

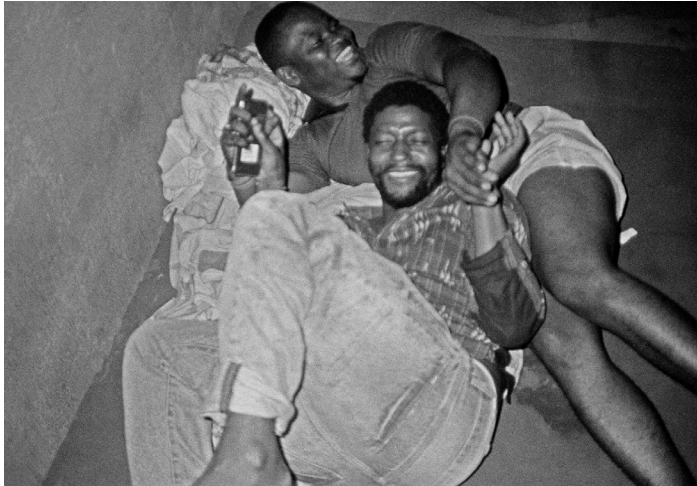
Gathering

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PICTURES OF US

Curated by Lewis Dalton Gilbert

Opening Friday 1st December 2023



Sabelo Mlangeni, *Afternoon Visit, Ola and I playing nipple* (Photo by Sodiq), 2019



Jess T. Dugan, *Self-Portrait (Hotel)*, 2021

Pictures of Us brings together contemporary artists using photography and film to foreground tenderness and intimacy as the connective tissue within and across a range of communities. Each artist explores ways in which selfhood is forged through relationships; these extend from familial, romantic and social connections to those that cross geographic and temporal boundaries. In sensitively portraying friends, lovers and family members, many of the works in *Pictures of Us* visualise the reciprocity between the individual and the collective. Photographic works by Lotte Andersen, Genesis Baez, Jess T. Dugan, Sabelo Mlangeni, Bernice Mulenga, Vivek Vadoliya, Alberta Whittle and Matthew Arthur Williams inhabit Gathering's ground floor, while on the lower floor films by Alberta Whittle, Genesis Báez, Jess T. Dugan, Matthew Arthur Williams and Lotte Andersen are shown in an environment designed to embrace the viewer.

Photography has been distinguished from other art forms by its dependence on the physical presence of its subject. Often instinctively perceived as a record of reality, the photograph has been used to claim truth and command trust. While the artists included in *Pictures of Us* engage the inbuilt association of photography with documentation, many of them use their lens to contemplate subjective elements of experience, revelling in the partial and the fleeting. In the works on display, the medium is expressive, intuitive, each shaped by the currents of emotion at play amongst artists and subjects. Vivek Vadoliya's works materially enact this propensity for the photograph to be fragile and impressionistic: hand developed by the artist in the dark room, the prints are faded, marked by the idiosyncrasies of their making.

Genesis Báez captures the edges of moments: the shadow of her mother in profile, nearly out of frame; a carpet dappled with afternoon sunlight; tendrils of hair carried by breeze. Writer and curator Charlotte Jansen notes that for Jess T. Dugan, photography has provided a way to visualise 'those fundamental things that transcend the bodies and borders we find ourselves in: the way one hand rests on another; the way the sunlight catches bare skin' (Elephant, February 2021). Both Báez and Dugan use this universal language of skin, touch and light to portray family members, allowing the viewer to glimpse fragments of their personal networks of kinship and feeling.

An intimate connection to the life of the close-knit groups being portrayed is an integral part of Sabelo Mlangeni's artistic practice, as he seeks to adopt a view from within that refuses the flattening that can often befall subjects depicted by an external gaze. Six of the photographs on view are taken from Mlangeni's series *The Royal House of Allure* (2020), for which he spent six weeks photographing the life surrounding a safe house in Lagos, where members of the queer community in need of boarding can gather and live. Mlangeni tells the story of *Allure* through the shifting rhythms of quiet togetherness that structure communal living; he uses a similar language to photograph the inhabitants of the George Goch Men's Hostel on the East Rand of Johannesburg. While many of the people Mlangeni portrays in these series have faced poverty and exclusion, these elements are not explicitly shown; subjects are given the space and freedom to define themselves outside of the strictures imposed by hegemonic culture.

Bernice Mulenga approaches their photographic practice with a similar emphasis on storytelling from within. In the photographs shown here, Mulenga portrays friends Abby and OJ in a setting of reflective domesticity; as the frame shifts from the windowsill to the garden patio, the artist's easy movement within and around the shared space is made palpable. Mulenga remarks that 'I see my work as an extension of my own story, even though I'm shooting people who are not me'; in their work, as in Mlangeni's, participation in the relationships and spaces they capture is vital (*Sensing the Image*, Photographers in Conversation at Cubitt Gallery London, July 2021). Matthew Arthur Williams gracefully articulates this understanding of the photograph as a tacit expression of the photographer's own embodiment, stating that 'landscape pictures have everything to do with the body, because it's the body who's taking the image' (in conversation with Louise Long, *British Journal of Photography*, January 2023). *Soon Come*, Williams' 2022 film and sound installation, intersperses digitised landscape imagery with analogue footage of abstracted bodies and archival material to construct a fragmentary portrait of the artist's sense of belonging, stretching between Clarendon in Jamaica and Stoke-on-Trent in the UK.

This merging of body and landscape is a significant trope in Alberta Whittle's practice. In her film *The Axe Forgets, But The Tree Remembers* (2022), images of water and bodies in motion are woven together with material sourced from the Hackney Archives, alongside footage from interviews held with family members and Hackney's Windrush residents. As she reaches into historical archives, Whittle renders them alive and generative, refusing their status as calcified depositories of historical narratives. This reanimation is something artist and activist Tourmaline has approached repeatedly throughout her practice, often mobilising a dream-like iteration of her own image to inhabit figures and places discounted by the historical record. Tourmaline refuses to frame Black transsexual identity through the narrow frame of counter-identification or conflict with normativity, instead using strategies associated with Saidiya Hartman's notion of 'critical fabulation' as a way of re-engaging with history and representation on her own terms.

Williams, Whittle and Tourmaline's different approaches to archival material encourage the viewer to critically engage with the potential of photographic documentation to shape narratives. The three artists make use of the photograph's ability to both embellish and withhold, as well as record; Lotte Andersen, meanwhile, involves the viewer in a materialisation of these processes through her puzzle piece works. *Tweezy* (2022) and *Gotcha* (2022) feature images taken from Andersen's family photography albums. Printed with an image on each surface, the pine and acrylic blocks can be flipped, moved and rearranged. The viewer is led to participate in the repeated fragmentation and partial reconstitution of the images, using playful tactility to intervene with the ways in which the memories and narratives they hold are communicated. Whether using archival material as a medium, or creating their own personal photographic testimony, the artists in *Pictures of Us* use photography and film to transform the archive into a permeable, living form rather than a static tool of unilateral power. The transformation of Gathering's lower floor into a screening room, with furnishings and chairs chosen for their softness, invites the viewer to stay, to reflect upon their own communal networks as they experience each work in comfort and quietude.

Featuring works by: Lotte Andersen (b. 1989), Genesis Báez (b.1990), Jess T. Dugan (b.1986), Sabelo Mlangeni (b.1980), Bernice Mulenga (b. 1996), Tourmaline (b.1983), Vivek Vadoliya (b.1989), Alberta Whittle (b.1980), Matthew Arthur Williams (b.1989)