

Seeking the Naked Truth, and Finding It Nearby

By ELIZABETH HAYT

ABOUT 20 years ago, when the artist Malerie Marder was around 8 or 9, her younger sister, Carrie, was snooping in their father's dresser and found a snapshot of a naked woman. Worried that their father had a secret, the girls showed the picture to their mother, who said she knew all about it; their father had taken it before he was married. It was no big deal, their mother assured them. But then she warned her daughters never to pose like the woman in the picture.

They didn't listen. The announcement for Ms. Marder's first solo show features a recent photograph of the sisters seated facing each other on a carpeted floor, their heads turned toward the camera. They are naked,

UP AND COMING

Malerie Marder

Save for tiny gold Stars of David dangling around their necks.

"It could be seen as unsettling and irreverent," Ms. Marder says of the color image, one of 13 photographs measuring 4 by 5 feet on view at Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art, at Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, through June 10. "Things that are uncomfortable and slightly twisted are interesting to me."

To put it mildly. For the last year, Ms. Marder, 28, who received her bachelor's degree from Bard College and her master of fine arts from Yale University and lives in Los Angeles, has photographed family members and friends nude (including her ex-boyfriend and her mother posing together), in either upscale California homes or pay-by-the-hour motels. At a time when sexually explicit display rarely elicits more than a yawn, Ms. Marder has managed to raise eyebrows with her voyeuristic images that challenge the taboo against incest.

Among the subjects willing to bare all was her father, who is shown on the floor in front of a fireplace, seated in profile, with a blue bathrobe gathered around

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Photographs courtesy Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art

his hips. There is nothing lewd about the photograph, but somehow, knowing that the man was willing to strip for his daughter produces a certain frisson.

"My mother was in the room when I took the picture, and I took it really quickly," Ms. Marder says. "I didn't want to see my father, so he turned away from me. I recognize that there is an aspect of my work that is indulgent. It's as if I'm a child who needs to be indulged by those who love her."

Although her photographs appear to be candid — the figures seem to be caught off guard in moments of confrontation or reverie — they are highly staged. With formalism in mind, Ms. Marder positions pale nude bodies against flat planes of rich color, like a wall of brown wood paneling or a hot-pink bedspread, and digitally enhances the images afterward.

Blurring the distinction between realism and fantasy, she sets up a scene with an individual or couple in a



"My Mother and My Boyfriend," far left, and a detail from "The Marder Sisters," left, showing the photographer Malerie Marder, who created both images.

particular setting, preferably a domestic one. ("I have a real love of the indoors," she says. "Indoors implies a private moment, and the act of photography is an intimate moment.") She then waits for spontaneous expressions or gestures that create a sense of tension and alienation. In one of the photographs, Ms. Marder's former boyfriend, the actor Peter Sarsgaard, is seen naked through a steamy glass shower door. He seems to cast a predatory eye at her mother, who is clothed and, with her back to him, perched nearby on the edge of the bathroom sink.

"People try to explain my work in terms of its sexual nature, but it's more about a failure to connect," Ms. Marder says. "The work tries to get at us as individuals rather than partners. I put people together to get a reaction from them, to create circumstances that elicit a psychological reaction. My mother and Peter both felt conflicted about their participation in the picture."

Whether or not she is physically in her photographs, Ms. Marder is implicitly at the center of each image. Her own intimate relationship to her subjects makes it seem as if she is spying on them while they are engaged in an illicit tryst. "My work fictionalizes my desires with family and friends," she says. "I'm not interested in our everyday lives. I'm interested in the part that isn't lived, that is fantasized about." □