

Inner Dialogues

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I once had a teacher tell me that a painting becomes a ‘good painting’ when there is some kind of tension to it. Looking at the works exhibited in *Inner Dialogues*, that sense of tension is felt: between generations of family, between memories and photographs, between what’s spoken and left unsaid. Through portraiture, the paintings explore the dialogues under the surface of our everyday experiences and closest relationships, presenting memory as a language for self-representation.

For one of the James Gallery’s first in-person exhibitions since the beginning of the pandemic, the uneasiness of self-analysis and delineated family ties seem fitting. The pandemic experience was inescapably identity-forming and re-contextualized our relationships. Now, as we begin to emerge from years of isolation and limited connection, our inner dialogues—and our new sense of self—are put forward and tested.

Angela Marino’s large-scale family portraits meet the viewer’s gaze squarely from strong, sickly green and pink backgrounds. Positioned on opposing walls, *Denial* (2017) and *Acceptance* (2017), chronicle Marino’s mother’s battle with Multiple Sclerosis as the artist navigated through grief and the ramifications of illness on familial relationships.

Marino found her mother’s face shifting in the gel transfer process, and mirrored the physical transformation of her body by cutting, pasting, altering, and replicating her image in the paintings. Pushing this friction between the familiar and incongruous further, she integrated images of her own and her siblings’ facial features onto the portraits, resulting in lopsided, discoloured figures. In Marino’s work, the anxiety of turning into your mother is heightened, becoming uncanny, as the artist’s own mother takes a new form.

Matters of family heritage emerge in Amanda Mckinney Sparrow’s portrait series as well, in which she depicts her father, grandfather, great-grandfather, husband and children throughout stages of her life. Sparrow similarly starts with photographs she’s taken and incorporates her immediate memories and emotions as she reproduces them through painting. Portraits of family members lost over the years have a sense of melancholy, but there’s a stronger feeling of commemoration.

At first the paintings seem like a snapshot, but on second glance the passing of time—the weight between then and now—is palpable. With deep blues and aged rust tones, the scenes feel like parts of an old faded photograph or the remains of a dream. Perceptible gaps emerge in the picture plane, like her seated grandfather’s feet blending into the asphalt driveway, or a floating

balloon that's painted unnaturally dark. Sparrow embraces her memories without necessarily romanticizing them, exploring what's left behind by those close to us, for better or for worse.

Vick Naresh's recollections are more abstracted, revealing themselves in compositions using the shapes, colours, and imagery retained in memory from a particular moment. His three paintings function as self-portraiture in the way that they represent and meditate on how he experiences everyday life. The works combine geometric forms and more gestural mark-making, picking up accents from Marino's bubblegum pink and Sparrow's cool teals. Naresh gleans inspiration from his immediate surroundings: *Compulsive Shopper* (2020) came from a moment of impulsive grocery shopping and *Queen of Diamonds* (2021) was inspired by his position in a chess game. The artist pulls imagery from these moments and represents them in ungrounded, immaterial planes that reflect his frame of mind.

Both the abstracted and representational portraits in the exhibition stray from traditional methods of linear perspective, opting for shallow, fictive space, such as in the form of Marino's mother floating on a flat background or Naresh's chessboard layered over a painterly backdrop. In this unsettled space, the artists are able to reconcile their experiences by retelling personal narratives.

All of the works in the show are intrinsically concerned with self-representation—with the self as a collection of ghostly core memories, a blueprint of inherited genes, and a thousand other factors in flux. The portraits of *Inner Dialogues* illustrate the range of hand-me-down features and habits, unique experiences, and shared histories that ultimately define our own identities. As the artists revisit these circumstances, flickers of themselves are revealed. This is the self that's reflected back at us every day, from the face of our mother or from our cart in the grocery store lineup.

As a show of adept portraiture, the works of *Inner Dialogues* jointly exist as psychological landscapes. By blending elements of the real with things projected, they convey the fogginess of childhood memories, intentional remembrance of impactful moments, and everyday recollections sparked at random, without shying away from the discomfort of introspection or the heaviness of overlaid temporality. The collected portraits explore these intersections of ourselves and other people and places, never vying to untangle elements of our inner worlds from what belongs to the material one.