This Is How You Turn a Family History of CIA Mind-Control Experiments into Art | VICE | Canada

By Rea McNamara

April 15, 2016

Video still from 'The Kitchen,' 2016 (courtesy of Gallery 44)

What is it like to have a grandmother who underwent CIA mind control experiments? For Sarah Anne Johnson, a Winnipeg-based artist who has been making time-based work on this subject for the past ten years, it's gaining a better understanding of the unpredictable mood swings and abrupt temper tantrums she grew up with.

In 1956, her grandmother, Velma Orlikow, checked into Montreal's Allan Memorial Institute for postpartum depression. Orlikow was treated by renowned psychiatrist Doctor Ewen Cameron, whose controversial "de-patterning" treatment—prolonged, drug-induced sleep comas, followed by multiple doses of electroshock therapy—turned out to be a part of Project MKUltra.

Cameron's experiments, alongside other institutions, were funded by the CIA to further "mind control" studies, which subjected unknowing patients to hallucinogenic drugs and other chemicals. Even though it took place in the 1950s and 60s, it wasn't until 1977 that the US Senate investigated the program and even led a joint committee investigation. (Alas, most of the records were destroyed during the Nixon administration.)
'White Out,' white out and graphite on inkjet, 2008 (courtesy of Sarah-Anne Johnson/Bulger Gallery)

Johnson, the first winner of the AIMIA Photography Prize, has created photography, sculpture, performance and video in an ongoing series exploring how this psychological torture impacted her matriarchal family. Two of the most recent works, Hospital Hallway (2015) and The Kitchen (2016), are currently being show as part of Toronto's Images Festival (on until April 23).

VICE spoke to Johnson about her work and her grandmother, who passed away when the artist was only 14. (By that time, Orlikow had successfully led a class action suit against the CIA, the first in Canada.) "At the end of the day, I am interested in how something can come in and break a branch in the family tree, and how that trauma sorts itself out from generation to generation," she says.
VICE: Growing up, how aware were you of your grandmother's condition?
Sarah Anne Johnson: I was very aware of the facts of everything. I knew my grandma had been brainwashed by the CIA. I guess when I was a bit older and we'd be out in public, and something would happen, if someone accidently bumped into her, or spilled something on her, she just couldn't handle her rage, and freak out at them.

Doctor Cameron's experiments have been likened to psychological torture: he put patients in "sleep rooms," which were drug-induced comas that lasted for weeks. He was also into "de-patterning" the human mind. What did that involve?
"De-patterning" was to erase your memories, and "psychic driving" was to replace them with better memories. You were suppose to get a negative recording that was going to cut into the root of your problem, and then a positive recording that was going to reaffirm. And my grandmother joked that she never got the "positive one." The only one that I found out about was [her being told]: "You are a hostile woman. You are hostile to the doctors, you are hostile to the nurses. Why are you so hostile? Is it because you hate your mother?" It's made-for-TV movie shit.
Your grandmother also suffered shock therapy, and was unsuspectingly given drugs like LSD and barbiturates. How long was she in treatment?

Three years. After a year, she left because she just couldn't take it. And they would tell her she's a bad wife: "You're a bad mother, you don't want to do this; if you loved your family, you would do this." And her family was like, "Trust your doctor. You have to trust your doctor. It may seem hard, but he knows what is best for you." So when she went home, she was worse than ever...she attempted suicide many times, and just couldn't function.

Most of the records pertaining to Project MKUltra were destroyed by the CIA during the Nixon administration. Even though there were Senate hearings in 1977, the extent of the MKUltra's Canadian activities weren't revealed until the early 1980s. What legal actions did your grandmother take?

She started a class action lawsuit. First, she went after the hospital, and then found other people who had been there. Then she started a class action lawsuit against the CIA. Seven other people came forward, they were suing for a million each, and then ended up settling out of court the day after my mom gave her pre-trial testimony. I guess they didn't want to hear from any more family members. It was the first time in history the CIA gave money outside the US. It changed the laws in Canada, so no one doctor has ultimate power. Patients have rights.
In re-enacting in these video works and increasingly performance-based installations of your grandmother's behavior, what sort of body memories did it shake up?

It's very strange. I can't possibly know what it was actually like for her. This is me trying to understand and come to terms with why she was the way she was, why my mom is the way she is, and why I am the way I am.

How did talking to your mom about it change the childhood memories you had?

There's one realization I had. I would go over to [my grandmother's] house everyday after school, because both my parents worked. We would watch TV together, sitting on this big long couch, with piles of books and newspapers and letters. I thought she was an avid reader and writer, and that she just didn't do it when I was around, because we were hanging out. So I was saying this to my mom, and my mom was like, "Oh, no! She used to be an avid reader and writer, but because of all the treatments, it destroyed her ability to concentrate."
What's the challenge in turning such a personal experience into art?
The thing that I struggle with is thinking about her and what happened to her in such a strange, abstracted way, because it's through the art veil. I'm trying to make art about it, so I'm constantly thinking about my audience, and photography, and video. All of these memories, and all these thoughts, get pushed through these other filters. So now I'm worried—she passed away so long ago—that I'm like, replacing my pure memories of her with all of these thoughts and feelings and images that I'm creating now for the work. That's kind of fucked. So that is what I wrestle with now. I don't want to lose her by making this work. It's weird: I'm making it to understand more where I come from—what everyone went through, why everyone is the way they are.

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