

Face to Face

At the heart of every face is a desire and a perennial question. Who are you? How alike are we? How do we differ? For Michele Liebler, these concerns became more intimate and urgent in the wake of the pandemic when she began studying those close to her like never before, interlacing the observations of an artist with those of a mother.

Sharing an apartment with her husband and two young adult children, familiar and repetitive sights turned intentional objects of inquiry. During lockdown, apartments became a self-contained world challenging our perspective of it as a closed space and of those living inside it. For Liebler these reflections created a spark and a creative possibility. She leaned into introspection to reimagine kinship as the cradle of bonds and intimacy, and the basis of a visual album.

Liebler explores this close-up encounter in a new figurative series of gouache, oil, acrylic, and graphite drawings on paper engaging with vulnerability and tenderness. Her vibrant color palette becomes a daring proposition to grapple with proximity and distance, space and legibility, seizing forced confinement to boldly express subjectivity.

Daily objects are elevated as artefacts of a transformed normalcy. Shoes, such as in *Platform Boots*, mark taste and identity which are no longer experienced in movement but in waiting. As a still-life, they populate the apartment with the uncanniness attached to derelict items. No longer relegated to clutter, shoes are the incarnated windows to freedom—to a longing outside and before times. Beds and sofas collect individual dreams as places of comfort and sanctuary. Their presence as moveable objects interrogates our lack of mobility.

In single and group portraits, Liebler paints pensiveness, rest, boredom, worry, and togetherness with an attention to unique qualities. She documents moments, sometimes stolen, for example in reclining portraits that belong to the realm of respite and oneiric escape. In these vignettes, bodies curl up, loose, abandoned. In other portraits, the poses emulate the formalistic style of studio photography free from stiffness, rather confident and wholesome. Standing straight across from the artist, group portraits evoke visual mementos of past school years and rituals. These are framed by escapist patterns of an elusive *elsewhere* objecting to the sameness of confinement experience.

These images sharply contrast with those of fleeing gazes, more oblique, melancholic, and subdued, in which the mother's concern and care bleeds into the artist's curiosity and studies. There, the artist lifts off a veil and almost intrudes. We discern an intention to capture authenticity in the sobriety of Liebler's composition. Vivid backgrounds of generous blue, mauve, and crimson draw us to the chromatic aura of her children and their feelings.

In consigning a mood, Liebler sketches the essence of transience at the confluence of COVID anxiety and fragile young adulthood. Color is an antidote to sadness and morosity. The family is visited by partners and friends and their growing home fills with warmth, an evolution perceived in the monochromatic drawings that give way to an explosion of saturated hues. While their cocoon may break at any point, Liebler plays with aperture to reveal the versatility of the human figure with determined sensitivity, coming face to face with her own emotions.

- Farah Abdessamad

