

## **Mum**

By Nancy Newberry

Artificial, shiny, spirited and virtually unknown outside of Texas, the Homecoming Mum is an elaborate corsage, or for the boys, a garter worn on the arm. Exchanged between friends, The Mum consists of a large silk flower decorated with long glittery ribbons and other trinkets, which indicate the wearer's interests, social standing, and allegiances to friends. Mums are proudly worn for all activities on Homecoming Friday, and then immortalized as trophies on bedroom walls all over Texas. Each year the collection grows with a more elaborate Mum, marking progress and personal history.

As both adornment and insignia, the Mum offers its wearer the opportunity to promote self-image, while identifying their status as an integral member of their particular community. At a time when many American high schoolers seem actively disengaged from the world around them, the Homecoming Mum constitutes both a unique act of cultural immersion, and a specific brand of Texas folk art.

Shot slowly and based on interpretation of memory, I have limited the settings of the photographs to in and around the subject's personal space, to further contain and charge the portraits through confines of the subject's own making.

I have intentionally paired the diverse visual language of both spontaneous and carefully arranged moments. This work is a cultural investigation and reflects the chaotic nature of self-identity and the interplay between individuality and social affiliation.

I have always intended to travel throughout Texas to capture the Mum both in ceremony and in the vernacular. Because of the size of the State, the logistics of this project have been demanding and expensive. Thus far, I have photographed my subjects in a hub-and-spoke method limited to a few regions of the State. To fully realize the scope and the cultural significance of the Mum phenomenon, the grant from Michael P. Smith Fund would be used to offset travel costs and would allow for the project's geographical expansion.

I intend to photograph not only the cheerleader's Mum, but the cowboy's Mum. I will photograph throughout suburbia and the countryside, along the border of Mexico and the Plains of the Panhandle. The difference in light, geography, economics, and architecture throughout Texas will greatly expand the work. The tradition of the Mum is celebrated in all regions of the State. The continued photographic exploration is an insider's look into a part of Texas that until now, has rarely been seen outside of the State.

The work highlights the importance of rituals as vehicles of expression. Customs are vital in defining all cultures. The simple existence of the Homecoming Mum is an artifact that is symbolically relevant. It isn't necessarily important to relate directly to the Mum tradition or to understand why it exists. This photographic treatise serves as an invitation to immerse ourselves in the appreciation of another culture on a very basic level. Human

existence is a creative act; the mystery is in how we are driven to innovate and engage the unspoken narrative of ourselves.