

Heidi Schwegler  
Passing Resemblances  
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By Jason Loeffler

The lost and the last seen with. They always come in pairs: a baby girl and a forlorn teenager, a second cousin with his girlfriend's mother, someone's neighbor and a trusted friend, an ostracized husband with someone altogether unknown. Thin smudges of fugitive ink on the cheapest paper, they are forgotten as quickly as they are seen, swaddled in the inexorable landslide of glossier advertisements for free beef, cheap pizza, discount carpet cleaning and obsolete electrical appliances.

Heidi Schwegler's latest exhibition, *Passing Resemblance*, was tautly structured around 'the missing.' For Schwegler, the missing and those searching for them form a discrete subculture with its own peculiar visual norms and fetishized objects. The core source material for the exhibition's central work, *Last seen with*, were images from direct-mail advertisements sponsored by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and photographs culled from the Doe Network's missing persons Web site. Schwegler cropped hundreds of these photographs and arranged them in a grid, effacing names, weights, heights and dates of birth. Alongside the monumental canvas Schwegler projected in rapid sequence single lines of text taken from the 'distinguishing marks' field from each mailer: *she has an appendectomy scar on her abdomen; he has a steel pin in his right leg from the knee downward; he has a small tattoo of an airplane on his left hand; he is hyperactive; her nickname is 'Fran'; she has a scar on her left knee and a hysterectomy scar on her abdomen; she has a pin in her right hip; there is no bone in the little toe of her right foot; her front teeth were replaced by temporary caps; which were lightly yellowed at the time of her disappearance.* These distinguishing marks – almost always physical frailties – are substitutes for the unique personal history of each of the lost. Each digitally projected sentence was quickly replaced by another, effecting an endless cataract unreadable data.

While *Last seen with* explored the printed artifacts that document the missing at the blurry edge of the public sphere, other works in the exhibit addressed the objects collected around private tragedies. Schwegler admits a fascination with the 'cult of the doll.' Middle-aged and elderly women – often childless – collect, care for and display near lifesize and very lifelike dolls. Schwegler describes these dolls as 'stuck in time, between the vulnerable moment of birth and the ever present fear of death – or worse: abduction,' while their collectors are 'distressingly aware of their own mortality and strangely haunted and alone.' Probably out of empathy or solidarity, Schwegler preserved her own likeness as a silicone memento mori in the work *Doll*. The doll's head is a casting of the artist's own, while the body is only a slight diminution of Schwegler's slight 5 foot frame. Clothed in a soiled, Alice-in-Wonderland blue frock plucked from the Goodwill bins, *Doll* was seated in a beat-up, plastic yellow chair, with arms cocked at aerobic angles. *Doll* gazed haplessly upon a suite of photographs of herself taken in the tacky mise-en-scenes of the Sears family portrait studio: playing with a ball at the beach, celebrating a birthday party, riding a toy pony. Assembled behind *Doll* was a small bestiary of stuffed animals – true fetishes of childhood – each entombed in white acrylic paint. Here, teddy bears, donkeys, seals and giraffes were powerful symbols of deferral, a token call to the presumed dead to return to the world of the living, and a meager message of defiant hope broadcast against loss.

Swegler's 2001 exhibition, *The Pathological Record*, at the now defunct Savage gallery, associated hereditary birth defects with heirloom jewelry passed between generations. The objects in *The Pathological Record* avidly demonstrated her training as a fine jeweler and metalsmith, but more important, the show's conceptual breadth underlined the artist's intellectual ambition, which far exceeds the normal limits of contemporary American craft. With her newest work, Schwegler has further distanced herself from craft traditions by outsourcing production of the objects on display to artisans and specialists. Her recurring trope remains physical helplessness whether by genetic mutation or abduction. As such, Schwegler has an uncanny knack for transforming bruising, traumatic events into chilly emotionless artifacts.