

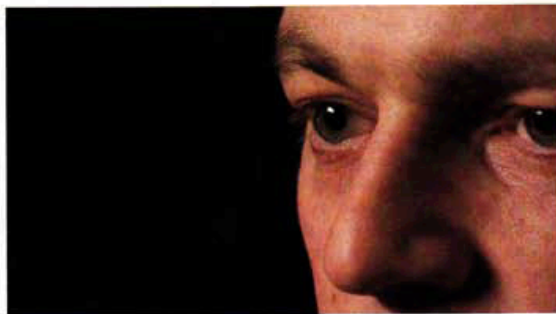
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By David Frankel

REVIEWS

Karl Haendel

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Patriarchy shimmers in and out of focus in Karl Haendel's *Questions for My Father*, 2011, being alternately constructed and deconstructed while remaining literally invisible. For this emotionally complex video, a collaboration with filmmaker Petter Ringbom (Haendel's own best-known work takes the form of large-scale drawings), the artist asked a group of male friends to look one by one into the camera and pose questions they would have liked their fathers to answer but that they had never asked. No doubt many sons' relationships with their fathers are jolly fun, but, as Tolstoy knew, happy families don't make good literature—they're all alike—and Haendel seems mostly to have picked men with baggage. Usually framed head and shoulders on a screen so large that their faces are taller than we are, they pin us with their troubles.



Karl Haendel and
Petter Ringbom,
*Questions for My
Father*, 2011.
Still from a color video
in HD, 11 minutes
17 seconds.

The structure of Haendel's video seems obvious but is carefully thought through. The sixteen men (one of them Haendel himself) come and go on-screen against a black background, each staying long enough only to ask a question before ceding place to someone else. But each also makes further appearances—the questions are clustered thematically, so that the same men resurface as the video moves through its topics. The result is that we gradually build up a composite sense of each speaker, or rather, *two* such senses, one of the speaker, one of his father. The same man who at one point asks, "Did you miss me when you moved out?" for example, and, a little incredulously, "Why did you get married?" elsewhere asks, "Did you always know you were gay?" And the question "Do Americans intimidate you?" is recontextualized when we hear the same man ask, "Did you ever protest against the Shah?" "What was it like to watch the revolution from America?" and, "Have you ever given money to a terrorist group?"

Politics, sexuality, household habits, finances—nothing is off the table here, and from the toxic to the trivial, from specific incidents to the more general emotional register of "What are your regrets?" every question has weight, given the power of the father-son relationship and the openness with which the men talk. They have a compelling willingness to lay themselves bare, at the risk of revealing hostility, prurience, scorn, sorrow, and, maybe more than anything, just plain bewilderment. Haendel ups the ante a little by occasionally cropping to show just a fragment of a face, so that we're not always sure who's talking—like the men themselves, we're asked to work, to decipher, to put together a picture. The fathers, meanwhile, are both utterly central and utterly invisible, unseen and unheard. In this way *Questions for My Father* reminded me of the "conversation books" used by Beethoven after he went deaf. He would have his visitors talk to him by writing in a notebook; then, reading along as they wrote, he would reply, occasionally also in writing but most often in speech, since his friends, after

all, could hear. As a result, their side of the conversation survives on paper while his is lost—the master's voice is absent. And so it is in *Questions for My Father*, an apparatus built around a void.

To apply this structure to the role or rule of the father—literally, to patriarchy—wittily subverts conventional psychoanalytic thinking: Isn't it women who are meant to embody a lack? In fact the DNA of Haendel's piece, named in its title, is to question, to talk back, to undo, but what is gripping in the work is that even as it clearly illuminates Dad's powerlessness, the inevitability of his failures, it also suggests his authority, the indelible mark he leaves on his child's life, whether or not he is present in it. In any case, I doubt Haendel would use a word like *patriarchy*, being more interested in emotional realities than in abstract principles. At the same time, he is conceptually adept enough to have his friends look fully into the camera, so that as we watch, each one of us is directly addressed, whether we are fathers or not.

—David Frankel