

1 APR 2021 / IN CULTURE

# Georgina Gratrix: painting the now

*"Probably the ugliest painting I have ever seen".*



*The Reunion (2020). Installation photo: Mike Hall*

It's a comment on an Instagram post of "80s mom" – one of the oil paintings on *The Reunion: Georgina Gratrix*, currently showing at Norval Foundation, a portrait no doubt of the artist's mother in the eighties. (With the blonde hair and shoulder pads, hoop earrings and a hint at blue eyeshadow, it could be all white middle-class "moms" of the eighties.) The Instagram comment precedes a thumbs-up emoticon, and because I've also experienced the painting in person, I'm inclined to think it's a compliment.

I'm reminded of that oft-cited Andy Warhol quote, that as an artist one should not read one's reviews but weigh them.

In fact I would only go so far as to disagree with said Instagrammer to say that there were perhaps three or four paintings on the show that I thought were

uglier. Also (I should say in case this is misconstrued as a bad review), I absolutely love them. But I'm okay with things that aren't pretty.

## Meet the Family

The truth is, there is something all of us find ugly about our mothers, if not most of our family members; indeed, there's a biological imperative to be revolted by our relations. (The aversion encourages us to move out of the nest and find love elsewhere, rather than, say, commit incest, a taboo that's not so good for the gene pool.)

This exhibition brings together a number of characters who are at once revolting and compelling. The first section of *The Reunion* is called Meet the Family, "80s Mom" and "The History of Dad" take centre stage. Then there's the three-metre-wide

**Lifestyling.**

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family portrait from which the exhibition takes its name, painted in 2020, that year that will always signify lockdown, Zoom calls, face masks and – the point of this painting – not in fact seeing much of our families at all. Hence, “The Reunion” (the painting) also includes characters from British TV series like Cora Crawley from *Downton Abbey*, a bejeweled royal and a detective in a hat and mustard trench coat.

### Meet the Archetypes

Then there’s a section entitled Meet the Archetypes, and here Georgina draws on real-life characters we all know: the happy couple from the *You* magazine,

the woman who’s had too much work done on her face, the “reluctant bride”, the art collectors and the art critics (which includes Irma Stern in its prestigious lineup of personalities).

This tension between revulsion and compulsion, attraction and repulsion, is a theme for me in this exhibition. It’s not just her subject matter. Layers of goey oil paint create an expressiveness that’s both alluring and repulsive at the same time; faces are so thick with lacerated paint they look, at worst, like roadkill carcasses or, at best, plastered with greasy makeup. Pictured above and below, “Filler Face” tells a story in the title alone, the portrait of an archetype we love to hate, or, gawk at. I’m also reminded of





*Man in Spotty Tie (2019) and Jon Dondon (2019)*

Penny Siopis' cake paintings from the eighties – where paint becomes matter, and materiality and image collide. Here, we have faces that are almost cake-like in their sculptural use of paint.

### **Still life, aesthetics and artistic tradition**

From ugly portraits to gaudy still lifes (breaking the rules by being enormous rather than lifesize studies and in landscape format rather than vertical), there's an interrogation of classical ideals like aesthetics and beauty and even artistic tradition. In conversation before her artist walkabout, she explains:

***Still life is an archaic subject matter, so how does one bring it into the now?***

For the gigantic "All the Birthdays' Bouquet", Georgina is reminded of the "tasteless art" of South African hotel foyers growing up – which she adored in spite of their tackiness – and one of her earliest art memories of drawing her mother's flower arrangements.

"I may be using frameworks," she says – like portrait painting or still life – "but very much referencing my own space and time and context."

### **Pastiche, parody, process**

There's pastiche at play along with parody: Georgina collects images (from the *You* magazine, and others)

and prints out pictures from Instagram and the internet, drawing inspiration from her contemporary visual universe, continually distilling information.

Her home art studio space reflects this process. She's always got multiple works in progress at one time, building up surfaces, allowing drying time, layering images, in a stop-start process. Not all of them see the light of day, or rather gallery wall, and Georgina emphasises the importance of editing. "Not everything I touch is amazing," she says, and more often five paintings come to inform one that she feels is successful enough to sign and put out into the world.

### **Nine Weeks: self-portrait in the age of social media**

Identity through portraiture in the age of social media is invoked through Georgina's lockdown series of watercolour self-portraits called "Nine Weeks". Painting an A3 self-portrait every day over that period, the resulting 63 artworks are displayed at the Norval exhibition in an expansive stream of three by 21, reminiscent of that three-across social media grid many of us spend hours scrolling – as the voyeur – or perfecting – as the seen.

The individual images in "Nine Weeks" show moodiness and apathy amidst a variety of mental states. States of lockdown fashion like "no pants", "athleisure wear" and "shopping attire" (donning



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*Pink Pop (Still Life with Hylton Vase and cheese curls) (2019)*





Georgina Gratrix portrait and Tulbagh Bride (2014)

mask) also feature, as well as the hilarity and insanity of lockdown activities like “Zoom face”, “Going a bit mental” and “Looking at too many memes”.

Georgina comments that art should reflect the time that it’s from, and although painting is an old medium that has been around for thousands of years, it should “look like now”. These paintings do that perfectly, depicting a time that will be cemented in memory for those who have lived through it.

***It must feel sort of like what a Beyoncé song sounds like, I want it to be of now.***

And in the age of social media, these paintings seem to enquire: what’s more honest, a daily expressionist self-portrait painting or a perfectly posed and styled selfie enhanced with a smartphone camera’s beautify mode and Instagram filters? Methinks “Potato Head” tells a more apt tale of the truth.

***Beauty is something that really doesn’t interest me at all. I’m more interested in unpicking beauty and moving it towards something that’s uncomfortable, or it’s so beautiful that it’s not.***

Like the still lifes, she says – which are almost sickly in the way that the embellishment of beauty becomes grotesque. Similarly, with her portraits: through all the lenses one could view them, “beauty is the least interesting of them all,” says Georgina.

## Humour in universality

As some of her artwork titles give away, the artist is also very funny. On the Archetypes, “Tulbagh Bride” from afar looks more like a flower arrangement than a portrait. We all know the unfortunate look.

“A Lover’s Discourse” documents Georgina’s time away from her husband while in artist’s residence in Johannesburg, wherein stilted conversation over text message is reduced to “Fine” and “Busy” (a walkabout with the artist reveals that her husband, Matthew, is painted into the jungle scene as a googly-eyed parrot).

Like all art should do, the work is personal but speaks beyond her own experience, Georgina tells me, allowing space for the viewer to put in their own ideas or interpretation. These are situations and characters that many viewers will find familiar.

***Art is about communicating, bringing a new understanding to topics and allowing people to connect with them in a different way.***

“My work is also about understanding painting. It’s about a materiality but also, I think, in its most basic form, it’s still lifes and portraiture and using them as frameworks to understand my frame of reference, whether it’s very personal or a broader worldview. It’s using these frameworks to find an aesthetically pleasing way to understand my own world.”