

A CAREGIVER'S JOURNAL

GAIL REBHAN: AGING

PYRAMID ATLANTIC GALLERY

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Poetry and art memorializing the dying reached its apex in the nineteenth century, before medical breakthroughs and the rise of youth culture made aging unfashionable. By contrast, with more youthful victims of AIDS and breast cancer, ailing octogenarians are rarely depicted in contemporary art. Repudiating this trend, Gail Rebhan's exhibition of giclee prints, "Aging," charts the downward arc of her father Herman Rebhan's journey into debilitating old age. With permission from her father—a Polish immigrant, observant Jew, and, in his prime, a prominent international labor leader—Rebhan exposes his experience of aging to the public, breaking taboos concerning "successful aging" as well as discussing family matters with strangers. Rebhan situates her father's experience within a larger social context, challenging the "preferred depiction of old age ... as a time of active leisure" that "typically portray[s] ... seniors as healthy and independent" and conceals "the debilitating effects of dementia and loss of control over one's body..."¹ In these intricately layered prints created between 2002 and 2006, Rebhan digitally combines portraits of her father with text and images of objects (calendars, prescriptions, etc.) made on a flatbed scanner. Rebhan photographed her father in various settings—outdoors, in his bedroom in her home, in the emergency room, and eventually in an assisted living residence.

In the large diptych portrait *1994-2004* (2004), a proud, erect, smiling Rebhan faces the camera while a decade later he looks away—a slouching, frowning figure with an aluminum walker. His transformation is reframed by a bold, digital collage border that also functions as a key and narrative commentary: it includes cropped life-sized images of shirts, pants, and belts along with a textual chart of statistics documenting his physical transformation.

The glowing montage *Decline* (2003) conveys spiritual dimensions that belie its clinical title. Formal elements and technique invite alternate readings. In the right foreground, like an aging Indian god with multiple arms (one gripping a cane, two holding a walker), her father moves toward a bright green, sunlit lawn led by a half-visible figure in a wheelchair on a path into the uncertain future (blurred upper

left). Graded focus and contrasts—clear/fuzzy, colorful/muted—imply transition and movement. In an uplifting counterpoint to his downwardly mobile future, the rhythm of diagonals reinforce the iconic reading of three arms and a single body (foreground), moving to the left and upward toward a distant background figure. Life as a journey is metaphorically implied by the path through a pastoral landscape. Text detailing his transition from using a cane to using a walker adds a note of reality from the caretaker's point of view.

The "Can't" series chronicles periodic stages of Rebhan's decline, including illustrated lists of ever-increasing impairments and needs that culminated when he entered a nursing home. Text entries ("My



83 year old father can't dress himself, can't cut his food ...") and life-sized scanned objects—Depends adult diapers, dentures, etc.—challenge hyped ideals of active golden years. These six images invite scientific as well as art historical and cultural interpretations. A visual culture reading might describe this series as collaged pages in a caregiver's journal. From an art historical point of view, "Can't" can be seen as a contemporary still life, with unusual *memento mori*. In "Can't," shame associated with adult diapers seems connected to the popular idea that aging can be done well—and the converse, that bad aging (debilitating old age) is preventable.

Portraits from the assisted living environment include *Brother*, an image of a bedridden Rebhan overlaid with printed text describing his confusion about his brother's whereabouts, and sadness on learning of his brother's long past death; and the emotional portrait *Why is it so hard?*, where her father's suicidal thoughts are printed below an image of him lying in bed. In contrast to her 1996 series and resulting book *Mother-Son*, which records the upward arc of her son's growth and development in a social context (exploring issues of gender and race stereotyping), "Aging"—with its snapshots, calendar entries, and memorabilia marking decline—is a Baby Book in reverse.

In "Aging," Rebhan performs a feminist tour de force by digitally reframing the classic nineteenth-century female caregiver-victim as a powerful subject: the photographer-daughter who exposes private matters to public scrutiny, blurring distinctions between art photography, a caregiver's journal, and a medical case study. Jarring contrasts in color and scale (looming objects in pop art hues, a diminished Rebhan in paler tones) metaphorically reference the dilemma of reconciling scientific advances with spiritual, emotional concerns—technology with do-not-resuscitate instructions.

ANN STODDARD is an artist and writer living in the Washington DC area. Her most recent work, "Fish Soup," was exhibited at Ohio University in spring 2006.

NOTE 1. Excerpt from Gail Rebhan's printed "Artist Statement" for the exhibition "Aging" at Pyramid Atlantic.

ABOVE

1994-2004 (2004) by Gail Rebhan

FACING PAGE

Decline (2003) by Gail Rebhan