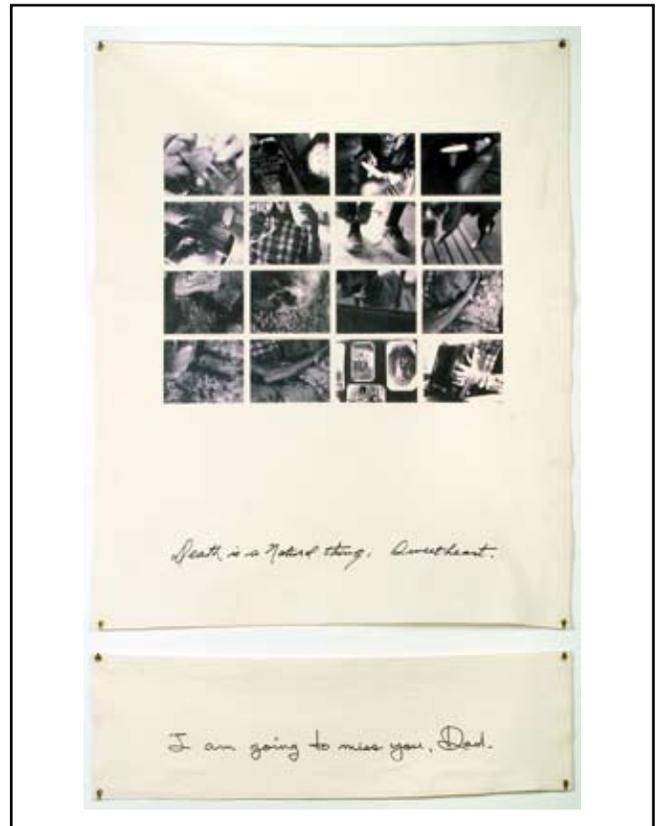


Sandra Semchuk

# DEATH IS A NATURAL THING, SWEETHEART & ACCEPTANCE

Sandra Semchuk  
BY CHRISTOPHER BRAYSHAW

Artist's Statement (1993)  
SANDRA SEMCHUK



Sandra Semchuk  
*Death is a Natural Thing, Sweetheart*, 1992

laser transfer media on canvas  
(149.5 x 95 cm)  
SAG 1992.02.01  
acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association  
and the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition  
Assistance program/et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux  
acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada

Photograph by Cameron Heryet

## Sandra Semchuk By Christopher Brayshaw, 1999

Sandra Semchuk was born in Saskatchewan in 1948. She received her BFA from the University of Saskatchewan in 1970. In 1983, she received a Masters Degree in Photography from the University of New Mexico. A founding member of the Photographers' Gallery, Saskatoon, Semchuk also teaches at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and



Sandra Semchuk *Death is a Natural Thing, Sweetheart*, 1992 laser transfer media on canvas (149.5 x 95 cm) SAG 1992.02.01 Acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association and the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program/ et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

Design in Vancouver. Her work has been exhibited at Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver; Photographers' Gallery, Saskatoon; Prince George Art Gallery; Coburg Gallery, Vancouver; Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina; and Concordia University, Montreal.

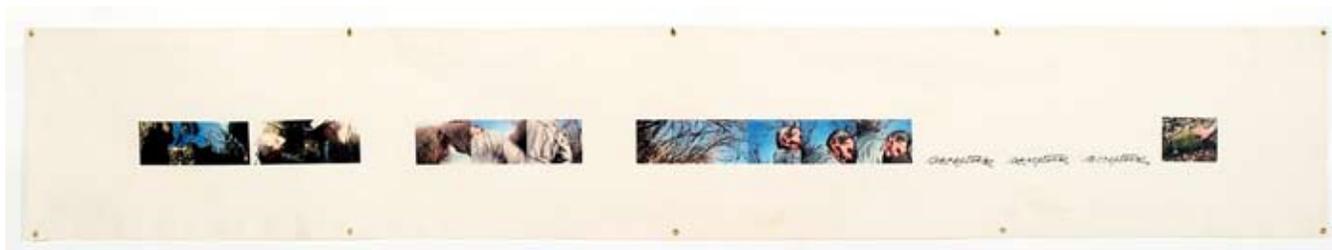
Semchuk's photo-based art practice is concerned with the photographic representation of personal memories. Semchuk's subjects are drawn from an intimate circle of family and friends. Often, her subjects are posed in settings which have particular resonance for the photographer, such as her family home or landscapes she has known since a child.

As a critically self-aware photographer, Semchuk realises that, despite the personal nature of many of her images, photographs must also be able to communicate to those who were not involved in their creation. Photographs of personal subjects presented in a gallery context are only meaningful insofar as they can communicate to audiences who, unlike the photographer and her circle, have no special knowledge of the subjects and landscapes they depict. Semchuk uses a variety of formal strategies to enable viewers' access to the deeply personal content of her images. Her photographs are often arranged in grids and sequences enabling audiences to "read" them like movie storyboards. In this way, repetitions of gesture and place help contextualize individual subjects and their relationships to each other. Sometimes, texts accompany Semchuk's photographic sequences, which give her subjects

voice, enabling them to comment on situations or details not represented by the photographs themselves. In this way, Semchuk self-consciously acknowledges that photographs often suppress as much information as they express, and consequently uses text to "fill in" the conceptual and narrative gaps that her photographs cannot express on their own.

Semchuk often works collaboratively, inviting her subjects to contribute to her artmaking process by making photographs of their own, which are then presented in conjunction with her own images. Often, the stylistic differences between her photographs and those of her subjects take on the form of a dialogue, in which each photographer's work develops and extends the other's.

Sometimes, as in *Death is a Natural Thing, Sweetheart* (1992), gaps between individual photographs and texts suggest painful events which cannot be represented directly, but only alluded to, through abstraction. For example, the white gap between the two sentences, *Death is a natural thing, sweetheart,* and, *I'm going to miss you, dad,* references to the actual death of Semchuk's father, an event which fractures the artist's recollection of him into the twelve photographic fragments displayed above the two handwritten texts. No longer a physical presence, Semchuk's father is displaced in memory, a collection of memories of individual gestures and mannerisms which no longer cohere. Semchuk's skill as an artist lies in her ability to give this dissociative experience



Sandra Semchuk *Acceptance*, 1992 laser transfer media on canvas (48.3 x 297 cm) SAG 1992.02.02 Acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association and the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program/ et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

form; by combining photographs and texts, she makes her own grief and forgetting comprehensible to others. Though the specificity of her father's life may slowly be lost in her memory, her transformation of her experience into art charges her experiences with new signifying potential. Her memories are not so much lost as redeemed, changed from one form to another. As Semchuk notes in an artist's statement, "In the photographic images I trace my own responses to my father and to his inevitable death. . . .I use the camera gesturally as a way of sustaining the experience from the inside, and of leaving a trace as an outside observer. The broken image, like the broken self, hastens the processes of reconstruction and synthesis."

### **Artist's Statement (1993)**

My father suffered from a serious heart attack in July, 1988. In *Coming to Death's Door: A Daughter/Father Collaboration* (a series of work which includes the piece entitled *Death is a Natural Thing, Sweetheart*, was shown at Presentation House Gallery, 1992), he and I look together at the event, which led to my helping him escape from the hospital. In the photographic images I trace my own responses to my father and to his inevitable death. This investigation occurs within the simple experiences of moving from the tent where I slept separate from my father's home, overlooking a lake in northern Saskatchewan, and of situating myself in his bedroom. I use the camera gesturally as a way sustaining the experience from the inside, and of leaving a trace as an outside observer. The broken image, like the broken self, hastens the processes of reconstruction and synthesis.

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