The Walther Collection
Artist Interview
Lebohang Kganye – John Fleetwood

John Fleetwood: How did *Ke Lefa Laka*[1] (2013) begin?

Lebohang Kganye: It happened quite organically, without me even thinking about what it meant. At the time, I was looking at a lot of my mom's photographs. The more I kept on looking at them, I realized that I could recognize many of the locations where these photographs were taken. I also realized that a lot of the clothes she was wearing were (still) in the house. I put on her clothes and I started looking for those places with my sister.

JF: You have previously mentioned that after the passing of your mother, you felt momentarily disconnected from the world, and perhaps from your own history. In many cultures in South and Southern Africa, oral tradition is a way of passing on history— of telling stories of what's happened to a particular family, but often also of public histories. So, perhaps in this loss there is then, a question about your link or access to history, to your mother and her ability to tell these stories of the past?

LK: I started going to the locations where my mother had been photographed. And then started trying to locate my family, because I really felt disconnected at that point. Before my mother passed away, it had been ten years that we were living as just the two of us and my younger sister. So I went around South Africa, to these different locations where my grandmother found contact details of our extended family. I mostly traveled with a voice recorder, tracking interviews of my family's oral history. It was on one level about my family's history, but on another it was about South African history, in terms of how they stayed in different places, why their surname changed— how it was recorded incorrectly by officials, and how they changed it depending on the location and point in time.

JF: Santu Mofokeng calls the photograph on the wall (or the photo-album) the shadows of a subject. He goes further to say that it's a treasure that unfolds identity, lineage, and personality. The family photo album presents this image of your mother, and I can imagine that to some degree when you are looking at these representations, that it must be loaded with combinations of fictions and facts, that it is a picture of your mother and on another level it is not?

LK: I was looking for photos of the both of us. I had my own childhood albums and then there were her photo albums. In her albums, there were only very few photos of the both of us. When I was re-enacting the photos, it forced me to recognize her outside of her role as a mother, and to see her as another person, as a woman. It was a discovery for me.

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[1] Ke Lefa Laka from seSotho translates to 'my inheritance' or 'my heritage'. It consists of two bodies of work *Her Story* and *Heir Story.*

I found these photos of her posing in a nightgown or all dressed up looking like a corporate woman. I think that was extremely interesting because there was such a level of performance to those photos. I wondered why she needed to present herself that way, because that's not how she looked on an everyday basis.
Neither my grandmother nor my aunts had a camera. They also used a street photographer who would take photos of them, and had similar photos. It's quite crazy thinking about it; the idea that someone, a stranger, would come into your house and take a photo of you, in your underwear. So, there is one guy for the different areas and he's seeing these women in different ways at different times. In a way it's like they are almost all presenting themselves for him.

JF: I wonder where this convention of performance, of presenting, of glamour comes from?

LK: The poses that my mom and aunt were doing, I could only link to *Drum* magazine. There was no real reference of black women in media at the time outside of that platform. I found a lot of the *Drum* magazine covers had similar poses, hair-does and that kind of performance.

JF: Your mother grew up at a time of heightened Apartheid. During this time, *Drum* often presented these glamour girls – women who are photographed in a very particular way – alongside pages depicting police brutality or injustice happening in South Africa. It's interesting how popular media allowed glamour and political reporting to exist in the same kind of publication and space. In relation to your mother's albums, it looks like her photos were a fantasy away from this brutal world that existed. Do you think there are traces that remain in the photographs?

LK: I think there definitely are, especially in my grandmother's photos. She worked as a maid her whole life and had a lot of photos with the madams for whom she worked. Most of the photos are of her and the madam's kid. She does not have photos with her own kids. There is even this weird photo of this white kid sitting down, but we had it in *our* family album.

JF: When I look at *Her Story*, there is this immediate question about the claim that photography is the faultless rendering of the real. Your image appears next to the image of your mother as a double exposure, like when you photograph in analogue and the film fails to move on, creating a second aberration of the person next to the first. In some of your photographs, I think this editing is done so seamlessly that we *accept* it as a mistake. The fault disappears by the very nature of its being a camera mistake.
This acceptance has a lot to do with your mother's ability to pose and your performance of those gestures as hers, but also yours. So, it's in this combination of her imitating something and you imitating what she is

imitating, that the photograph comes together. Considering South Africa's history of documentary photography, how do these images speak about historical forms and conventions, and how did you respond to the processes of imitation?

LK: At the location, by looking at the original photo, my sister would tell me "no, put your arm like this, put your arm like that," and we'd make a few shots of that moment, and then choose the picture that was closest to the original. In the process of merging the photos, I wanted to see the differences, but also the similarities in terms of our characters, because I think that does come across to some degree, in terms of our facial expressions and gestures. With certain photos, it's almost impossible to tell which is which, whether I am her or she is me, or if it's the same person. And it also goes back to the idea of analogue photography and the double exposure, where it is almost the same moment, just photographed twice. It's two different slices of time that become one, joined in one document and meant to stand in for one moment, but which remain two different entities.

JF: In *Heir Story* you work with a studio set, using life-size images and cut outs that reference the materials from photo albums that you blew up, inserting yourself again in this kind of reconstruction. In this series, there are many more of what I would call public or political references or images, often referencing the documentary mode. Content-wise it deals with little *anecdotes*, very intimate, mundane stories that tell the story of your grandfather. How did you encounter documentary photography?

LK: I actually started studying photography because of a comprehension test in matric (final secondary school year) called "The Life and death of Kevin Carter." That was my introduction to photography. I had no idea that the medium had such great importance or could bring any change or even be political. At the time, I wanted to study journalism. I then considered doing photojournalism. I also had an interest in African literature and creative writing, which I think comes across in how I work, because I think fiction is important. That elemental act, almost like writing or re-writing a story. I think that's really what my practice is.

JF: Did this rejection of documentary position studio practice as your stronger interest because it allowed fictive narrative and playing with existing stories, instead of making stories from the real? Perhaps we can look at your work as being post-documentary, because in a way it still considers what is happening in our world, but without the limitations of the convention. You are not out there witnessing, but instead there is a clear shift to authoring your own history.

LK: I think it goes beyond that for me. It's not about rejecting documentary photography. Rather, there's a natural interest from my side to explore my own

identity and stories, and consider the literature and history that I am interested in. I am intrigued by this idea of oral history and transcribing a voice interview with my family *into* a photograph. This is how I want to work and I think that *Heir Story* is great in that sense because you listen to a voice, you record the interview, you sit down with it and you listen to it, then you choose which parts to work on and how you want to merge them. One can imagine my grandmother's memory of how they ended up in Joburg. The process merges many peoples' memories and imagines how it all happened. It's also very similar to my act of taking on the role of my mother, because one takes on their personalities or one assumes that this was their personality, and in the process, one let's go of their own.

JF: As you speak about this kind of research, where you gather all of this content in order to present it in a final form, you also describe how different elements of a photograph come together to give meaning to an overall process. But part of the power of you, as a historian at that moment, is that you can shift and can create certain fictions therein. How do you see these fictions and what their role is within the photograph? What do they do that facts cannot?

LK: I don't even know what facts are. Even in analogue photography, when you go through the process of processing the film you know the photos can't be truth, because there is an element where you decide how the image should look and what it should be. Neither digital nor analogue are truthful mediums. It is not necessary for my practice, but I'm not trying to say this is truth. I think that there is also a point at which I am in dialogue with memory, because memory is also not truth, and neither is history. How I work is in recognizing that different people will tell me the same story very differently. So there's a recognition in that, our truths are not universal truths, like a photograph can't be universal truth. That's why the idea of personal and collective history stands at the center of the project, because it's recognizing that there is really no truth to it. You choose to remember a moment in a certain way because of how that makes you feel, you choose to take out chunks of information, even when you tell the story in the same way. Similarly, when you take a photograph, you take out chunks of information and focus what you want to focus on. Now it's me telling that story. The idea of these cut outs, the stage, this performance is speaking to that – none of these stories are necessarily true. They are truth to you, to the person who tells them.