

Artist Statement: The 4 Questions

The 4 Questions follows my 2009 work, *A Story of Rose's*, which was a biographical narrative about my mother, Rosette Volk, a holocaust survivor whose journey brought her from Cuba to France and later, to the United States. That work explored significant events that I believe shaped and changed my mother's identity.

Born in Union de Reyes, Cuba in 1924, Rosette Volk was the eldest child of Sephardic Jews from Turkey. When she was 4, my grandmother and grandfather, Camilla and Yehuda, brought her and her younger brother, Maurice, to France seeking new opportunities. Fourteen years later, in 1942, under orders from the government of occupation, German soldiers picked up my mother, taking her from her family and bringing her to an internment camp in Vittel, France (Illag Vittel), where, as a Cuban citizen under the protectorate of the United States, she was held with other non-French nationals.

Located in the Lorraine region of northeastern France, Vittel had been a well-known spa with many grand hotels dating back to the 19th century that accommodated guests who came for the curative mineral waters. The establishment of the internment camp at Vittel in 1939 enabled the Germans to utilize the hotels to house prisoners who were recuperating from treatment at the local hospital. Eventually, Vittel was used to hold British and American citizens, as well as other citizens of allied countries, who were of value for prisoner exchange, including, in some cases, Jews. Occupancy at the camp grew to over 3,000 people, and Jews were housed in separate hotels.



Video Still, *The 4 Questions*, single channel video, 2013, 11 minutes.

(Click on the linked image to view video)

Vittel was unlike any of the other Nazi camps in France in that it also served as a model to demonstrate Germany's "fair" treatment of captives to the International Committee of the Red Cross. It received supplies from the Red Cross, there was a hospital on its grounds, and residents were allowed to attend school and participate in activities. It was there that my mother learned to speak English. As it became known that internment at Vittel could mean survival, there were Jews who attempted to transfer to the camp with false papers. In one well-documented case, 300 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto came to Vittel, and when their papers were found to be forged, they were sent to their deaths in the concentration camps.

During the time of my mother's internment at Vittel, her parents and younger sister had to return to Turkey, as their safety in France was in question. My mother was registered as a Cuban national and her Cuban citizenship enabled her to escape the plight of an estimated 77,000 other Jewish citizens living in France who were deported and killed in concentration camps. In 1944, American soldiers liberated Illag Vittel and my mother returned to Paris. In 1949, she immigrated to the United States.

The 4 Questions was developed around a rare audiocassette recording in which my mother recalled what happened to her during the Holocaust. In the video work, my mother's experiences are explored using the Passover Seder as a framework. During the Seder, the ritual meal of Passover, the youngest child reads "The Four Questions" aloud. They reference the symbolic gestures of the Seder (such as eating bitter herbs and reclining in one's chair) that recall the history of the ancient enslavement of the Jews and their escape to freedom. The Seder is an act of remembrance and calls upon the participants to recall and celebrate the history of the Jewish people.



The 4 Questions, archival pigment print, 20 x 20 inches, 2013.

This work is about and an apparent contradiction: that in spite of the tradition of recollection and remembrance in Jewish life, we rarely recalled or recognized the most significant and pivotal event in my family's history. As a boy, the four questions I wished to ask at the Seder were about a different narrative that was shrouded in mystery: not the ancient Jews' exodus from Egypt, but the great miracle of my mother's survival.

For many years, it was hard for me to understand that because of an arbitrary distinction of nationality, my mother did not perish as so many others did. My mother's reluctance to talk about her experiences and the lack of information available about Vittel made it very difficult until recently for me to understand why she was spared. Through the production of this work and the prior work, *A Story of Rose's*, I have come to better understand my mother's experiences during the Holocaust as well the circumstances that enabled her survival.

My impetus to make a work that addresses a "biographical narrative" is rooted in an interest in unraveling and understanding the historical legacy of my family. As an artist, the challenge of bringing this history into visual form is that the work must do more than serve as a personal narrative. My intent, through the use of particular materials and forms, is to produce an analogous experience of this history. By creating this, I hope to make the narrative accessible in such a way that the viewer will experience it through the lens of their own perspective and as a result consider what might otherwise be unknown and unimaginable to them.

Larry C. Volk

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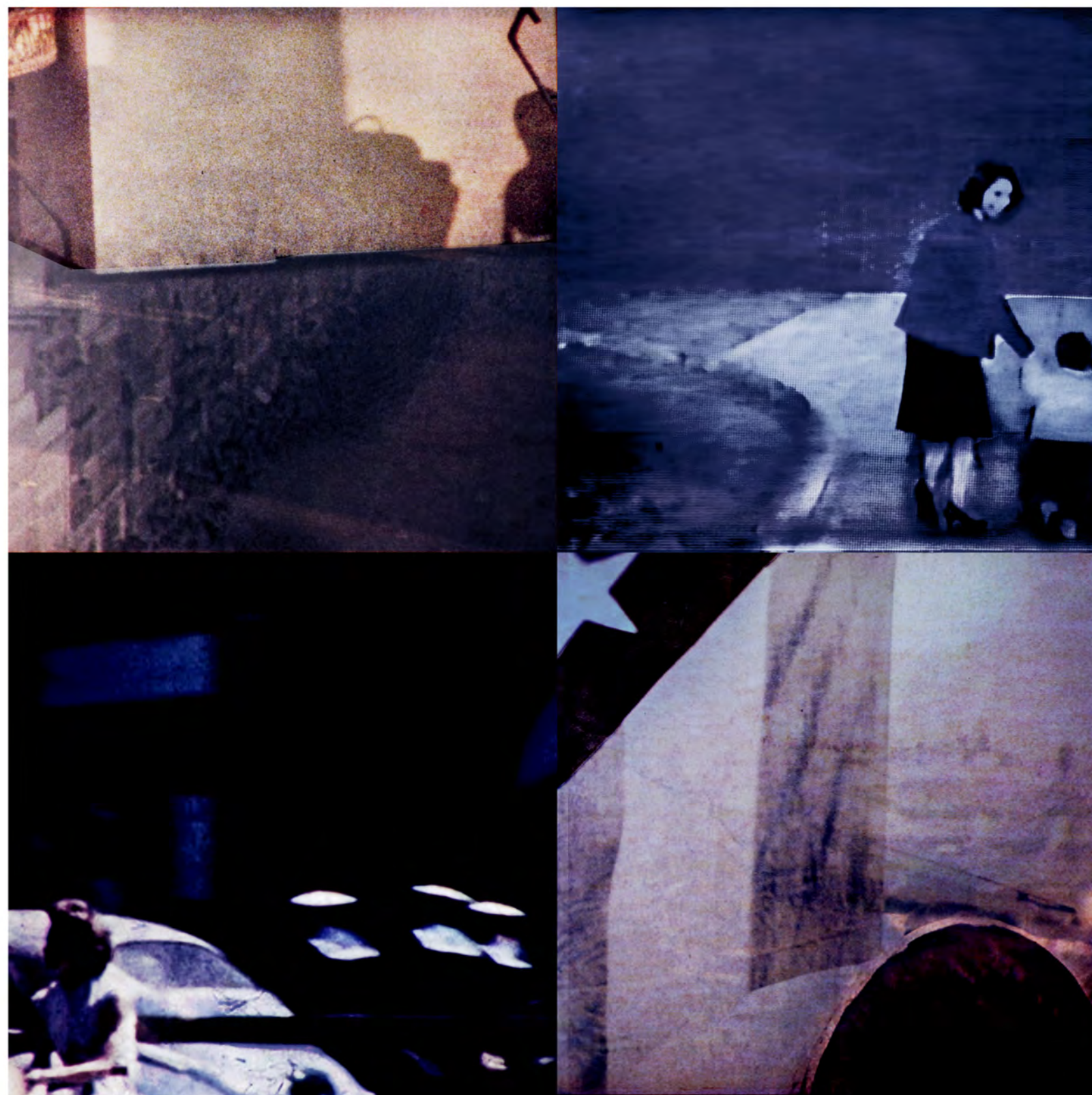
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Click on the image to link to the video.

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