital-screen displays an image of Otto in his coffin, with a hand-written account of his stoicism when faced with cancer. The room also contains an operating-theatre trolley with surgical artefacts, and framed works recording Otto's achievements.

*The Surgeon* lists the titles of 38 scientific papers, while *Otto and His Patients* testifies to the high regard with which he was held: "He was often sent the cases that other, more eminent surgeons wouldn't touch, fearing their reputations lest the person should die on the table. Otto would always operate, caring only about saving lives, which invariably he did".

The teasing title of the installation, "There Are Some Things You Don't Need To Know . . .", refers to the reluctance of Kerr's mother to divulge all the family's secrets. In *The Gynaecologist and His Team*, Kerr recounts the tale of Otto's "appendicectomies"—euphemistic abortions performed on unchaste nuns. Her text admits that Kerr is "stumped" as to what might be the nature of racier stories that have been suppressed.

The monumental concerns of Kerr's work at Battersea are partly reminiscent of those addressed in the concrete cast of a three-storey Victorian house in Bow, east London, which won Rachel Whiteread the Turner Prize in 1993. Unlike Whiteread's sculpture, however, Kerr's evocative installation enables viewers to savour family life, and laugh and cry with her protagonists. By representing universal themes of love, hate, secrecy, and scandal, the artist helps us to understand better how our own families function.

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