

## ***The Familial Millennial***

Exhibition essay by Lauren Marsden

**Shaina McCoy**

***A Family Affair***

September 7 – October 26, 2019



*A Family Affair*, artist Shaina McCoy's newest series of portrait paintings and solo exhibition at Ever Gold [Projects], offers a constellation of tenderness and reverence based on the photographic archive of a black American family.

Within this collection, she traces her own family heritage using a signature style of thick, glossy brush strokes and almost featureless faces. Each painting is based on a photograph from the McCoy family album and is rendered with bold and affectionate gestures. McCoy's technique, though firmly influenced by the traditions of Impressionism, has a unique capacity to hover over the precipice of familiarity and anonymity; she gives us just enough information for a spark of recognition, be it a face, a shirt, or a room that we might already know, while also withholding the bristling realism that we are so accustomed to in our increasingly high-definition world. Her images function more like memories or afterimages than documentation. Although each portrait conjures its source—the original moment of capture in an old photograph—McCoy's treatment transforms it into something more elusive than a nostalgic archive. She brings a material rather than illustrative devotion to her subjects, whose details are not precise or minute but visceral and swift. Her mark-making is not driven first and foremost by a drive for fidelity, but to give a sense of weight, mass, and substance to her figures. Their presence is palpable. The volume of each figure is shaped by the very materiality of the paint and the artist's own physicality and movement.

The usual requisite sentimentality of such personal work is reserved, even concealed, by the lack of recognizable facial features, which are perhaps only hinted at with a particular swoosh this way or that, so that we can start to imagine the possible imperfections, the wrinkles, the smirks, or the half-closed eyes of candid photography. Her style of portraiture, at once gooey and flat, rejects a paradigm of artificial facial recognition, one in which our cherished images of loved ones are played back to us as automated, premade slideshow templates set to generic stock music. Instead, what she offers is both an honest record of a specific family *and* a relatable surface for the memories of others—a placeholder where one can project their own faded, idealized, or troubled visions of relatives posing, eating, and gathering across generations. In spite of the increasing social isolation and hyper-customization in the era of Facetune and Pixlr, McCoy offers a reprieve from the onslaught of edited and filtered images that reminds us of the joy of looking at a blurry picture on outdated film stock of someone you love. According to the artist herself, "As a millennial, I want to be fully responsible of keeping my family close. We tend to lose sight of where we come from, who created us, and our purpose."<sup>1</sup>

Titles such as *Who I do it For* (2019) and *Heir to the Throne* (2017) give an indication of the artist's veneration for her ancestors. The former, a picture of her parents, is imbued with the gratitude the title implies. The figures overlap in an embrace where mother and father are treated with the same

excited texture, nearly collapsing them into one entity; even the wall behind them radiates for their presence. There is generosity here: the intimacy of the figures, the thickness of the paint, the confidence of the colors, the labored texture of hair, and the glistening, smooth skin lift these images out of the everyday and elevate them to a divine vibration.

Considering McCoy's work in the context of black portraiture, in particular relationship to Kerry James Marshall, there is still something radical about employing black paint and black and brown figures within the Impressionist tradition, which had historically perpetuated the corrosive idea and flawed color theory that black was unnatural and simply not useful for painting. In such masterful works as *Invisible Man* (1986) and *Slow Dance* (1992) Marshall proved otherwise with an outright dismantling of the tyranny of a Eurocentric chiaroscuro, offering a world where the limitless spectrum of blackness brought forth portraits that are nuanced, beautiful, and unwavering. To him, "blackness is non-negotiable in those pictures. It's also unequivocal—they are black—that's the thing that I mean for people to identify immediately. They are black to demonstrate that blackness can have complexity. Depth. Richness."<sup>2</sup> In turn, McCoy's palette is personal and specific and, when presented with such viscosity, brings a literal depth to her figures, raising them off the canvas to reflect light at many angles.

The domestic environments of McCoy's portraits are barely there. Much like her previous series of portraits, *Rapper's Delight*, her figures sit within fields of hand-made texture rather than in discernible rooms or places. The background surfaces in *A Family Affair* are reminiscent of plaster skip trowel finish straight from the walls of a 1970s living room. Although there is a conscious textural variation between the background, a hair style, and the upholstery of an armchair, each subject in McCoy's world seems to be made of the same lively material as their environment. Here, setting and foreground are treated with the same amount of care and attention, creating a world where the family is inextricably linked to the spaces it occupies.

McCoy's experiment is one that, essentially, seeks identity through photography but by using a process of transfiguration between snapshot and painting. This is at the very crux of her version of post-millennial identity construction, one that slows down a relationship to the overwhelming archive of images, taking on only a few at a time, and building memory through an active, analogue, and physical process. As Okwui Enwezor wrote in 2007, shortly before the ushering in of a new social epoch of image-sharing:

The snapshot that documents scenes of life's many turns—birthdays, holidays, and events of all kinds—perhaps exemplifies the most prominent aspect of the private motivations for image making, for it not only records that burning desire for the archival, it also wields a formidable ethnographic meaning. The photographic image, then, can be likened to an anthropological space in which to observe and study the way members and institutions of a society reflect their relationship to it... the photograph becomes the sovereign analogue of identity, memory, and history, joining past and present, virtual and real, thus giving the photographic document the aura of an anthropological artifact and the authority of a social instrument.<sup>3</sup>

In the current moment, the threshold between private and public identity is blurrier than ever and our relationship to the preservation and ownership of our own images is constantly being contested. If social media platforms capitalize on our "burning desire for the archival" and our use

of image-making for the construction of social identities, then it is a precarious contract between the needs of the user and those of the corporations who manage, distribute and ultimately control their circulation. In *A Family Affair*, McCoy has taken up the task of rerouting the power dynamic of this situation and has taken the act of photographic remembrance and identification into her own hands. What she has unearthed is a map for finding our way back to ourselves.

<sup>1</sup> Shaina McCoy. Email conversation with the author, June 27, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Wyatt Mason, "Kerry James Marshall is Shifting the Colour of Art History," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, October 17, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument," in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York, International Centre of Photography & Steidl Publishers, 2008), 13.