



# A Family Album

31 October – 13 December 2020

# Memory remains: the tapestry of family narratives across time and place

A family album in its traditional form is a collection of photographs compiled over time that documents significant family milestones and everyday moments.

To consider the idea more broadly, a family album is any mechanism for personal and community storytelling; to commemorate the physical environments, material objects, experiences and intangible aspects of our relationships that help us to understand who we are. Using a variety of mediums, including but not limited to photography, the artists in 'A Family Album' memorialise aspects of their own or other's family histories, in an attempt to archive the ephemeral.

Featuring family units that cross generations, landscapes, cultures and communities, each artwork is a narrative marker, an anchor and locator in time, offering a variety of perspectives to colour our personal and collective memory. This exhibition explores nostalgia and the melancholia of separation, while simultaneously celebrating language, customs, oral histories and our precious natural environment. Together, the featured paintings, photographs, textiles and video works offer rich materials to assemble a collage of contemporary Australian communities.

Exploring issues of cultural difference, diaspora, identity and performance, Pia Johnson's practice stems from her Chinese and Italian-Australian lineage. The artist photographs family environments, archives and photo albums, to examine where cultural and social routines intersect with the intimate textures of individual lives. Johnson presents *Por Por's House* and *Remembering Por Por*, two photo series that journey through the home of her maternal grandparents who immigrated to Australia in the 1970s. For the artist, this house is a place where her cultural blend comes into focus.<sup>1</sup>

Johnson began this series when her Por Por (Chinese maternal grandmother) was in hospital recovering from a stroke. With a childlike curiosity and desire to distil time, Johnson extends her lens inside drawers, peeks into cupboards and sifts through photo albums to create a portrait of the house as a living embodiment of Por Por's life and their Chinese family heritage. Johnson observes the nature of the space, its objects and interiors; the backdrop to many family activities. Through this process of looking, feeling, handling and re-photographing images of her grandparents within their home, the artist hopes to make their presence more 'alive' again.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly interested in the profound ways materials hold memory, Hannah Gartside has restaged elements from the kitchen of her family home in London from the late 1980s. Including an original wooden chair and cotton curtains, both covered in vibrantly coloured Collier Campbell prints, Gartside has elaborately crafted a new chair, curtains and surrounding walls, to form her installation *For Tim Gartside (1955-2008)*.

Through the reimagining of this familiar domestic environment, Gartside has created a 'psychic space' to commune with her family and 're-meet' her father. The original pieces are highly charged objects from the material culture of the artist's childhood; items that became anchor points to remedy a sense of dislocation when the family moved from London to Brisbane.<sup>3</sup> The new elements hold tacit knowledge transferred from Gartside's hand into the silk organza curtain panel with brightly-coloured, fabric appliqué details; metres of patchworked brown paper bag 'wall panels' that encase the kitchen; a framed family photograph of the artist's parents; and an embroidered family tree.

Hoang Tran Nguyen's *Seven Years of Happiness* is a celebration of a love story, told through the remaking of a boat from memory.<sup>4</sup> Through two karaoke-style videos set to the sound of a classic 'Aussie' anthem, we learn of Nang and Le's separation and resettlement to Australia through their exchange of love letters. Nang draws the boat that he and his brother built to escape

for producing and consuming, regenerating and maintaining culture for Vietnamese migrants who were finding their feet in adopted homes.<sup>6</sup> Splicing performance elements and cues from the original music video with the retelling of Nang's lived experience, Nguyen's playful homage illuminates the diverse perspectives and experiences within Australia's collective memory.



from Vietnam in the early 1980s. Together with his reunited family, they build the model boat before joyously parading it through the streets of their Melbourne neighbourhood. Nang has provided the Vietnamese song lyrics, taken from the love letters, which the artist then adapted for the English language version video. The particular cadences of each version inform the tone and sentiment of the narrative, a difference that is only discernible to those able to read both languages.<sup>5</sup>

The artist met Nang through a community choir, when the group performed a Vietnamese rendition of the Australian national anthem which Nang had translated. Celebrating and exploring the diversity of cultural translation, Nguyen's video practice examines the role of karaoke within the Vietnamese diaspora. Mostly experienced at home with family and friends, karaoke became a prevalent method

Similarly using art as a tool and language for cultural regeneration and empowerment, Badimaya First Nation artist and activist Julie Dowling depicts known and unknown figures she finds in photographs, to reclaim them for their communities. Applying a diverse range of European and Aboriginal artistic traditions, religious iconography and symbolism, the artist conveys injustices affecting Aboriginal communities, including racism and generational trauma, resilience and self-determination, and the particular experience of living life as a twin and also as a fair-skinned First Nation person.<sup>7</sup>

Illustrating intimate family gatherings, portraits of herself and her ancestors, and children of the Stolen Generations, Dowling's powerful social-realist paintings record, re-tell, and celebrate Aboriginal survival. Painted from a photograph taken at a small family reunion at Dowling's

grandmother's house, *Didn't you know you were Aboriginal?* depicts the moment when the four-year old artist and her sister learnt of their 'difference'.<sup>8</sup> Hoping to encourage empathy by illuminating social issues, Dowling conveys the complex interconnectedness of identity, family, history and culture.

Exploring the innate human need to belong, support and find solace in others, Selina Ou's *Embrace* series embodies the process of surrendering to the many concurrent emotions of grief whilst supporting those around you.<sup>9</sup> Best known for her large-scale, documentary-style colour photographs of people at work, this series marks an experimental time in Ou's arts practice, during a period of significant pain and personal loss. The artist is exhibiting three photographs from this series, recently acquired for the Town Hall Gallery Collection.

Made in response to losing a family member and another living with a serious health condition, each photograph features two figures intertwined in each other's arms. They hold one another close, lift up and rest against each other, while their hands gently nurse and cradle the other. Expressing ideas of intimacy, co-dependency, grief, vulnerability, strength and resilience, *Embrace* beautifully illustrates the transformative process of grief and the profound practice of care.

Similarly intimate and emotive, Donna Bailey's richly saturated, hand-printed photographs explore representations of the young subject and themes of belonging and place. The artist has been photographing her children, grandchildren, and extended family for over twenty years. Using a long form documentary style, Bailey records ongoing dialogues with her subjects, exploring childhood, masculinity, fertility, and the maternal relationship. The backdrop for Bailey's practice is the site of her family home at Kangaroo Flat, a lush and undulating bushland near Bendigo, also marred by past gold mining practices, seasonal drought and flood.

An archivist by profession, Bailey's practice is a method for representing a family narrative strongly tied to its natural surrounds. Recently, Bailey has turned to her grandchildren as subjects. The children stride through a familiar terrain of gullies and waterholes and the eroded sites of nineteenth-century exploration, where their mother, aunts and uncles once played. The landscape does not carry the weight and echoes of history for the children that Bailey perceives in it, instead it opens up boundless opportunities to perform and explore identity.<sup>10</sup>

'A Family Album' illustrates the human need to record and revisit our personal and collective narratives, to negotiate our way through the layers of memory and thread our lives into the tapestry of family narratives.

1 Pia Johnson, artist statement for *Por Por's House*, 2014

2 Ibid.

3 Correspondence with Hannah Gartside, 12 September 2020

4 'Seven Years of Happiness - English', Cargo Collective, accessed 20 September 2020 at <https://cargocollective.com/footscraybynight/Seven-Years-of-Happiness-English>

5 Correspondence with Hoang Tran Nguyen, 23 September 2020

6 Correspondence with Hoang Tran Nguyen, 3 September 2020

7 'First Nation artist Julie Dowling', Art Gallery of Western Australia, accessed 21 September 2020 at <https://artgallerywablog.wordpress.com/2018/02/13/artist-in-focus-julie-dowling/>

8 John Barrett-Lennard, 'Julie Dowling (Born 1969)', Bonhams, accessed 21 September 2020 at <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/22854/lot/26/>

9 Correspondence with Selina Ou, 13 August 2020

10 Correspondence with Donna Bailey, 22 September 2020



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*Cover:*

Julie DOWLING, *Didn't You Know You Were Aboriginal?* (2004), acrylic and red ochre on canvas, 120 x 150cm (unframed). Private collection, Perth. Photo by Simon Cowling.

*Centre spread:*

Hoang Tran NGUYEN, *Seven Years of Happiness* (2011), video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

*Above:*

Donna BAILEY, *Ada at Ten* (2017), C-type print, 90 x 120cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

*Back cover:*

Selina OU, *Untitled #4* (2010), chromogenic photograph, 60 x 40cm. Town Hall Gallery Collection. Image courtesy of the artist.



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