





## What We Inherit

TEXT KRIS POOLE

PHOTOGRAPHY KIRSTEN SHULTZ

Elissa Kline is a fine art legacy of sorts. Her parents and grandparents were artists and, despite efforts to resist the pull, this heritage has shaped who she has become. Kline's grandfather was the celebrated Dadaist Marcel Janco, a Romanian architect and artist who bought passage to Palestine when Hitler threatened his homeland. After fleeing Romania, Janco helped establish Ein Hod, a small artists' village in Israel, where he lived and worked for the rest of his life.

Kline's mother, Josine Ianco (her mother uses the original spelling), was born in Romania and spent her adolescence in Israel. As a young woman she went to Paris, where she married an American and then moved with him to the United States. In New York, she studied at the Art Students League. Ten years later she was reunited with documentary filmmaker Herbert Kline, whom she had met in Israel when he was making a film on the Holocaust. They had fallen in love back then and, as he was leaving Israel, Kline had pledged to send for her. A serious bout with malaria had prohibited him from doing so, but he sought her out in New York when he learned that she had separated from her husband. The two were married in 1956 and began a family. Elissa recalls that during this time her father was preoccupied with screenwriting.

In the early 1960s Elissa's father received an offer to develop a museum in Los Angeles dedicated to the history of film. The family moved to California when she was three. Within the first month of the move, Kline's father was diagnosed with stomach cancer and turned his responsibilities temporarily over to his wife. In addition to running the Arts Center, Kline's mother began to curate exhibitions, a pursuit in which she continues today. Under Josine Ianco's leadership, the Lytton Center for the Visual Arts thrived for many years. Kline remembers accompanying her mother to work and helping her install exhibitions. A highly intelligent curator who spoke many languages and had cultivated a discerning eye, Josine Ianco was interested only in the highest quality art. Kline vividly recalls recoiling as a teenager when her mother would review artists' slides. Ianco would look at the work critically and, as is true for most curators, would dismiss much of what she saw. This memory contributed to Kline's reluctance to make or share art.

Through her parents, Kline witnessed the pull and power of having and feeding artistic passion. As a child, she felt that her father's commitment to his work was greater than his commitment to his family. His continual absence while filmmaking and the constant financial uncertainty (especially when he was blacklisted during the McCarthy era) combined to make their life chaotic. But as an adult, she has learned to respect his passionate commitment to his work and his willingness to take risks. Through the salons hosted by her mother, Kline was introduced to a fascinating world: She would sit in and listen intently. Her mother's extraordinarily high standards simultaneously impressed and intimidated her. She couldn't imagine putting her own artwork up to such scrutiny. Kline summarily concludes, "I did everything in my power not to become an artist."

Kline did want to be involved in the creative process, however. Growing up in Laurel Canyon in the '60s, she was immersed in music, and the process of making records intrigued her. She moved to

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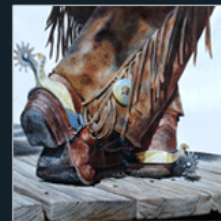


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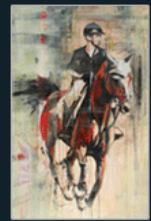
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New York, where she could obtain training to become a recording engineer. When, in 1976, she enrolled in the Institute of Audio Research and was informed that girls didn't do this kind of work, it only strengthened her determination. Kline was one of two women in the school. She worked as an engineer for three years, then traded in the technical side of music for the role of studio manager.

Kline reluctantly left New York when her first husband took a job in Los Angeles. Kline was unhappy, and her marriage slowly fell apart. When a house-sitting job for Gerry Goffin reignited an acquaintance with Carole King, Goffin's former wife, Kline mentioned to Carole that she had become disenchanted with L.A. and the music business, and wanted to find a more physically beautiful place to live. Several days later King called with a proposal that Kline move to Idaho to manage her ranch. Kline knew nothing about ranch management, but had had some experience with horses when she was a girl. She spontaneously invited Erik Gillberg, whom she had just met, to join her on this

adventure. Erik and Elissa have now been together for fifteen years, and have a seven-year-old son, Ian.

It was the isolation and solitude of Robinson Bar Ranch that ultimately turned Kline toward the close-up, textural photography she is doing today. Frenetic urban life had prevented the kind of quiet that is prerequisite to noticing and celebrating the details. The patterns in ice and the shadows created by a horse's mane came clear when Kline was quiet enough to see. It was also this isolation that encouraged her to risk making art, doing the work just for herself. Even today she states how personal the work is: I have never cared what comes of it—I do it for me. I love the stories...I can look at a photograph and remember the day, recall the temperature and my feelings and what was happening in my world.

Photography was something that Kline had done for pleasure all her life. The sublime beauty of Idaho's landscape and the Rocky Mountain West encouraged her to use her camera often. In retrospect she sees that she went through a necessary transition with her photographs. At first, she took "postcards"—the kind of isn't-this-beautiful snapshot that compels tourists to pull out their Nikons. But those broad, panoramic mountain views didn't hold her interest. It was the more abstract qualities of photography—the significance light plays in transforming or revealing an object—that fascinated her. She describes the shift from pretty pictures to what she is doing now as a move from observer to absorption and, visually, from the center to the edges. Rather than shooting the whole lake, she eventually chose the spot along the shoreline where the water laps up to the land. Instead of horses lingering in a meadow, the focus narrowed to the place where the horse's back meets the sky.

Of photography's appeal, Kline says: It's like writing with light. It is the mark and measure of the moment when sun, shadow, time of day all combine to offer the right ingredients. And while Kline's images are abstract, their narratives are very real to her. In a way, she is using these images as a diary, a record of her life on the ranch. Each of the photographs recalls a moment or an event. Kline remembers the day when her son had a sustained high fever and, needing to attend to the horses, she went outside where the temperature was 28 degrees below zero. The contrast in temperature was startling. Seeing an intricate frost on her truck windshield, she retrieved her camera and shot the ice crystals. In another of Kline's photographs, a field of white surrounds three barely discernable lines etched in the center. For Kline, the serene and minimal image recalls scratch marks left in a snow bank by a bull elk that had been eating hay nearby.

It is the purity and clarity of Kline's photographs that sets them apart. The honesty and familiarity combined in the images is a formula she arrived at instinctively. Pregnant with Ian, Kline had complications that restricted her to her bed. To overcome the boredom she began to play with Photoshop on the computer. The number and variety of options—being able to heighten contrasts, enlarge or eliminate, zoom in or cut out—intrigued her for awhile. Eventually, though, she surmised that the technical appeal was seductive but distracting. Kline realized that in order to focus on her work she had to establish some rules for herself. Today she uses only natural light, and will not stage or arrange her images, or manipulate them in processing. Through experimentation she has learned that her best images are those that are distilled down to their essence.

After some time at the ranch, Kline's photographs, like her life, simplified. She talks poetically about the solitude and how the horses she fed and watered every day became the landscape of her life. After Ian was born, Kline's world shrank further. As is true for all new mothers, it was difficult to find time for herself. The walk from her house to the barn every morning and every night became her respite, and the path an intimate retreat. Through the routine of feeding and grooming the horses, the nuances of their physical beings became apparent. Noticing how the frost lay on their coats, Kline began to carry her camera with her. Often, in the twenty minutes it took Kline to do chores, she would shoot a roll of film. Nearly the entirety of Kline's photographic work has been shot in this quarter-mile route between her house and the barn.

It is this familiarity of site—the deep knowing of a place—that allows Kline to do what she does. She

can locate the intricacies because she no longer needs to see or assess the location as a whole. The lacy edges of a puddle or the patterns of pine needles are what distinguish one day from the next and make the well-traveled path meditative and fascinating. Kline recently returned to her mother's house, another place that she has known intimately. With an eye trained to the subtleties, she was able to see things she didn't remember—the heat vent, the door handles, the hardwood floors—each offering new pattern, new texture to translate.

The irony of Elissa Kline's life is that it is precisely her desire to have and keep family that created the space and motivation to make art. It was the forced slowing down of motherhood and its humbling nature that helped her see more acutely the preciousness of her surroundings. This place is still a wonder, and this is my time for appreciation. Living here I can get quiet enough. I want to show people what I see; the greatest compliment comes when people see something different in it than I do.

Sensitive to the vagaries of recognition and the marketplace, Kline is skittish about declaring photography her career. Like most artists, she does her work because she has to—because it is an outlet for her life. When friend and novelist Judith Freeman asked her if she was a serious photographer, Kline's response was "No, I am a joyous one." And it is the commitment to doing the work for her own pleasure that will keep it honest and true. She has given herself permission to love working at the ranch and raising a family alongside making her art. When she talks about what's next, she refers back to her family and how her father taught her that you can be the architect of your own life. He was a boy from Davenport, Iowa who ended up traveling the world and making important films. And Mom was a little Romanian girl who ended up running a museum in Los Angeles.

The freedom and courage with which her parents embraced their lives is the same that allows Kline to execute hers as she wishes. Her passion is grounded in her commitment to family and ranch work. While she understands that exhibiting the work to the public is the next step, she finds herself remarkably patient about it. It is a patience fueled in part by her history, a legacy that has taught her to risk making her own path and to value the quiet and balance she has carved out for her life.

Kristin Poole is the Artistic Director of the Sun Valley Center for the Arts, where she oversees programming, curates exhibitions, and writes about art. She lives in Hailey with her two children, Maddie and Eron.

Elissa Kline's photographs can be viewed at the Anne Reed Gallery or at [www.annereedgallery.com](http://www.annereedgallery.com).

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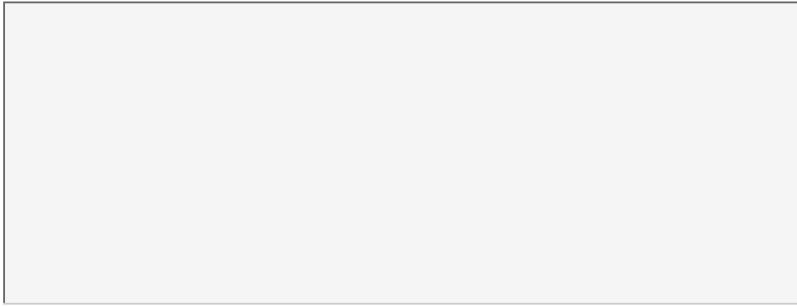
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