

## AN END TO A KIND OF LONELINESS ... from the artist

Nina Mae Fowler

I met Wendy Riva on a trip to LA by complete chance. I was showing my work to a friend of hers, Jill Goldman, who quickly got Wendy on the phone and instructed her to come straight to the cafe to meet me. Neither of us knew why but it soon became clear. Wendy Riva was married to the grandson of Marlene Dietrich, his name was Michael.

I have been drawing my idols since I could hold a pencil – the longest standing infatuation being with Marlene. So meeting one of her relatives and being invited to view this unseen archive, in person, felt as though fate was playing a hand.

Wendy and I spent the next few days and nights together looking at the letters, photos, objects and articles which tied Marlene so inextricably to her beloved grandson. I couldn't believe I was reading her actual handwriting and standing beside the piano she had in her apartment. I kept thinking to myself 'this is the closest I could possibly come to meeting her'. It was an exceptional insight into the private, domestic, family life of someone who reached impossible heights of fame and thus became incredibly protective of her privacy – only allowing her fans to see what she wanted them to – controlling absolutely every aspect of her public image and safeguarding her private one with such tenacity that the Dietrich we know is unrecognisable as a Grandmother who loved to cook beef stew for her family. I felt I had a duty to Marlene, Wendy and Michael to do what I could, if I could, to try and help give this project wings.

Wendy had been planning to make a publication about the archive for a while but had hoped to find a new pair of eyes to assist in bringing it together and perhaps offer a contemporary thread to tie the historical aspects to a current response. I had never felt so qualified for a job. We shared the same understanding for the aesthetics of the project, the respect for the material and the tenderness with which it needed to be handled. Wendy gave me total artistic licence to respond as I chose and this freedom gave me the courage to make a new body of work – addressing themes and processes I feel I have been moving both towards and away from for a very long time.

The drawings came easily as the photographs from the family albums were so full of love between Grandma and Grandson that they almost drew themselves. Tracings woven throughout the book come from the beginnings of drawings old and new – they represent a freer, scratchier side to the archive – scrawled handwriting sometimes indecipherable and desperate. The main body of work was executed in the form of sculptures to create a narrative, combined with objects associated with the archive.

I call them 'sculptural compositions' as they only exist for the pages of this publication. Since discovering the archive in 2019 I slowly went through everything, word by word, piece by piece and gathered my own collection of ephemera along the way. My Grandma's wooden spoon with which she cooked for her family, my husbands wrist watch – emblematic of Marlene's longing, an antique type-writer which I dismantled for parts to hold the sculptures together or prop them up. I lived with this collection for 2 years, as the works came together in my head, editing it and adding to it and allowing for destiny to play its own part too as items were lost, replaced or found unexpectedly to play a part.

During this time I gave birth to my daughter Mabel and with her came an even deeper understanding of the material I was working with. Michael as a baby, toddler, infant and the relationship he had with his Grandmother. The physicality of holding a child this age, at times nestling into you, at others pulling away. Often looking for your hand to steady them, sometimes engaged, sometimes unreachable. Sometimes happy, sometimes inconsolable. I felt so close to these pictures at that moment in time, the sculptures came very naturally and looking back now I can't even remember making them, as though something/one else took over.

The titles of the 'sculptural compositions' come from the sentences I found most resonant from Michael and Marlene's correspondence. "An end to a kind of loneliness" for me sums up this project. It has come to fruition thanks to a wonderful team working together from across the Atlantic ocean – Wendy, Olivia (editor), Sam (designer) and myself who I believe each knew how special this opportunity was and each wanted to do our best by the protagonists – Michael and Marlene.

It is seeped with emotion – grief, loneliness, longing, reliance, jealousy, pleasure, love, admiration, passion – I could go on and on. By pulling some of these feelings out of the archive and reimagining them in a contemporary context, hopefully I have done this unique relationship between two special people the justice it so deserves.

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