

Douglas Howard and
Evelyn Wilkie Howard,
photographer and date
unknown, circa early 1930s.



THE ABSENT PRESENCE OF EVELYN WILKIE IN PHOTOGRAPHS

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When donors offer clothing to the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection, I always ask if there are related photographs. Clothing tells only one part of the story. Photographs can help reveal other clues as to the fashioning of identity since accessories and other details of body language are also relevant to unravelling clues to their persona. **Studying the photographs of Evelyn Wilkie that are on display in the exhibition *Absent Presence: A Wedding Dress and the Drawings of Sarah Casey* (May 9 - July 5) allows us to revisit her absent presence.**



Douglas Howard and Evelyn Wilkie Howard in a field of daisies, photographer and date unknown, circa late 1920s.

Although there are no photos of Evelyn as a bride, other photos of Evelyn reveal a vibrant personality. In this undated photo of Evelyn with her husband, she is dressed in a smart suit with a knee-length skirt and a turban style hat. There is a flower on her lapel, and she holds gloves and a clutch purse in her hand; these accessories reveal her desire to personalize her look. Her hair is styled into a chic bob and she also wears lipstick. Her little French bulldog rolls in the strip of grass at her feet, but she looks directly at the photographer asserting her confidence.

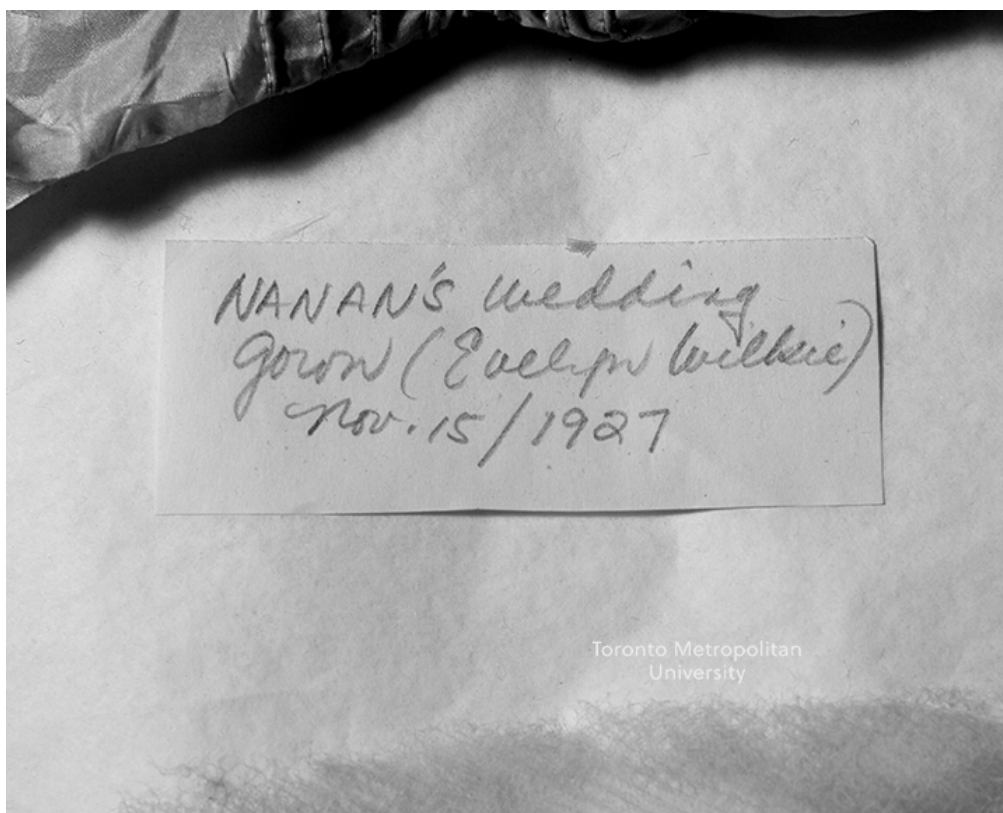
In another undated photo, Evelyn's hair is again in a chic bob but this time she wears a cotton drop-waist dress and a cloche hat. She is smiling and relaxed as she sits in a field of daisies. There are many such photos of Evelyn on display in the exhibition - and each conveys her youth and energy.



Wilkie Wedding Dress
front. Photograph by
Victoria Hopgood.

In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* by French philosopher and literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915-1980), he writes of the emotional potential of photographs that “pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” and gives it a name: the punctum (note 1). For me, ***the punctum*** is evident in the photographs of Evelyn Wilkie that have captured her sunny spirit, but and this quality is also present in the haunting images of her wedding dress taken by Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Communication student Victoria Hopgood.

These photographs stop time - halting the inevitable decay of the textile. One of the images captures a poignant note handwritten by one of the family that reads “Nanan’s wedding gown (Evelyn Wilkie) Nov. 15/1927.” Wilkie was obviously much loved by her family since they kept wedding gown stored away for all these years - even though it had deteriorated to the point where it can no longer be handled.



Note included with the Wilkie Wedding Dress. Photograph by Victoria Hopgood.



Detail of bridal headpiece with Wilkie Wedding Dress. Photograph by Victoria Hopgood.



Detail of rosette at waist of Wilkie Wedding Dress front. Photograph by Victoria Hopgood.

Many of us keep treasured garments once worn by loved ones - too precious to be thrown away - yet holding little monetary value. **Although the dress will with inevitably yield to the processes of time and decay, the memory of Evelyn Wilkie will continue to live on in the drawings by Sarah Casey, in the remaking of the wedding dress by Olivia Da Cruz, in the catalogue for the exhibition and in the digital imprint of this blog post, the [Toronto Metropolitan University Today](#) story and other social media.**

The exhibition *Absent Presence: A Wedding Dress and the Drawings of Sarah Casey* compels us to consider the effects of time, memory, decay and the evanescence of life. The show runs until July 5 at the [MLC Gallery](#) at 111 Gerrard Street East in Toronto, Canada. The MLC Gallery is open from Tuesday - Friday noon to 4 pm or by appointment with an email to admin@mlc.ryerson.ca.

Note 1: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang: New York 1980) 27.