

Commentary by Pat Rogers: Imaginative Journey through Ancestry

March 29, 2012

Imagination can be a powerful thing. It can conceive solutions for challenges facing scientists, architects and world leaders tackling cultural conundrums. Trailblazers welcome inspired ideas to craft new paths. For Jenna Lash, imagination and a paintbrush created a passport for journeys to imagined pasts that shed light on the present.

Lash's first painterly exploration portrayed international cultures through designs and figures found on paper currency. Her "Currency" series explored cultural identities through implied ideals, values and histories held most dear and expressed through images printed on each country's legal tender.

Lash's paintings leap from money she collected on trips and through friends. The art is portraiture or abstraction that retains some visual recognition of the original currency. Lash uses fragmented lines, distinct forms, sprays of dots and color to create unique paintings. Ultimately, "Currency" is an exploration of world cultures, the crosscurrents that may run between them, and the human implications.

In her latest works, Lash's muse shifted from societal to individual contemplations—this time her own. "Imagined Memories – A Family Album" is a series of portraits based on family photographs. Some of the relatives are known to Lash, while others are not. As in the "Currency" series, iconic images from the past illuminate what could be important truths in the present.

Paintings in the "Imagined Memories" series have a strong photographic sensibility but are abstracted from setting. The series offers a range of portraiture techniques that highlight the subject's style, personality, and quirks. All artworks present intimate portraits of unguarded moments. Taken together, the paintings reveal a gallery of interrelated individuals—in short: They are family.

An interesting twist to the implied narratives is that they do not portray actual memories. Each subject is extricated from the authentic context to step into possible memories imagined by Lash. By detaching from a strict accounting of facts of the photo's circumstances and their subjects, Lash was able to begin with family legends and end with her own.

In some compositions, shapes and painterly forms in the background silently pulse with life. In others, backdrops are soothing color fields that accentuate the person or people portrayed. Figures can appear bold or compromised by time.

The historic implication is achieved through color choices and fields of abstract shapes.

The forms are solitary and appear to float, comfortable in their own space. Shapes are detached yet, as a group, portray well-defined clothing, a hairstyle, a forehead or other physical characteristics. In a few paintings, the faces possess streaked and detailed fields of shadow that command as much attention as the strongly rendered features.

“Imagined Memories – A Family Album” was born after Lash unearthed photographs of relatives saved by her mother. Reeling from the death of both her parents within four months of each other, Lash decided to allow contemplation to ignite her painter’s imagination and wander freely where it led. Through the process, Lash explored her parents’ early lives, imagined stories to fill unknown gaps, and considered the ways her present-day dispositions might have roots in those who came before. She also drew on memories of a trip to Russia, where she met relatives who had been separated by time, space and language.

Making the paintings stretched Lash as an artist and pushed her to closer align her internal life with her art. Through her intense personal journey, Lash has created a series of work that is as personal as a diary, but with stories we each can walk away with as our own.

The art explores the dynamics of families, suggested intimacy, implied histories and the daisy chain that genetically links talents and foibles from ancestor to one’s self. People portrayed seem familiar enough to be our long lost relatives.

When “Imagined History – A Family Album” is viewed as a whole, the impression is amplified. It becomes easy to imagine discovering a cache of our own family photographs. Like Lash, we can allow imagined stories to lead the way to memories we’d like to keep.