

The approach

Mike Silva

London Portraits, Interiors and Still Lives

Viewable online from 20th May, 6pm

The Approach is pleased to present a solo exhibition of new works by London-based artist Mike Silva.

Silva paints portraits, interiors and still lives that are intimately connected to personal memory. Working from photographs taken on film and archived over the years, mostly of his acquaintances, friends, lovers, and the environments that were once communally inhabited—the artist creates a tender sense of celebration tinted with melancholy.

Having taken many photos since he was young, usually with his Pentax K1000 camera, Silva has described the photography as a way of remembering. Moving around regularly as a child and later living in short term shared housing co-ops, he began to think of the photographs as anchoring him in a sense of time and place. Silva works from both a combination of the photograph, as well as the memory of the moment the photograph was taken and the person or place captured within. The process of casually taking the photo and then consciously translating that image into a painting, often years after they were first taken, has made Silva aware of the poignancy that this time lag creates. He speaks of ‘slowing down time’ and bringing focus to the years that have passed in-between. Rooted in the London of the 90’s or early 00’s, many of these images carry the attraction of the innate beauty of youth, as well as the inherent sadness of a photograph being taken of a moment that no longer exists. Whilst the painting of the photographs is a way of remembering they are also cathartically about letting go.

“Memory and longing is something we project onto an image. The photographic image is rooted in the time and place that it was taken – it is fixed to that specific moment. Whereas a painting can appear to always seem in the present, because it’s been divorced from the exact point in time it originally refers to; it has a more universal quality”. ¹

The men in Silva’s paintings are not always close acquaintances or friends of the artist, occasionally the artist chooses to photograph and paint people that are not known to him, simply because he liked the way they looked, their style, or choice of clothing, perhaps someone he has encountered on the street or in a magazine. The photograph turned painting makes an otherwise fleeting encounter become more significant. There can be a toughness to the look of the subject, but there is always an intimacy in the gaze and relationship to Silva and the way he paints. The paintings are executed in a photo-realist manner, painting wet onto wet. However, despite their impressive technical virtuosity there is a tenderness and care that seems to go deeper than the canvases slick painterly surfaces. The vulnerability to his work happens twofold; firstly in that he as an artist is exposing his life to his audience because in these paintings are people that he has known, whether as friends, lovers or in passing moments. Secondly there is the vulnerability of the person he has photographed and painted, as his subjects, these men and their masculinity is being exposed.

“The men that I paint are often known to me, but as someone who is mixed-race, I’ve always grown up being aware of otherness. The mixed-race experience is a very strange one, I almost feeling like I’m floating between identities. And friends who I have spoken to, whether from West Indian or Asian heritage, have also expressed this conflict, of feeling simultaneously very British but also not British at all.” ²

Along with the figures Silva has photographed over the years, a large number of his paintings are of interiors or domestic spaces, places that he has lived in at some time or had a personal relevance. Informally captured views expose quietly observed moments such as when light hits a particular wall or floor of a shared bedroom, kitchen or living room — evoking a feeling of nostalgia or longing for places that were inhabited only for brief periods. Using white generously in the painting process offers a milky or hazy quality to the paintings, perhaps a reflection on the ungraspable and transient nature of past memories.

1.2. Mike Silva in conversation with Jo Harrison in 2019