Mira Friedlaender by Sara Roffino

Unpacking relationships.

Installation view of Half of What’s There at Recess (week 2), 2014. Image courtesy of the artist.

From September 2 through October 26, 2014, Mira Friedlaender was in residency at Recess in SoHo. Friedlaender’s mother, the artist Bilge Civalekoglu Friedlaender, was born in Turkey in 1934 and died there in 2000. She spent the majority of her life, however, working in Boston and Philadelphia. After her death, her daughter was left with a storage unit in Philadelphia, full of work, supplies, notebooks, and other ephemera from Civalekoglu Friedlaender’s thirty-year career. Friedlaender moved the contents of the storage unit to Brooklyn, where she lives, but did not open them until she transported the storage unit to Recess—filling almost the entirety of the storefront residency’s space with boxes—and undertook the excavation of her mother’s storage as her own conceptual piece, Half of What’s There, examining what it means to make, to inherit, and to own art.

A month after the boxes had been sorted, their contents documented, repacked, and returned to their ten-by-ten-foot home in Downtown Brooklyn, Friedlaender and I met inside the storage unit to discuss the public processing she had just performed.

Sara Roffino You packed everything up, from Recess, and moved it back here about a month ago. Have you been back here since?

Mira Friedlaender Yeah, we documented everything moving out of Recess, but it was such a flurry. I’m going to have to recreate my map of what is where. I have an inventory, but when we were moving there was
consolidation, so it's not entirely accurate anymore. I worked with a great art
mover for that part of the performance. I'm really compelled by the logistics
of art, all the artworks in storage all over the world, in crates, flat files, in
transit.

SR People hearing about this show generally assumed it was really
sentimental, even though it wasn't. How did you navigate the
mother/daughter dynamic of the project with the actual work you were
making, and performing?

MF I was in such a reactive state—I was reacting to the inventory, in terms of
my own action list, in a logistical way, to what I had unpacked, and, also, I
was interacting with the public, talking with them. Sometimes, I was pretty
aggressive, as a daughter might be expected to be toward her mother. A lot
of people—including my cousin, who didn't know my mom very well—were
really surprised by my focus on the logistics. For me, that's the center of this
work. The act of excavation was the entire point. I sometimes felt like I was
disappointing people, because I didn't want to talk about my feelings. I was
working instinctively, within my "rules." People often said, "It must have
been so hard, for you to unpack this," and in some ways it was. But, I think
people imagined it was somehow much darker than what I actually
experienced. It's her artwork; it's not family letters. I wasn't reading her
journals.

SR But, you had those there.

MF Yes, I had them, and, one day, I'll show them all in a row. She kept a
journal every day of her life. Or, maybe my sister will work with them. She's
a writer.

SR Does it feel like an invasion to read them?

MF A little bit. Take one piece I looked at from the last year of her life. It's an
artist book, and it's all about her family. That's the closest I got to reading
one of her journals. Sometimes, I would open one, read a page, then
immediately close it. I'm grateful they exist, though, because, if I have a
question there might be an answer, somewhere, in them.

SR Did she write about you?

MF I found a journal from the year of my birth. I don't know if it was just her
studio notebook, but there's really nothing in it about her personal life. I
recently became a mom, so I was a little surprised by that, but I haven't
really dug in. Maybe, she wrote about it in another notebook, which she kept
at home. It surprised me, because the later journals are explicitly personal.

SR Did people think you were being cold?

MF I didn't get that impression. Except, I had to ask myself if I was being
cold, because the question of my emotions came up so often, and I clearly
wasn't giving people the reaction they wanted. The truth is that I was
ecstatic. It was really intense to be interacting with all of my mom's work.
She's so present in the work, the work was so strong, and people wanted to
talk about her work, and about our relationship. Meanwhile, I was looking at
the boxes and c-bins, planning the next install. So, there were a lot of things
happening, simultaneously. I really have a lot of work to do, unpacking what
happened.

SR Her death?

MF No, not her death. What just happened, at Recess. I've spent a lot of time
unpacking the way she died, and it was a long time ago. I'm not in active mourning. It's just human nature, people responding the way they did. You find out this news that somebody died, then you respond, and want to talk about it. It makes perfect sense, but that wasn't my focus in working with her storage.

I’ll do the unpacking of this box on video. I didn't shoot everything because that would have been nuts, but I did document a lot, so I know what's in this box. Jock Truman had worked for Betty Parsons. He had his own gallery and in—

SR Wait, this says, "Nothing on Top,"

MF Oh yeah, well, this is really light (laughter). See? Feel that. This box has a piece of mail art in it—notes to Jock Truman, written on Benjamin Franklin postcards. I think they were shown in the gallery.

SR Did he represent her?

MF No, but I think these may have been in a group show. I'm not sure. Did I tell you about the Agnes Martin pieces that I found?

SR No! I didn't hear about them.

MF Well, basically, my mom had this much younger boyfriend, who is an artist, and, now, a nomadic art handler, who works in art fairs. They were together a long time ago, long before she died. A few years ago, he told me that my mom had some Agnes Martin pieces, and that they might be in the storage. I had never heard anything about them.

SR How did she get them?

MF I have no idea. So, there I am, opening a folio. There were tons of stuff—handmade paper, artworks, all sorts of stuff. I was going through everything, and I came up to these two prints, just in their mats, and separated by a piece of tissue paper. I knew it wasn’t her work. I peeked under the mat, and there was the signature. Then, a lot of Googling ensued, and I sent a picture to my friend, asking him what he thought it was. He said, “Oh, it's your mom doing Agnes Martin.” I was like, “No” (laughter) Historically, I’m curious about them, because it’s the work she made when she returned—after her sojourn in the desert in ’73—I think. And also because I think my mother related to Martin’s level of renunciation and her spiritual relationship with the work.

SR Do you want to keep them?
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**SR** Do you want to keep them?

**MF** I do, for now. I tried to find out when she acquired them, but I’m not sure. I think it was when she had a gallery on 57th Street.

**SR** What was her gallery?

**MF** It was Kornblee Gallery—Jill Kornblee.

**SR** Did she trade with a lot of artists?

**MF** I don’t think she knew Agnes Martin. She would have talked about it, I think. From the way they’re packed, it seems like she kept them in her flat file. It was cool to find this hidden treasure, but it underlines an important question: What is art when it’s forgotten in storage? Because, statistically, that’s where most artworks are. Anyway, now, the Martins are in my flat file.

*Squaring Mutation* 5, 1975. Watercolor and gouache on paper. 25.75 x 40 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

**SR** Were there other things that didn’t make it back to the storage unit?

**MF** I brought home some works, and I’m going to loan some to friends. That will be another piece: Where I’ll bring them out, we’ll do the loan agreement, and document that. I have to decide what hat I’ll wear when I deliver these.

**SR** Daughter, artist, or art handler?

**MF** No, actually which hat on my head! (laughter) But, yeah, I think I enjoy being the laborer. I think about that side of it so much, all the work that goes on behind the scenes to show and care for art objects, or not, as the case may be.

**SR** In one of our conversations, you spoke about how, when you took the work out of storage, it was your mom’s work, and at some point it became your piece. But, now that they’re back in here, and when you deliver them, whose are they?
MF You can keep reframing it. You could say that the delivery and the loan are long-term performances, but then what happens? Long-term loans sometimes disappear. There’s a lot of her work that’s not here. Was it on a long-term loan? Did it end up being adopted? I think at this point, it’s storage again. But, I still think of the storage space as a monumental sculpture.

SR I guess, the bottom line is that your mom isn’t here, so you get to decide its terms, but, whether or not that makes it your work, or her work—

MF When it’s hanging on the wall there, it’s definitely going to be her piece. And, I’m not going to draw on top of her work. One thing I realized in the aftermath of Recess is that, when I’m working with somebody else on the work, hanging the work, doing an action together, unpacking, making this delivery—that’s the most exciting part.

![Portrait of a Storage Space 2 (before Recess), 2014. Image courtesy of the artist.](image)

SR I’ve really appreciated being put to work when I’ve visited you. So many people are so precious about this sort of thing, but you just ask, “Can you move that over there and then hold this side up?” You’re not doing it to create an experience, it just needs to get done. It allows for being a part of the work.

MF We shared an experience, but not an overly choreographed one, which I like. The times you came, especially that last time, it was as though I were on a roller coaster. The first week I was very conscious of what I was doing, and I was so deliberate. Then, the roller coaster went down.

SR It was an endurance piece.

MF It really was, and I planned that. But, there’s planning and then there’s doing. I hadn’t done any performance for as long as seven weeks, so I did have to reshape my approach for the last couple weeks. The combination of public engagement and repetitive art installing took a lot out of me.

SR You said more than once, “I could move all of this to Midwest and drop a bomb on it,” and it seems—

MF Oh, yes. There was an attachment that happened with the unpacking, but I still could drop a bomb on it.

SR But, could you really?
MF It's important to feel that I could. The truth is: It belongs to me. I have to deal with it. I cannot continue to store it on this scale for the rest of my life, unless I move somewhere, acquire a garage, or discover cheaper storage.

I did put some of it on the curb.

SR Really? Like what?

MF There were some large, handmade paper pieces that really, truly, looked like the product of a weekend workshop. They didn't fit her work at all. Palette, texture, it was all wrong. I thought of a ritual burning, but figured I'd collaborate with the Department of Sanitation, instead. I spent a lot of time, that week, talking about how awful they were, and how I was going to destroy them. It brought out some uncomfortable responses, but destruction is part of controlling the artist's oeuvre, as any artist packing up their studio will tell you. It's part of making.

SR You found several folios of really beautiful handmade Japanese paper, and said you were going to find a new home for them. Did you?

MF No—and talk about getting attached. I was talking with some former Recess artists, who stopped by one day, and one of them had a friend in town who was interested in the paper. I could feel myself resisting it.

SR You didn't want to give it to her.

MF No, I didn't. Another friend, a sculptor, who also teaches, asked me to let him know when I was getting rid of the supplies, so he could bring his students. I was like, "no, no, no." I surprised myself. Now, I'm thinking about ritual gifts or other collaborative actions with the non-artwork objects.

SR How did your critical view of the work evolve, after looking at it so closely for two months?

MF I was raised by a snob, who was a very serious artist, so it's only fair to hold her to that standard. But, at the same time, I do appreciate it more. It was a funny process, because, as the child of an artist—and every artist is convinced of their own importance, they have to be—there's a point, when you get older, that you're not convinced anymore. You're not sure if they were just full of it. Seeing the really vital work from the '70s, which I didn't know before, was a revelation. That's why I really foreground the logistics of the project. It's the act of unpacking that yielded the best moments.

SR You have a friend who stores work here also, right? When I met him at Recess, I remember him saying something about how it doesn't matter, if you throw it all away, because your mom made it for the sake of making it, the experience she had making.

MF I do know other artists, and even a gallery, that store work here, but that was actually my friend Wes talking about the moment the artist had making it. In a way, he's much more on her wavelength, as an art mystic, than I am.

SR Thinking about it in that manner relieves the pressure that you feel in regards to physically dealing with all this work, but it's hard to fully subscribe to that.

MF It would make it easier to firebomb all of it, but I'm not sure I agree with that—that what art is, and what it's for, is the artist's satisfaction of making. It does raise the question about art after the artist. Sometimes, I feel like we
keep making stuff, because it's amazing to be in relationship with materials, or mark-making. But, this project is very much about having a different moment, where the artist's hands aren't making something new but processing, excavating. That has its own satisfactions.

SR But, in wanting to continue with the loans—it is an extension of doing. It's being satisfied, and, simultaneously, unsatisfied. Was there a sublimation of your own practice, or self, in order to do this piece?

MF It might look that way, but the funny thing is that this project actually brought me out of an idle state, in terms of producing. When I was struggling with this idea, and, whether or not it was valid, I said to myself that I need to work with what I have. This is right on top of me. I keep seeing threads come out of this project that are absolutely my own work. That it springs from a situation with her artworks, which you could say my whole life has, doesn't change a thing. I don't totally know why I'm unpacking it all this way, but I do feel compelled to keep going.

SR It's generous of you to look at this work, to spend your residency bringing this work out into the world. I can imagine, as an artist, to spend three months—

MF I felt like I had to do it. And do it as a performance. Those months of unpacking were my own work. It gets confusing, because you can't hang that on the wall, and her work, which had been on the wall, was so strong. My objects will come later. I always struggle with producing, and making that struggle central to this project works for me. There is an ambivalence to it, probably, in part, because I grew up at the foot of somebody who was not at all ambivalent. In terms of the mother/daughter thing—how can I make objects? I'm sure that's part of what leads me to work with performance, and to engage with these ideas.

SR Much of that ambivalence must come from carrying around storage units of your mother's work.

MF It doesn't help! But, perceiving the storage rack as an art object opened up everything for me. There's still a lot to do with her works, my own responses, and, in the separate thread of the estate. But, I have found that, though they might say it's overwhelming, everyone's interested in opening boxes of stuff.

SR There's a voyeurism to it.

MF Yeah. People kept saying I was brave to do it in public. And, honestly, I was happy for the company. It became about the public conversations, and not just about sorting through the boxes.

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*Sara Roffino is the managing editor of the Brooklyn Rail.*

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