

# **SYLVIE HARRIS**

## **THE ANCESTRY OF HOME**

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**DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES**

**September 1–November 29, 2022**

# The Ancestry of Home

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*The Ancestry of Home* depicts cultural traditions that are passed down from one generation to the next, even as newer generations both embrace and interrogate those traditions. If home is where we gather, cook, nest, and share stories and values from the past and deliberate about the present and future then Sylvie Harris's home experience traces back to her Babcia's and Dziadziu's house in Springfield, Massachusetts. That's where they cook Polish food from recipe cards written in her great-grandmother's hand and learn to ornament and inhabit their houses in ways done long before us, creating a visual landscape of ritual that they find familiar and comforting, though sometimes alien to more modern sensibilities and beliefs.

These cultural traditions began with Harris's great-grandmother who immigrated to the United States from Poland when she was fifteen, never to return to see her parents or loved ones. Disconnected from her origins, she brought a strong commitment to her cultural and domestic traditions that she devotedly maintained in the new family she soon began. In 2021, Harris traveled to Poland with the Stuart Abelson Graduate Research Fellowship to find traces of these traditions and to consider how they endure and transform within the domestic space and beyond. In Poland, Harris found variations of the recipes that she grew up cooking, plants sitting in curtained windows and facing the light just as they do in our own homes, patterned fabric used in costumes like those we dressed up in as children. Combining such familiar rituals and objects, she studies how cultural traditions appear to many of us who attempt (albeit not always easily) to remain connected to them, especially given contemporary discourses regarding religion, nationality, and women's roles and rights.

*The Ancestry of Home* includes photographs, textile installations, and video depicting visual evidence of traditions and the examination of traditions in the domestic space. These media document specific rituals such as the carving of the Baranek (butter lamb) for Świąconka (Easter breakfast) and the making of pierogi for Wigilia (Christmas Eve dinner), as well as the repotting of inherited plants. Textile installations that include fabric traditionally used in Polish folk costumes reference domestic objects and evoke the rituals that take place in their environment.

# SYLVIE HARRIS

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**Sylvie Harris** is a Brooklyn based artist whose work celebrates domesticity while also addressing the challenges of societal expectations within the patriarchy. Harris graduated in 2022 with an MFA in Photography from Columbia College Chicago where she was also a Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Photography and the recipient of the 2021 Stuart Abelson Graduate Research Fellowship. Her recent solo exhibitions include Lineage of Labor at Swartley Gallery in Englewood, New Jersey and The Ancestry of Home at The Arcade Gallery in Chicago, Illinois. Harris's work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions including at Old Main Gallery in Bozeman, Montana and at Columbia College Chicago in Illinois.

Instagram: @sylvie\_harris



*Window Garden, 2022, pigment prints on cotton percale and silk with traditional Polish costume fabric*



*Maternal Line*, 2022, pigment prints on cotton percale and silk with traditional Polish costume fabric



*Barasz*, 2022, pigment prints on cotton percale with traditional Polish costume fabric on 3 tables



Barszcz (detail), 2022, pigment prints on cotton percale with traditional Polish costume fabric on 3 tables



*Baranek, 2022, archival pigment print*





*Pierogi Weekend I, 2019, archival pigment print*



*Święconka*, 2018, archival pigment print



*Still from Baranek, 2022, single channel video*

# INTERVIEW WITH SYLVIE HARRIS

Conducted by Mariana Belaval

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**Mariana Belaval:** Tell me about your journey? Where are you from, where did you do your studies, and where do you currently find yourself?

**Sylvie Harris:** I was born in Chicago but grew up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the town where the famous Walker Evans photograph of the cemetery was taken! I received my BA at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey where I majored in Studio Art and Art History with a minor in Photography. I moved to New York City from there where I worked at a gallery and did freelance work before moving to Chicago to start my MFA in Photography. I just graduated in May 2022 and recently moved back to New York City.

**MB:** Do you think domesticity and routine are mutually exclusive?

**SH:** I don't think they are mutually exclusive. I think that routine is a natural and unavoidable reality of the domestic space, given the repetition of our needs that are met there day after day. Routine as it pertains to tradition is not necessarily inherent to the domestic space, but I do think it's present in most homes.

**MB:** Can domestic rituals be preserved or considered some sort of passage, more specifically, a rite of passage?

**SH:** For some, rituals can be considered a rite of passage. That is the case in my family, where partaking in the carrying out of traditions and being trusted with those duties is an honor but also a responsibility. Much of my work, this project included, is an examination into my own experience of being a member of a younger generation choosing to accept these responsibilities.

**MB:** Did you pick the mediums you utilized for this work specifically because of function and facility, or because they can represent some sections of Polish domesticity?

**SH:** I most often turn to photography to express my ideas, which is why photographs are so heavily represented, but the textile objects are meant to reference a domestic heritage, specifically one that can be traced to Poland. I purchased the fabric that was used for the installations in Poland while I was there for my fellowship with the intention of creating domestic objects. Those specific fabrics are commonly used in Polish folk costumes but are easily found in most fabric stores. I wanted to pick a pattern that would be easily identified as Polish to the people who recognize it, but still visually compelling for those who don't.

**MB:** Is your investigation of domesticity and home more of a search for some sort of identity or more of a statement about what culturally exists and what doesn't?

**SH:** In this project I am both searching for my identity and attempting to find what culturally exists and what doesn't. There are traditions that have been watered down or lost over the years and I'm examining my role in preserving what traditions we still practice. I think that many people hold onto cultural traditions practiced by their families to help them relate to a kind of identity. We all search for our identity in different ways but finding one through our family's cultural heritage is a common way.

**MB:** What are the main components of home and tradition that you found?

**SH:** One of the main components of traditions practiced in the home is, unsurprisingly, the preparation of food. That is why including

# INTERVIEW CONTINUED

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recipe cards in my installations was so important to the exhibition. The recipes are scans printed on fabric of my family's recipe cards that record my great-grandmother's instructions that she brought from Poland. I was also intrigued to see the same connection to plants in the domestic space in Poland that I've experienced with my family in the US, including placing orchids and clivia plants in the window and living with nature in our domestic spaces.

**MB:** What can we expect to see from you in the future?

**SH:** I will continue to work on this project because there is definitely more to study, and a lot more photographs that I took in Poland that I haven't found a use for yet! Some of the photographs will be included in an experimental book which is well on the way. I'm also working on a project involving the repetition of domestic work, most often done by women which will involve photographs and textiles as well. That project will be on view at Swartley Gallery at Dwight-Englewood School in Englewood, New Jersey, opening at the end of November 2022. Working on "The Ancestry of Home" has been an exciting experience and I'm thankful to have received the Stuart Abelson Graduate Research Fellowship and for everyone at DEPS for their guidance and support!



## THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Mariana Belaval. Graphic design is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Gray Beyer. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at: [colum.edu/deps](http://colum.edu/deps)  
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