

**Sean Crookes, *Generations***  
Grey Street Gallery, Brisbane

Sean Crookes' lolly-coloured paintings conjure my childhood. They whisk me back to the sun-soaked floor of my bedroom, immersed in the colours and stories of illustrated children's books. They conjure the watercolour palettes, the large expanses of empty space, and the beautifully sweet stories of familial love by Mem Fox.

Pursuing these correlations between Crookes' paintings and family life is easy. In each of his artworks we recognise the everyday-ness of the family home. This is not necessarily in the details of his paintings (that chair, that plant, that living room) (which in another conversation could be discussed as markers of race and class) but in the postures and poses of the people who inhabit them (an easy jog, an averted gaze, a hand on the hips mid-conversation). Curiously, these depictions belong equally to Crookes—evidence of a private and intimate investigation of *his* life, *his* kin; and to us—as part of our collective knowledge of family and the home. In other words, they are simultaneously private yet familiar. They make us, as viewers, both outsider and invited guest. Crookes' paintings are rich with such delicate tensions and dual possibilities.

The scenes in Crookes' artworks are equally snapshots frozen in time, rich with the connotations of photographic language, and temporally vague. They depict the quiet boredom of weekends without deadlines, activities like card games designed to pass the time, and special moments of embrace that exist beyond and outside the ticking clock. Crookes' combined use of photography as an artist's sketch book and oil painting as his final medium further imbues his works with unstable and complex timestamps: quick and slow, immediate and laboured, frozen and lingering.

Perhaps the most interesting tension in Crookes' work is his inconsistent saturation of colour. In his oil on board paintings, reds and pinks draw our attention. Their brighter hues lend permanency and objecthood to the lines of his father's shirt and his mother's sandals while their application to furniture and architectural features function to anchor the domestic spaces within his paintings. This inconsistency escalates in his work *Winding Up* (2018), the hero artwork in this show. While swathes of the scene dissipate and dissolve into the lightness and non-space of Crookes' pastels, the figure of Crookes' son, in the folds and shadows of a black dressing gown, is undeniably solid. Crookes' paintbrush seems to say: *this* memory, *this* figure, *this* child is known and is here. As

viewers it is impossible to tell if the paintbrush records this pre-existent truth or if, like an incantation, it hopes to materialise this desire as reality.

To view Crookes' paintings with an art historian's eyes is to consider them amongst a different suite of images than the books of my childhood home. Via these eyes, they recall earlier investigations of portraiture and family by an emerging generation of Australian women artists. In Micky Allen's germinal lifecycle project she documented *Babies* (1976), adults (*Prime of Life*) (1979) and *Old Age* (1978). By hand colouring the black and white prints, she feminised photography, complicating the lens's claim to objectivity and eschewing medium-specificity. The same year that Allen trained her camera on infants, Ponch Hawkes also deployed photography to explore familial relationships armed with the new insights of second-wave feminism. Her series *Our Mums and Us* (1976) records her friends and their mothers together in the family home. Shared facial features, divergent fashions and awkward smiles reveal the complex variety of maternal relations. Against the grain of contemporary art's concern with affect, which is always cool and intellectual, Crookes' sentimentality operates in the same realm as these feminist reclamations of pink, domesticity and the family photo album. The three artists' series share an intimacy that is honest and earnest and tender. Their selection of subject matter and medium speaks to a desire to know through the act of representation and, for Crookes, to love through the material and temporal labour of painting.

Crookes' *Generations* memorialises the interstitial non-moments of *his* everyday. This realisation returns us to the position of an outsider looking in, and enables us to pivot our attention to our own lives. We all have our own quiet moments, our own homes and our kin. Crookes' paintings quietly encourage us to cherish them.

Words by Louise R Mayhew