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## Kareem-Anthony Ferreira reassembles memories of Ontario and Trinidad to paint his life growing up

By Chris Hampton



Kareem-Anthony Ferreira's paintings on display at the 2020 Arizona Biennial. (Kareem-Anthony Ferreira)

### The Hamilton-based painter has turned his family's photo albums into defining works of art

Though they may sit dusty on the shelf in Mom and Dad's rec room or live boxed in a corner of the basement, our family photo albums make sacred texts. Those four-by-sixes remembering summer vacations and holiday get-togethers long ago, the Polaroids of picnics and birthday parties: they tell important stories about who we are and where we've come from. Recorded in ancient photo chemicals, these moments and memories are the stuff identity is made of.

Artist Kareem-Anthony Ferreira has made a practice of scouring his family's photo albums, selecting and reassembling scenes to tell his own story about growing up between two different cultures. The Hamilton-based painter was born in Canada shortly after his parents emigrated from Trinidad. He always felt like he had two homes, though neither place understood much about the other, and his work reflects this hybridized experience as a third-culture kid. Intimate, familiar, and tenderly wrought, Ferreira's paintings are currently featured in the Arizona Biennial and were the subject of a recent solo exhibition at Nino Mier Gallery in Los Angeles.

The artist seldom begins with a blank canvas. Instead, he builds up his painting surface, affixing torn paper, cloth, cardboard packaging and other found material. The practice nods at a Caribbean sensibility, he says, visible in his families' homes in Trinidad, where everyday items are routinely saved to be repurposed and reused. The physical buildup on Ferreira's panels lends his paintings not only texture but history too, as materials that shuttle through the artist's daily life find their way onto his canvas.

Before picking up a paintbrush, he makes a digital composite of photographs, compiling images from occasions — a gathering at his aunt's, say, or a house call haircut by an uncle — snapped on either side of the Tropic of Cancer. He likes it best, he says, when viewers can't tell whether they're looking at Trinidad or Canada. Through his reassembly, timelines are disordered and characters repeated, sometimes appearing

at different ages within the same frame. The collages compact time and space, creating scenes that feel like a summary of Ferreira's experience. He then transposes these to canvas, painting with a soft, warm realism befitting his vintage source material.

The painting "Day at the Beach," for example, shows four children lolling in a plastic wading pool parked on the sand. The kids' scene was from Hamilton, Ferreira recalls — "I think it was at a birthday party." But the beach pictured is Maracas Bay in Trinidad.

"What I love about that piece is the three depictions of water and the beach," he says. First, there's Maracas Bay, where his family visits whenever they return to Trinidad. Then, there's the pool full of children. "That represents my parents taking us away to Canada but wanting us to stay connected and to experience the things we would back home." Finally, there is the simulation: the cartoon version of tropical seas printed on the side of the pool, promising buyers they can have the beach in their own backyard.

This layering, replete with the clichéd images of the Caribbean, is typical Ferreira. He'll often depict characters clothed in tropical print to acknowledge the flattened, cartoonish representations of his familial home that are widely hawked. Misconception is a major theme in his work because it has figured in his experience. He remembers, as a kid, playing in a steel drum band that performed at a cottage resort's Caribbean Night somewhere in Ontario. There were Hawaiian leis and people wearing fake Rastafarian dreadlocks — the individual cultures of all those islands reduced to bad Halloween costumes. It didn't look like anything his mom and dad did at home, and it sure didn't resemble anything he'd seen on his last trip to visit his grandparents.

These sorts of misconceptions didn't only define Ferreira's experience growing up Trini in Hamilton, though. Paintings like "How Old Are You Now," which shows a tableful of kids and adults ringed around a birthday cake, celebrate the local Caribbean community his family found there. This, he feels, is critical to depict. Although it was perhaps not as prominent, he says, as the Portuguese and Italian immigrant communities, there was a strong Caribbean community in Hamilton when he was young, and they gathered often to feel connected to their home. "It was a big part of my life growing up."

The painting "Kids with Hair Curlers" describes yet another dimension. It pictures Ferreira's brother at daycare flanked by four white classmates, all of the children wearing hair rollers. His brother is huddled among the other kids, playing along, but the expression he sports is an uneasy one. Ferreira says the work is about assimilation. It's about the feeling of "standing out" in their predominantly white neighbourhood. "He's trying to fit in, he's trying to do what everyone else is doing, but clearly, he's struggling. He's struggling, but he wants to be a part of it."

The structures that form identity are complex and many-faceted; this is ultimately at the heart of Ferreira's art, and he studies it with great care and consideration. To tell his story, he has delved into those records of memory and disassembled the pieces — putting them back together, now pictures truer to the feeling.