

ARTISTS WE LOVE: GEORGINA GRATRIX

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VISI talks to Georgina Gratrix about the work in her recent retrospective, “The Reunion: Georgina Gratrix” at Norval Foundation, and asks curator Liese van der Watt about the process of putting the exhibition together.

South African artist Georgina Gratrix was born in Mexico City. She’s known for her highly expressive paintings, which feature bold, impasto brushwork and frequently evoke strong emotions. “The Reunion: Georgina Gratrix”, her memorable recent exhibition at Norval Foundation, was the artist’s first solo retrospective at a museum – an impressive achievement, as she is not yet 40 – and was curated by guest curator Liese van der Watt. The exhibition featured work from 2011 to 2020 in three distinct groups: portraits of friends and family, including self-portraits; still lives; and portraits of contemporary social figures.

You incorporate multiplicity in some of your portraits, indicating different dimensions to individuals. Is this something you’ve observed in your subjects? How does it inform your perspective on relationships?

I think this is particularly evident in The History Of Dad and 80s Mom. Often, I use elements of myself embedded in the painting – so, a bow on my father’s head is my way of inserting an aspect of myself onto him. It’s a very particular point of view; it’s not an

objective likeness but more a sort of map – a history of faces that I am attempting to represent.

In the series “Nine Weeks”, created during the 2020 lockdown, you charted your changing mental state. What did you learn during that process?

“Nine Weeks” began at a confusing time for many, and started with simply wanting a manageable daily task. The watercolours are small and could be done at my dining room table. They pick up some “concerns” I thought other people might identify with. It’s also about not seeing people: for instance, Melding is about my husband and I merging into a homogenous blob, while Starting To Look Like Those Around Me is a reference to how many dogs I have, and feeling like that was the only conversation I was having.

As an accompaniment to the exhibition, you collaborated with Missibaba on limited-edition bags under the overall title of Fat Flower. How did this come about?

I’m a big fan of Missibaba, and when a collaboration for the exhibition was suggested, Chloe Townsend immediately came to mind. I gave her a rudimentary sketch of an idea for a bag – a flower based on various still lifes – and her interpretation and execution have been thrilling to see. Each bag is



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unique and numbered – almost like a wearable sculpture. It's been amazing to go to her studio, look at my work and extract unique colour combinations to make this edition.

Tell us about the artwork **The Reunion**, which depicts a family reunion, and whose title also became the overall title of the Norval Foundation show. What does this work mean to you?

The Reunion was made last year, and was an imagining of bringing together various family members who live around the world. It's a combined portrait of real family as well as fictitious characters such as Captain Hastings from Agatha Christie's Poirot series, and Cora from Downton Abbey. It's about the way these TV personas seem to have slotted in as family in a time of separation, and about not knowing when reunions might be likely to happen again.



THE CURATOR'S VIEW

Guest curator Liese van der Watt put together the recent Norval Foundation show of Georgina's work. We asked how she managed to seamlessly thread together the exhibition of artworks – spanning almost 10 years – in the way she did.

"I decided quite early on that the exhibition should focus on Georgina's portraits, and then primarily in a thematic rather than chronological way," says Liese. "Having said that, Georgina – like most artists – tends to revisit themes, so it was also interesting to see how motifs, figures and personalities return and modify (or not) over time. I decided to divide the portraits into two loose groups: family and friends, and then those of over-familiar yet unknowable celebrity archetypes.

"The face is clearly becoming digital currency in our contemporary world, so Georgina's attention to the face is entirely au courant and of our time. Because of international shipping challenges due to Covid-19, we decided to focus on South African collections; to some extent, works were already pre-selected, which made the final choices easier. In fact, I think one of the nicest aspects of this show was that we were able to see early works that have largely been taken out of circulation."

