

POSSESSED; Letting Fate Take the Picture

By **DAVID COLMAN** JUNE 29, 2003

"WHEN I look around today, the biggest anachronism I see is pregnancy," Andy Warhol wrote in "The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)." "I just can't believe that people are still pregnant."

That was in 1975. In 2003, Jessica Craig-Martin finds the fact even more appalling. Ms. Craig-Martin, the art-cum-fashion photographer whose often unflattering, paparazzi-style photos of night-life warriors bring to mind a strange mix of Warhol, Weegee and Dian Fossey, has become painfully familiar with the realities of incipient single motherhood, with three weeks more to go as host to what feels like a gorilla in her midst.

"This is way too ridiculous, this ludicrous shape I've become," she said last week. "It's hideously low tech. It feels very old-fashioned. It seems very odd that the instant gratification part hasn't been sorted out."

Ms. Craig-Martin is not terribly nostalgic for life in sepia tones. And any feeling she has for low-tech charm extends back only as far as the 1970's. To be precise, to that triumph of instant gratification, the Polaroid SX-70.

While she is not a photographer who uses digital cameras or Adobe Photoshop (or even sets and lighting), Ms. Craig-Martin acknowledges that in her own way she is "a total control freak." The SX-70, she said, utterly short-circuits the drive to control

with a fixed lens and little room for tinkering. Once you take the picture, the die is struck. After a brief gestation period, out it comes, and there it is, and no amount of nurture à la Photoshop can change it.

"It has its own little voice," she said. "It's always fun to see what comes out. I never get tired of that."

For her, it also comes with its own set of hereditary problems. When Ms. Craig-Martin, 38, the daughter of the British painter Michael Craig-Martin, was young, her mother bought an SX-70 and turned it into an apparatus of maternal devotion and torture. "I think somewhere in a trunk, there is a record of every 10 seconds of 1978," she said. "It was stalking, basically."

So when confronted with an SX-70 last summer at an antique show in Sag Harbor, N.Y., she gave it, she said, "a sideways look." But fiddling with the sleek design, she reconsidered and bought the camera for about \$200. "I just wanted it -- I didn't care what it was," she said. "If it had been a handbag, I would have bought it."

Whatever she was expecting, she was in for a surprise. "Even with the usual lack of control over a photo, these came out more extreme," she said. "The color was off, and the framing was all wrong -- it actually completely changes the subject matter.

"They were always someone else's photos," she continued. "No matter how much I tried to make them mine, the camera absolutely rebelled. The more you try and get it right, the more it goes wrong."

Sounds an awful lot like parenthood. "It does ring a bell," she said, wincing. "I'm sure I will get the same result. The more I try, the opposite will happen."

Like Polaroid, like daughter. Ms. Craig-Martin recalled that back in the SX-70's heyday -- her rebellious teenage years -- she didn't exactly come out as her mother had envisioned either.

"Yes," she said drily. "I've apologized for that."

One aspect of the camera is particularly appealing at the moment; that is, the way that after the picture comes out, the camera snaps back into its trim, stylish shape.

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