

A woman with short dark hair and a serious expression holds a baby in a white onesie. She has a large, colorful tattoo on her left forearm. The background is dark and textured.

Kinship

National
Portrait
Gallery

HIRMER

kinship

The eBook is made possible
through generous support from
Frances Stevenson Tyler



Kinship

Dorothy Moss and Leslie Ureña
with Robyn Asleson, Taína Caragol,
and Charlotte Ickes

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HIRMER

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Foreword

Art is not only part of history—even a living history—it is part of and makes community, it is part of and makes family.¹

Many of us remember posing with family members for obligatory photographs taken during special occasions to honor our traditions. These moments create what Marianne Hirsch calls a generational transmission, but they yield selective memories and mark time in a way that may tell only a fraction of the story.² Documenting occasions such as weddings, birthdays, holidays, and funerals is part of how one memorializes an event and better understands oneself in relation to others, but family portraits also remind us of those who are missing, those who can no longer join us inside the frame.

Kinship considers the limitations of family portraits and allows for an expansive understanding of community and connection. Through a broader interpretation of our kin, the notion of the nuclear family is challenged in myriad ways. In this regard, kinship serves as a locus of intimacy and belonging and often becomes a counternarrative to feelings of isolation and displacement.

Just as history is not a grand narrative, neither are interpersonal connections. The eight artists featured in *Kinship* expose this idea, offering their perspectives on how memory, archive, and community form a symbiotic relationship between artists and subjects. Ideas of the nuclear family are deconstructed through works that bring historically marginalized individuals to the center. One photographer, who has documented a family over several years, reveals how he and his subjects have embraced each other in times of adversity. Another artist expands our understanding of kinship through a portrait of someone who has supported a community of Black artists for decades. Unexpected ties are formed through the harsh realities of navigating death and loss, and we see how challenging structural injustice can create a common language across generations and regions.

Art unites unlikely subjects. Through art, strangers can bond over a shared understanding of something; this is part of art's power. Art creates a kinship where ideas, experiences, and values can belie linear narratives. While some of these relationships may be tied to a familial bond, they are often made and cultivated by choice, not obligation.

As the world reels from the tremendous tragedy and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems eerily prescient that this exhibition, which has been planned for several years, explores the notion of kinship. At one point, physically connecting with one's closest kin was a life-threatening proposition. Relationships had to find new and unusual ways to be sustained—or not. For a time, sharing a laugh or working together was either thwarted or mediated through a screen. And the loss of more than one million people in the United States to COVID-19 brought yet another meaning to kinship. Loss, memory, and grief formed a shared language. One can hope that some of these unwitting connections will serve as a bridge toward greater patience, understanding, and compassion for all.

A deep appreciation to curators Robyn Asleson, Taína Caragol, Charlotte Ickes, Dorothy Moss, and Leslie Ureña, who worked together under exceedingly difficult circumstances to develop this “Portraiture Now” exhibition. The project would not have been possible without the leadership of Kim Sajet, director of the National Portrait Gallery, and the generous support that the museum received from John and Louise Bryson; Frances Stevenson Tyler; The Haynes and Boone Foundation, Purvi and Bill Albers, Susan and David McCombs; Lyndon J. Barrois Sr. and Janine Sherman Barrois; and Lisa Goodman and Josef Vascovitz. Thanks, as well, to the American Portrait Gala Endowment.

Special gratitude to each artist represented in this show. Your work and creativity, especially during such trying times, has been an inspiration and helped us better understand the world and the special role each of us can play in making it a better place.

Rhea L. Combs,
Director of Curatorial Affairs
National Portrait Gallery

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- 1 See Kellie Jones, “Art in the Family,” introduction in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.
 - 2 See Marianne Hirsch, *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth Press, 1999).

Portraiture Now

The National Portrait Gallery entered into the twenty-first century with a new vision. Over the past two decades, the museum has developed an impressive contemporary art collection, introduced robust programing, and published important scholarship on living artists. This work has transformed the Portrait Gallery into a place that both honors historical figures and responds to contemporary events from diverse perspectives.

From 1968, when the museum first opened to the public, to 2000, portraits could only enter the permanent collection after the sitter had died. The idea was that curators and historians should take their time to assess an individual's impact on history before acquiring a portrait of the person. This rule no longer applies. Whether through commissioning artworks for the collection or organizing exhibitions and programs, such as the IDENTIFY performance art series, Portrait Gallery curators have located and presented groundbreaking new work. Today, the museum reaches broader audiences than ever before, and we strive to ensure that everyone who walks through our doors will see their story represented. The "Portraiture Now" series has become a core component of the Portrait Gallery's contemporary initiatives, and *Kinship* came to fruition through this dynamic exhibition program. Launched in 2006, the series encourages audiences to consider the possibilities of contemporary portraiture by providing insights into new modes of thinking and artmaking.

There is always room for experimentation, and with each exhibition, there is a first. With the inclusion of work by Anna Tsouhlarakis, an artist of Creek, Navajo, and Greek heritage, this is the first exhibition of the series to include an Indigenous artist and to present performance art. All of the portrayals featured in *Kinship* illuminate how our personal relationships center us and color our life experiences. Today, more profoundly than ever, portraiture reveals its potential to promote empathy and equity in inventive—and poignant—ways.

Dorothy Moss

Past "Portraiture Now" exhibitions

Portraiture Now

July 1, 2006–April 29, 2007

William Beckman

Dawoud Bey

Nina Levy

Jason Salavon

Andres Serrano

Curated by CC, BBF, ACG, FG, TPH,

WWR, AS

Framing Memory

May 25, 2007–January 6, 2008

Alfredo Arreguin

Brett Cook

Kerry James Marshall

Tina Mion

Faith Ringgold

Curated by CC, BBF, ACG, FG, WWR, AS

RECOGNIZE! Hip-Hop and Contemporary Portraiture

February 8–October 26, 2008

Tim Conlon

Nikki Giovanni

Dave Hupp

Jefferson Pinder

David Scheinbaum

Shinique Smith

Kehinde Wiley

Curated by JB, BBF, FG

Feature Photography

November 26, 2008–September 27, 2009

Katy Grannan

Jocelyn Lee

Ryan McGinley

Steve Pyke

Martin Schoeller

Alec Soth

Curated by BBF, ACG,

FG, WWR, AS

Communities

November 6, 2009–July 5, 2010

Rose Frantzen

Jim Torok

Rebecca Westcott

Curated by BBF, ACG, FG

Asian American Portraits of Encounter *

August 12, 2011–October 14, 2012

Zhang Chun Hong

CYJO (Cindy Hwang)

Hye Yeon Nam

Konrad Ng

Shizu Saldamando

Roger Shimomura

Satomi Shirai

Tam Tran

Curated by BBF, ACG, FG, LJ, RK,

KN, WWR, AS, DW, in collaboration

with the Smithsonian Asian Pacific

American Program

Drawing on the Edge *

November 15, 2012–August 18, 2013

Mequitta Ahuja

Mary Borgman

Adam Chapman

Ben Durham

Till Freiwald

Rob Matthews

Curated by BBF, ACG, FG,

DM, WWR, DW

Staging the Self *

August 22, 2014–April 12, 2015

David Antonio Cruz

Carlee Fernandez

María Martínez-Cañas

Rachelle Mozman

Karen Miranda Rivadeneira

Michael Vasquez

Curated by TC, RK, DM, DW

* traveled to other venues

The Face of Battle: Americans at War, 9/11 to Now

April 7, 2017–January 28, 2018

Ashley Gilbertson

Tim Hetherington

Louie Palu

Stacy Pearsall

Emily Prince

Vincent Valdez

Curated by TC, DM, AN, DW

Unseen: Our Past in a New Light, Ken Gonzales-Day and Titus Kaphar

March 23, 2018–January 6, 2019

Ken Gonzales-Day

Titus Kaphar

Curated by TC and AN

Kinship

October 28, 2022–January 7, 2024

Njideka Akunyili Crosby

Ruth Leonela Buentello

Jess T. Dugan

LaToya Ruby Frazier

Jessica Todd Harper

Thomas Holton

Sedrick Huckaby

Anna Tsouhlarakis

Curated by RA, TC, CI, DM, LU

Curators:

Robyn Asleson (RA)

Jobyl Boone (JB)

Taína Caragol (TC)

Carolyn Carr (CC)

Brandon Brame Fortune (BBF)

Anne Collins Goodyear (ACG)

Frank Goodyear (FG)

Charlotte Ickes (CI)

Lauren Johnson (LJ)

Rebecca Kasemeyer (RK)

Dorothy Moss (DM)

Asma Naeem (AN)

Konrad Ng (KN)

Tia Powell-Harris (TPH)

Wendy Wick Reaves (WWR)

Ann Shumard (AS)

Leslie Ureña (LU)

David Ward (DW)



Regarding Kinship

Dorothy Moss and Leslie Ureña
with Robyn Asleson, Taína Caragol, and Charlotte Ickes

Even by its simplest definitions, “kinship” is a multifaceted concept. In anthropology, the word is meant to encompass “relatedness or connection by blood or marriage or adoption.” More broadly, it is defined as “a close connection marked by community of interests or similarity in nature or character.”¹

The decision to focus on kinship for this “Portraiture Now” exhibition followed numerous discussions regarding family in relation to contemporary art. As the project’s curatorial team considered the theme, however, it became clear that the works we were selecting addressed more than the core genetic and legal definitions of “family.”² A number of these projects reveal new, even surprising ways of understanding our close bonds with others—both people within and outside of family units.³

The theorist Tracy Rutler notes that “by decentering the experience of the nuclear family, we might be able to expand what we expect from kinship and intimacy.”⁴ Likewise, the artists in *Kinship* simultaneously center and decenter the nuclear family through their intimately expansive approaches to family and kin. Even when we consider those artists who cast their nuclear family as their subject, we can see their work forging connections among larger communities. It is, therefore, at the intersection of the nuclear family and the communal experience where these artists’ projects are in dialogue, where our curatorial vision is rooted.

Kinship visualizes the complexities of interpersonal relationships with portrayals by Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Ruth Leonela Buentello, Jess T. Dugan, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Jessica Todd Harper, Thomas Holton, Sedrick Huckaby, and Anna Tsouhlarakis. Each artist joins this conversation under very different circumstances and offers a distinct interpretation of kinship, prompting us to reconsider how human beings relate to one another. Despite their varied geographies—with artists now based in California, Colorado, Illinois, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas—together, their works deepen our understanding of kinship, particularly how it involves ideas of intimacy, vulnerability, privacy, familiarity, and recognition. The passage of time is another important facet. Several artists here illuminate the ways in which relationships evolve and demonstrate how kinship does—and does not—endure. These artworks also highlight the crucial role that storytelling and memories have in fostering our kin-like relationships, particularly between different generations and between the living and the dead.

Jessica Todd Harper's meditative photographs rely on storytelling to draw us into an intergenerational world within the artist's family. Children, parents, siblings, and grandparents relate to one another in scenes that evoke a harmonious coexistence. In many of these idyllic images, however, an individual's abstracted expression or direct eye contact with the camera creates a sense of detachment, as in *The Dead Bird* ([see p. 61](#); 2018).

In *Self-Portrait with Marshall* ([see p. 64](#); 2008), radiant light transfigures a cluttered bathroom into a sacred space, emphasizing the profound bond between Harper and her newborn son. Yet even as she holds her baby close to her body, she appears psychologically removed, lost in her own thoughts. This self-portrait, like many of Harper's photographs, underscores the private worlds that separate us

1 Jessica Todd Harper
Marshall (Yellow Ball), 2011
Inkjet print
81.3 × 81.3 cm (32 × 32 in.)
Courtesy of the artist

