

Family setbacks central focus of 'Aerospace Folktales'



Artist Allan Sekula found his earliest inspiration close to home.

A Pennsylvania native who grew up in California, Sekula — who died in 2013 at age 62 — launched his professional career with the mixed-media work “Aerospace Folktales.”

Using 142 photographs combined with audio and text elements, the ambitious piece chronicles the trials and tribulations experienced by Sekula’s family — especially his father, Ignace, and his mother, Evelyn — in the early 1970s.

The work was created in the wake of Ignace losing his job as an aerospace engineer in the Burbank plant of the Lockheed Corp. (now Lockheed Martin).

It serves as the centerpiece of a larger exhibit of Sekula’s art — “Allan Sekula: Aerospace Folktales and Other Stories” — on view through July 2 at the Columbus Museum of Art.

According to curator Drew Sawyer, Sekula (who from 1980 to 1985 taught at Ohio State University) referred to the work as a “disassembled movie.”

“Cinema and film were important throughout his practice,” Sawyer said.

The piece might also be said to resemble a dismantled flip book: Running horizontally across the four walls of a museum gallery is a thin strip of photographs, positioned at eye level. Like frame enlargements from a movie, a particular scene or activity is frequently depicted throughout the course of several photographs seemingly taken moments apart.

For example, one set of images shows a group of enthusiastic workers (presumably employees of Lockheed) on their own and then mingling with military brass; another set depicts Ignace in profile, grimacing behind the wheel of a car.

The photographs present a powerful study in contrasts: Ignace was a member of a profession associated with flight and forward thinking, but his unemployment brought his family crashing to Earth.

By the time the work was completed in 1973, Sawyer said, “His dad had been unemployed for quite some time, so you can see they’re now living in a small apartment in San Pedro.”



Several photographs show Ignace and Evelyn standing in front of a row of garages in their apartment complex; another group — prefaced by a “title card” reading, “In the evening, the engineer would write letters and straighten the lamps” — show Ignace laboring at a small desk barely illuminated by inadequate lamps.

What is he writing? Job applications?

Echoes of Ignace’s former life are found in photographs of model planes hanging from a ceiling and rows upon rows of books; in one image, the volume “The Effects of Nuclear Weapons” is posed beside editions of “Grimm’s Fairy Tales.”

Playing continuously in the gallery are audio recordings of Sekula interviewing Ignace, Evelyn and a family friend; although focusing on their voices while scrutinizing the images is difficult, the audio ultimately enriches the piece.

“It becomes deeply personal and very specific,” Sawyer said. “With the images, we might imagine what these individuals sound like and what they think, but with the audio we really get a chance to know what they’re actually thinking.”

Several of Sekula’s slide-show and video works are also included in the exhibit; the most striking is “Untitled Slide Sequence” (1972), in which 35-mm slides depict workers and management marching wearily out of an aerospace factory.

More superficial (and dated) is “Reagan Tape,” a video created in 1981 by Sekula and Noel Burch. Footage of Ronald Reagan as president is juxtaposed with innocuous examples of his work as an actor; even in the clips shown here, however, Reagan displays his lasting appeal as an actor — presumably not what the creators had in mind.