

Celine Marchbank

Nothing is more foundational than family. It shapes us, supports us, and gives structure to the unfolding paths of our lives. We inherit not only the visible traits of those who came before us but also the gestures, rituals, and ways of being that have passed quietly through generations. Among these inheritances, the bond between mother and child stands apart: intimate, nurturing, complicated, and often ineffable. It forms us in ways that we only fully understand when tested by distance, change, or loss.

Celine Marchbank's photographic series *A Stranger in My Mother's Kitchen* offers a deeply affecting meditation on this most elemental human relationship. Created over five years following her mother's death, the work returns to the domestic space where their connection was once lived most fully: the kitchen. Within this room—its soft light, its familiar surfaces, its quiet gathering of tools and ingredients—Marchbank discovers a place where memory accumulates and where grief, love, and continuation coexist. What emerges is not merely a portrait of absence but a visual articulation of the presence that persists beyond death: an enduring conversation between mother and daughter, carried forward through photography, through cooking, and through the rituals of care that bind one generation to the next.

Marchbank's relationship to cooking is intertwined with a deeper familial legacy. Her mother was a well-known restaurateur, a woman whose culinary creativity and professional rigor shaped both the meals she served publicly and the rhythms and intimacy of her home. In this household, food was never incidental—it was expressive, intuitive, and central to how love was given and understood. Cooking became the language through which mother and daughter communicated: a shared vocabulary of technique, flavor, and gesture. When Marchbank returns to her mother's kitchen with her camera, she is not simply entering a space of domestic memory but stepping back into the heart of her mother's identity. Preparing her mother's recipes becomes a way of continuing a dialogue that food itself had always made possible.

The photographs in this series reveal how grief inhabits the everyday. Marchbank's lens moves slowly across utensils resting in drawers, handwritten recipes creased from years of use, jars whose labels bear the traces of her mother's touch. These objects do not announce loss; they contain it. They hold the emotional touch of a life lived within this space, and it is through careful looking that the artist uncovers the quiet density of meaning they carry. The kitchen becomes a site where the past lingers, visible in the gestures remembered, in the meals once prepared, in the knowledge that nurturing is a language transmitted across time.

Cooking, in this context, becomes a profound act of reconnection. Marchbank's engagement with her mother's recipes is not a reenactment of domestic routine but a form of ritual practice. In preparing dishes her mother once made, Marchbank participates in a process of continuation: she becomes both student and keeper of tradition, honoring the creative and caregiving labor embodied in her mother's culinary knowledge. The photographs offer nourishment that extends beyond the physical, reminding us that making is one of the most enduring expressions of love. The kitchen, in Marchbank's work, functions almost as a shrine—

not in a monumental sense but as a quiet, living archive of care. It is the place where her mother expressed love through food, through time, through the attentive labor that nourished her family. By returning to this room with her camera, Marchbank elevates domestic space, foregrounding the creativity and emotional intelligence embedded in cooking. She challenges the often overlooked value of the maternal kitchen, revealing it as a site where artistry, survival, and affection converge.

For Marchbank, photography, too, becomes a mode of nurturing. The light is soft and natural, evoking the quiet hours of early morning or late afternoon when home kitchens often feel most alive. Her compositions are unforced, balancing documentary clarity with poetic restraint. She creates images that invite contemplation rather than prescribe meaning. They beckon the viewer to linger, to peel back layers of memory, to consider the spaces and objects that hold significance in their own lives.

As a title, *A Stranger in My Mother's Kitchen* captures the emotional dissonance at the center of the work. The daughter who returns to this once-familiar space is no longer who she was. Grief has reshaped her, and the kitchen she enters is recognizable yet altered by loss. Marchbank's photographs explore this estrangement with tenderness, acknowledging how death changes our relationship to ordinary places. She photographs not to catalogue what remains but to understand how absence transforms the contours of daily life.

Yet even in moments of estrangement, connection persists. These images reveal the ways memory survives in the ordinary—the glancing fall of light across a countertop, the careful arrangement of spices, the wear on the handle of a favorite pan. These details form an index of intimacy. They speak to the repetition of gestures shared between mother and daughter, gestures that shaped their relationship and now sustain its memory. In documenting them, Marchbank creates a visual continuity: evidence that love is not lost in death but reconstituted through acts of remembering. Her photographs open a space for vulnerability and sincerity, inviting viewers to confront their own experiences of loss and continuation. The images embody a gentle willingness to look at what remains, sit with what hurts, and find beauty in the persistence of connection.

Ultimately, this body of work is a testament to the ways we remain connected to those who have shaped us. Twining the languages of photography and cooking, Marchbank continues a dialogue with her late mother—one carried forward through memory, touch, and the intimate work of tending to what has been left behind. Her photographs remind us that love does not end; it lives on in the spaces we inhabit, in the gestures we repeat, in the recipes we prepare, and in the images we make to hold on to what matters.

Crista Dix
Executive Director
Griffin Museum of Photography