

LOVE

still not the lesser



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By Asha Iman Veal Associate Curator, MoCP

Kierah KIKI King, still from digital video *Fruitful Devotion*, 2023

"I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace..."

—James Baldwin
excerpt from *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

"Has everyone been in love? Not on the basis of the evidence. If they have, they've forgotten it. If everyone had been in love, they'd treat their children differently. They'd treat each other differently."

—James Baldwin
from "Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris," 1970

LOVE: Still Not the Lesser brings together twelve international artists, uniting across communities to share the ways they encounter and understand love. These artists explore dynamics within sensual eroticism, romantic partnership, family structures, social utopia, and life and death. They observe and declare circumstances of love that serve various intentions.

The projects on view in *LOVE* range from an expressive courtship dance enacted by two people learning how to meaningfully connect despite barriers of distance, to an embodied portrayal of feeling one's own sensuality and pleasure. From an adult son's photo collaboration with his nonagenarian father during his artist mother's last weeks of life, to the love and pride held within visibly queer parenting, the exhibition presents love as a universal value of respect and care for all humans.

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Mari Katayama

you're mine #001, 2014

Collection of Hedy Fischer and Randy Shull.

There is nothing in the artistic work or world of **Mari Katayama** (b. 1987 Japan) that is not beautiful—most importantly, her own self. Themes of visibility and adoration recur as concepts embraced by many of the photographers in *LOVE*. Even so, Katayama's distinct and exquisite use of self-portraiture powerfully affirms her own and others' bodies as divinely worthy to enjoy gentle care and affection.

Sensual devotion exists as a seductive command in her large-scale images on view as part of the exhibition, *you're mine #001* (2014) and *in the water* (2019). Many years after her diagnosis of congenital tibial hemimelia, and the subsequent amputation of both legs at age nine, Katayama first began to adorn herself as a living sculpture. This artist clearly states, "You can't separate my body from my work. But, I'm not making art out of my disabilities."¹

Katayama commands rapt attention through her use of textures and ornamentation of all sorts. She adorns her prostheses, sometimes with colorful butterflies, a habit she has refined since first drawing on them back in grade school. She crafts custom high-heeled shoes that affix to the bottoms of her prostheses and dons red lipstick below a smoky eye whenever she shows herself to the world as model and designer—striking enough to likely cause even Christian Louboutin to feel humble and blush. Lace, seashells, and intricate patterns quite often embellish her portrait scenes and gild the custom frames that she makes. Plush embroidery often surrounds her or adheres to her body in a style far more numerous than an octopus' number of limbs.

In *you're mine #001*, viewers specifically meet Mari as a bold coquet. In the image, *in the water*, gold glitter highlights her fair-skinned limbs. The piece is produced and printed much larger than life and beyond scale, so that her limbs appear like columns.

“This world is multifaceted and always glimmering, and that’s true for all of us. As we age, the world changes around us, and our radiance only grows, and words alone can’t suffice. For those times, I think art is very useful. If we could get through to each other, I’m sure it would start something. By all means, use art to see the radiance in people you are close to, or in the world you are familiar with.”² Katayama’s major exhibitions include the 58th Venice Biennale 2019 and many more across Asia and Europe.

LOVE: Still Not the Lesser introduces artist **Jorian Charlton** (b. 1989 Canada) to a Chicago audience, for her second US Midwest museum show. This photographer focuses on her generation of peers within the Caribbean diaspora—authoring their canon of Black Canadian representation.

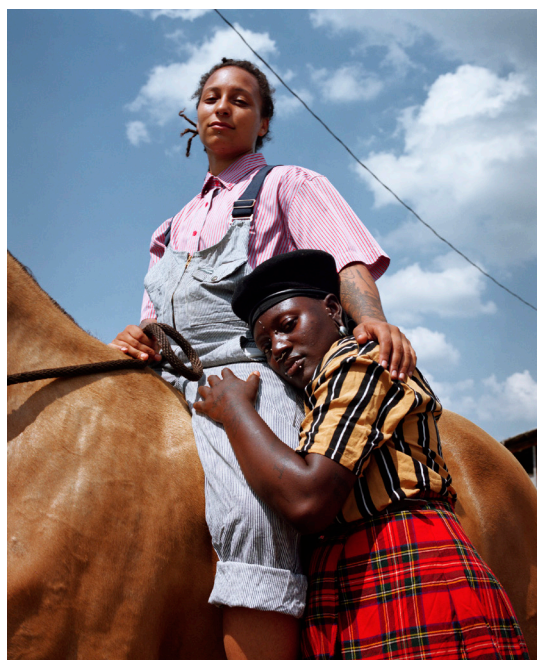
For *LOVE*, Charlton presents two pairs: *Shai and Lex* and *Cynn and Melisse*, each representing a generation of Black and queer young people aware of their available access to leisure time for expanding into more spaces to explore intimacy. The formerly named duo are a hetero pairing, and their playful and tender sensuality brings viewers into intimate scenes of young love and Black love. Touch and gaze respectively define each image. *Shai and Lex*, though a real-life couple, could have been reinvented as a new generation’s version of Darius and Nina from the classic film *Love Jones*, exploring a slow weekend together during an early phase of love and creative life.³ Smokey Robinson’s romantic classic “Cruisin’” feels nearly audible in the background. *Cynn and Melisse*, show Black and queer love set against an open blue sky. Attentive to one another’s needs and taking on new experiences together, they are a romantic pairing in a moment of comfortable and unbothered closeness. Mutual adoration defines them, as does the artist’s keen aesthetic sense of atmosphere, fashion, and, again, touch.

An additional portrait hangs alone. *Georgia* (2021), shows a stunningly regal and dark-skinned woman as she lies alone in a green field. It’s a lush nature scene befitting a goddess of romantic lore. In addition to other striking qualities, Charlton’s images consistently articulate a strong sensibility for intimate physical poses.

Charlton’s first museum solo show, *Out of Many*, opened at Toronto’s Art Gallery of Ontario last year, exhibiting the artist’s original portraits alongside 35mm slides from her family’s lineage in Jamaica, New York, and Toronto. From 2021 to 2022, the Jamaican Canadian artist presented work as part of *The New Black Vanguard: Photography between Art and Fashion* at the exhibition’s debut at Les Rencontres d’Arles photography festival (France), and subsequent travel to Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

“I love you more than my own skin.”⁴

—Frida Kahlo



Jorian Charlton
Untitled (Cynn and Melisse), 2020
Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery Toronto.

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Jess T. Dugan

Self-portrait with Vanessa, 2013

Courtesy of the artist and CLAMP, New York, NY
and Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.

Several of the artists in *LOVE* signal affirmation and solidarity to communities that acutely experience the social and legislative politics of love. Photographer and nonbinary parent **Jess T. Dugan** (b. 1986 United States) offers selections from their *Family Pictures* series (2012–present), focused on Dugan’s own multigenerational, queer family in the US. They began *Family Pictures* from a desire to document their intimate life, as well as to create a public project that centers visibly queer parenting. The full body of work captures an array of significant yet everyday moments.

In many of the images, *Family Pictures* shows the first days of life and continuous growth of their young daughter, Elinor. There is also the early romance and adoration of their co-parent, the blonde-haired Vanessa. Diana, Dugan’s mother, features prominently in scenes where she tenderly holds her partner, Chris, or cuddles her baby granddaughter. Describing their more than ten-year process, which began in their mid-twenties, Dugan explains, “Over the past decade, these relationships have deepened and evolved significantly. Becoming a parent in 2018 fundamentally changed how I view myself, and it transformed my understanding of family and my orientation to the world. The experience of simultaneously being a child and a parent altered my relationship with my mother, and parenting Elinor threw aspects of my own childhood into heightened relief, causing me to revisit memories and feelings from my past.”⁵ Dugan’s father is perhaps noticeably absent from their present-day family photo narrative.

Concurrent to *LOVE: Still Not the Lesser* in Chicago, selections from *Family Pictures* are also presently on view as part of the *Kinship* exhibition at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. Among their many honors, Dugan is a recipient of an ICP Infinity Award and was selected by the Obama White House as an LGBTQ+ Artist Champion of Change. Their work has been exhibited and resides in the permanent collections of more than fifty museums.⁶

“Love isn’t just something you feel. It’s something you do every day when you go out and pick the paper and bottles scattered the night before on the corner. when you stop and talk to a neighbor. when you argue passionately for what you believe in with whoever will listen...”

“... when you never stop believing that we can all be more than what we are.”⁷

—Grace Lee Boggs

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Tom Merilion

Study for Figure Shadow 2, circa 1980,
from the series *Between Light & Dark*, 2019–2022.
Courtesy of the artist.

Between Light & Dark (2019–2022) by **Tom Merilion** (b. 1967 England) combines an original series of his own contemporary photographs with the mixed-media 1970s–1980s and final archival materials of his late mother, the artist Sylvani Merilion (1936 England–2019 France). The project offers an intimate, family-centered collaboration and exploration of universal themes of love, life, and loss. Returning to photography after many years as a filmmaker, Merilion began this project in France during the last two months of his mother’s life, blending techniques of observational documentary with traditions and structures of posed portraiture.

The hospital images, shot by Merilion and Sylvani both, alternate between close-up details of her alert yet resting, and then eventually passed away in her hospital bed. Away from the hospital, Merilion steps into his mother’s former role of photographing figure studies of her then-young husband, his now nonagenarian father, John. His photographs of his father are composed as fine art, while Sylvani’s original depictions of John were part of her private sketchbook process as a studio painter. Merilion recalls, “It wasn’t until after she died and we collected her belongings from the hospital that I looked at the photographs she’d taken. I hadn’t given any thought to it in advance, but mom’s photographs were what I’d expected to see. Her recent painting had been about abstracted fragments of landscape, color, and form, and the hospital photographs could easily have been studies for future paintings. Or she may just have been trying to stay creative using what was in front of her, in the only medium she still had to hand.”⁸

Merilion has previously exhibited photographic works at the National Portrait Gallery in London, Belfast Exposed gallery in Northern Ireland, the Midlands Art Center in Birmingham, and Royal Birmingham Society of Artists gallery. Sylvani Merilion cofounded the now venerable sixty-year-old institution Ikon Gallery in 1964, alongside a small group of her former Birmingham School of Arts faculty colleagues. In the late 1950s, Sylvani apprenticed at the Charleston house studio in Sussex for members of the Bloomsbury Group. Her dedicated practice and impactful role as an arts educator steadily contributed to shaping Birmingham, the second-largest city in the United Kingdom, as a formidable cultural scene.

Alicia Bruce (b. 1979 Scotland) carries the gaze of *LOVE* northward, to the far east coast of Scotland, where picturesque dunes and the remote beauty of ancestral homelands have become an unlikely, world-watched battleground between long-time community members and encroaching private development. Bruce, a self-identified working-class photographer, activist, and educator, has spent the past fifteen



Alicia Bruce

Mike Forbes, with his wife Sheila's memorial cairn on the day he buried her ashes at Mill of Menie, 2021.
From the monograph *I Burn But I Am Not Consumed*, 2023

Courtesy of the artist.

years shooting the community-resistance collaboration that led to *I Burn But I Am Not Consumed* (*Daylight*, 2023). Her acclaimed monograph shows the environmental destruction and harassment of homeowners, led by real estate developer Donald J. Trump's intention to build "the greatest golf course in the world" at Menie, Aberdeenshire. Through Bruce's insider positionality and relationships of trust and collaboration, the more than eighty images in her photo book introduce local resisters such as Michael and Sheila Forbes, whom Bruce especially honored through a posed image that references the art historically famous painting *American Gothic* by Grant Wood (1930).

In *Mike and Sheila Forbes, Mill of Menie* (2010), the couple stands side-by-side and stoic in front of their farmhouse. Instead of aligning with the collar, broach, and specs of the original image, Mike—a farmer, fisherman, and former quarry worker—is proud in a simple brown T-shirt with his visible forearm tattoos. Sheila wears a sleeveless white top. Together, they defended their home and land, refusing to acquiesce to a compulsory purchase order. For years, this independent photo project by Bruce offered an artistic and consensual platform to the Forbeses and many of their neighbors, who'd been otherwise forced from rural private lives into media attention.

LOVE also includes a solo portrait of Mike after Sheila passed away. Bruce explains, "Mike spent a year sourcing granite—which is the local stone—to build a cairn. In Scotland a cairn is a very sacred space and a memorial. On the day he buried Sheila's ashes, myself and my partner were invited to join. He said to me afterwards, 'If you got your cameras, do you want to do a portrait of me? Come on, let's do one. Let's do one in the same position as you did the last one and put the cairn in.'"

Mike and Sheila's partnership, through Bruce's photos, resounds eternally in collections including the National Galleries of Scotland, Martin Parr Foundation, and St. Andrews University.⁹ *LOVE: Still Not the Lesser* marks Bruce's debut exhibition in the United States.

*"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light."¹⁰*

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning



Mous Lamrabat
Warning, 2021
 Courtesy of the artist.

In the allegorical dreamland of *Peace Room* (2022), an installation by **Mous Lamrabat** (b. 1983 Morocco), love most fully exists as a realm of blended cultural symbols and contexts. Each peace flag bears a photograph on each side, printed on a mid-folded cloth and suspended in the air. The rich scenes that compose each flag affirm Lamrabat’s specific generational experience of third culture—the anthesis of monoculture. He connects most deeply to being Moroccan and African, though he came of age in Europe and keeps his home base there, close to his parents and siblings.

In each *Peace Room* photograph, the inhabitants of Mousganistan (a place in the artist’s mind) come to life. They are black, brown, and beige humans. Their masculinity and femininity enjoy notions of beauty beyond Eurocentric gender molds. In Lamrabat’s dream world, love means no fear of difference.

There are varying portraits and scenes on each print. *Fly Immigrants*, for example, playfully refutes the politicization of dark bodies. This specific cloth-print puns a popular luxury airline’s marketing tagline, “Fly Emirates.” It features the remixed slogan worn on a Nike sports jersey by a beautiful, Black-skinned model, her striking face framed between a silk scarf and beret. The same model reappears on a separate flag print where she stands beside a companion. Carefully balanced stacks of red fez adorn their two heads, and a huge silk heart shape bursts from each respective chest.

Red hearts of all sizes appear as a motif throughout the individual prints in the *Peace Room*—alongside iconography from the three largest Abrahamic religions.¹¹ There are also nods to Lamrabat’s influences from high fashion and 1990s hip-hop (his favorite love story film is Tupac Shakur and Janet Jackson’s 1993 *Poetic Justice*, and his favorite love song is Mary J. Blige and Method Man’s 1995 “I’ll Be There For You/You’re All I Need To Get By”). Lamrabat’s autobiographic reference to McDonald’s golden arches—fostered during a high-school job in the historic Belgian town Sint-Niklaas—also repeats across multiple photographs. His other images occasionally bare a pop-culture symbol styled onto the front-side of a djellaba.

Lamrabat’s influences and poly-cultural sensibility feel endless, visible through many embedded references. In *Warning* (2021), a separate large-scale photo print that features prominently in the exhibition, his models don the phrases “Stop Terrorizing Our World” and “Warning Explicit Beauty,” referring to prominent Belgian fashion designer Walter Van Beirendonck’s controversial Fall/Winter 2015 Paris Fashion Week collection.

“I spent my youth not being able to belong or fit in and my work is a continuation of that,” Lamrabat states.¹² Also held within his creative mind, are childhood memories of strangers staring at the traditional garments worn by his mother while she minded her business on public streets. Hence the strength of women is also a common theme. “My admiration for women began with her and my sisters. The kindness in women is something you rarely find in men. They have incredible power and I wish I could do the things that they can.”¹³

Lamrabat trained in interior architecture before making the move to photography, preferring the self-direction and a faster creative pace of life as an independent artist. Since founding his Mousmous studio, he has become one of the most in-demand, global commercial photographers working today.

*“Give me one reason to stay here / And I’ll turn
right back around”¹⁴*

–Tracy Chapman, from “Give Me One Reason” 1995

~

*“I guess it would be nice if I could touch your body
I know not everybody / has got a body like you”¹⁵*

–George Michael, from “Faith” 1987

* * *

The term *emerging*, as conventionally applied to so many early-career artists, often absurdly belies the depth of maturity and dedication to craft that has been developed and honed through years of practice not publicly seen, as in the case of choreographer and dancer **Kierah KIKI King** (b. 1998 United States) and visual artist **Jorge Ariel Escobar** (b. 1994 Paraguay). Each of them relocated from the East Coast to the Midwest, furthering their respective artistic practices within Chicago’s constant cultural bloom.

Escobar, a queer Latinx image-maker, focuses his lens to capture themes of intimacy, desire, and physical relationships between queer/gay men. He centers his lived romantic encounters, as well as his mind’s fantasies, as source material and research. For *Would You Lie With Me* (2022) Escobar permits viewers into his private space. Moments of tenderness between himself and a lover exist in the same body of work as staged scenes that portray erotic longing and glimpses into an imagination that for many years sustained his emotional interiority. He



Jorge Ariel Escobar

Could we just lay here for a minute? II, 2022
Courtesy of the artist.

describes the artistic process of *Would You Lie With Me* as “a year-long journey of self-discovery and embracing my identity as a gay man. Growing up in a Catholic household, I was surrounded by homophobic thinking from family members and peers, which resulted in me feeling like I could not live my life authentically. Prior to coming out at 23, I never experienced romantic or physical intimacy with anyone. It was something I longed for.”¹⁶ Two photographs from this series are on display, and many more constitute Escobar’s full project, which includes delicate moments such as two lovers’ palms pressed together, their undone belt buckles, and a bedroom’s mirrored closet door. Escobar considers projects such as *Would You Lie With Me* as a mode of love letter to men from his past. As an autobiographical storyteller, he includes his body as central to the work, and at times he increases the already vulnerable scenes by posing alone. As a goal of his overall practice, he wants to continue harnessing his tools to interrogate many different relationships of closeness, as well as to visualize young queer experience.

Similarly driven in their storytelling’s emancipatory ambition, KIKI King offers their third dance film, *Fruitful Devotion* (2023), as an embodied portrayal of connecting with self-sensuality and pleasure, centering nonbinary and femme Black queerness as paradigms for achieving unmitigated self-love.¹⁷ King describes this newest work, which was commissioned by MoCP for the *LOVE* exhibition, as a narrative that seeks to explore the body and sexuality as gifts that are private for each person—and distinctly self-nourishing when explored apart from partner centeredness or externally consumptive sexualization. “I believe that queerness can strengthen a sense of exploration—if we allow it to do so,” says King.¹⁸

Although becoming known as a strong director of dance films, King’s in-person movement practice remains at the core of their artistic work. In both forms, they aspire to elicit a visceral and connective experience with her audience. They seek their own freedom and joyfully entice their collaborators and audiences to join in as part of their personal processes. Though speaking to a wide audience, King is particularly interested in the experience and autonomy of their generation of Black women. Their preceding dance films *Black Woman Why?* (2021) and *ACT 2 SCENE 2* (2021) were produced locally in Chicago during the COVID-19 lockdowns and stood out among the dynamic proliferation of independent dance films that emerged as necessity of the era. After the summer of 2020’s explosive racial justice movement, which in the United States focused on the police killings of Breonna Taylor (Kentucky) and George Floyd (Minnesota), King’s first two films testified to the secret resilience and complex position of Black women in America.

Like Escobar, King also constructs their visual works as potentially wide-reaching love letters to community.

*“I want a girl with extensions in her hair / Bamboo earrings, at least two pair
A Fendi bag and a bad attitude / That’s all I need to get me in a good mood
(You got me shook up, shook down, shook out—on your loving)”¹⁹*

—LL Cool J, from “Around The Way Girl” 1990

“I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees.”²⁰

—Pablo Neruda, from “Every Day You Play” 1924

* * *



Yuge Zhou

Love Letters (summer), 2021

Still from digital video

Courtesy of the artist.

The purpose of love letters as a tradition of romantic declaration has been restyled and reframed through various art modes and delivery formats time and time again. **Yuge Zhou** 周雨歌 (b. 1985 China), who is an affiliated artist of NEW INC, the New Museum’s (New York) art and technology incubator, has applied her video-art skillset alongside her perspective of a Chinese diaspora immigration experience for the video series *Love Letters (summer)* and *Love Letters (winter)*, produced sequentially in 2021.

Zhou grew up as a child television star in what she now describes as “the second stage of China’s economic reform—witnessing a massive influx of urban migration, expansion and globalization.” True to this influence, her video duet features an expressive courtship dance enacted by the same two bodies who’ve achieved the necessary privacy to begin to develop their intimacy within an otherwise intense metropolis. The two people figure out how to connect with one another meaningfully despite obstacles. Zhou’s (*summer*) scene introduces the young pair (played by Sam Crouch and Rebecca Huang) who are separated from one another across opposite banks of a postindustrial midwestern US river, and wear monotone costumes of respective blue and red. The physically distanced lovers signal to one another by full body gestures and dance motions. They improvise a style of wordless language that no person outside of their relationship could understand. Landscape and architecture are supporting characters in the relationship on screen, situating the characters’ bodies in distinct yet unidentifiable milieus. Offering an entirely dissimilar vantage, Zhou’s (*winter*) video uses aerial-view technology to record a choreographed, walk-chase between the two dancers who remain identifiable by their

respective colors even in protective winter clothes. Zhou explains that the two episodes “emphasize the traditional Chinese concept of ‘Yuan 缘’ as a fateful intersection leading to a relationship with an uncertain future.” She was also influenced by the sequential style of American filmmaker Richard Linklater’s romances *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013).

Before working as a visual artist, Zhou came to live in the United States as a technology student slightly more than ten years ago. Her experience of separation from loved ones, across an entire continent and ocean, became more universally relatable the year she conceptualized and produced *Love Letters* during the pandemic lockdowns when so many in-person relationships ceased.



Modou Dieng Yacine

Detail from *Let Me Know How You Feel'N Me*, 2022
Combined canvas, denim, burlap, digital print, vinyl records, oil sticks, acrylic paint.
Courtesy of the artist.

Modou Dieng Yacine (b. 1970 Senegal) is perhaps the sole other artist featured in the *LOVE* exhibition who calls attention to the courageousness of moving past anticipatory feelings and uncertainty that sometimes arise with attraction. The romantic bravery of courtship becomes immediately apparent by the titling of his work, *Let Me Know How You Feel'N Me* (2022), a large-scale mixed composition of oil sticks, acrylic paint, digital photo print, cuts of denim and burlap, and vinyl records. One of the record labels displays the artwork’s title and alludes to the steamy tunes of courtship pressed within.

Yacine is a painter whose work quite often combines mediums of painting and appropriated photography to create “a dualistic positioning where both mediums are engaged and activated by one another.”²¹ In doing so he builds “imaginative lines and multiplicities of layers which can be continuously applied to the surface.” A layer of meaning that’s more stealthily knit throughout the *Let Me Know . . .* collage artwork is Yacine’s employ of memory—memory as a mode of human expression and enjoyment of love. To choose to remember can be both an action of care and a safekeeping of beloved moments and sensations. And sometimes, no matter how much a person tries, past experiences of love can also result in an inability to forget.

Beyond the element of flirtatious bravado, *Let Me Know How You Feel'N Me* significantly holds its artist’s love of culture and place. Material and color choices reflect personal memories of growing up in Dakar and Saint-Louis, Senegal, and his recollections of environments since, including his moves to the US Pacific Northwest and Midwest. Hence his most dominant materials and tones recollect sub-Saharan desert dust, assembled with colors that feel like seasonal shifts in the United States.

Despite recently setting roots to further build a dedicated studio practice in Chicago, Yacine continues to be on the move and over the past few years has exhibited work at the 1-54 art fair London, NOMAD gallery Brussels, Gallery 193 Paris, Dak'Art Biennial Dakar, and other venues.



Salma Abedin Prithi
From the series *Dear Love*, 2011–2018
Courtesy of the artist.

In a perhaps unlikely connection to attachment and memory, **Salma Abedin Prithi** (b. 1985 Bangladesh) extends the earlier-established mood of love attributed to recollection and place. Through more than seventy scenes, her body of work in *Dear Love* (2011–2018) portrays shame-free joy in sharing love or desire, as well as the shame-free void of the absence of feeling loved. Each small-scale image is accompanied by a handwritten personal story of love provided by the sitter(s). *Dear Love* includes intimate posed portraits of parent–child relationships, siblings, romantic partners, and best friends, shot in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, and Thailand. She explains, “Relationships have complex, multiple layers [that in some way overcome] the difference of class, race, age, and sex and meets to a divine line where intimacy stays strong. To me it is difficult to define any relationship where I have found many contradictions and surprising connections at the same time. There are times when breach of trust breaks someone’s heart and leads to a separation. But the intimacy is still felt through an absence. Many characters of my portraits stood alone in the photographs, but their mind traveled to the loved ones.”²² In a particularly stand-out moment within the series, she photographs a married couple, Polash and Parvin, both of whom are blind. They remain physically close while sitting in the deep grass of a lush and textural public park, lightly touching each other’s bodies as a means of loving gesture.

Beyond *Dear Love*, Prithi’s photographic practice examines a niche that she describes as engaging the ordinary castes and people in contemporary South Asian societies as part of a process of protest and healing. Her projects explore conditions of domestic violence, gender rights, social injustice, and freedom of expression, and she focuses on vulnerability and psychological struggle. Prithi began her early creative career as a news reporter and later began learning photographic portraiture by spending long periods of time with her sitters, anticipating the patterns and rhythms of their still moments. More than a decade since then, she has shown her work at international photography festivals across Asia, and elsewhere. Prithi was a 2019 Magnum Foundation Photography and Social Justice Fellow, and she was shortlisted for the C/O Berlin Talent Award 2021.

“Whatever is done in love is never any trouble, and there is always time.”²³

—based on words attributed to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Bahá’í Faith

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”

“It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”²⁴

—Corinthians

* * *



Alia Ali

تاذرا (aldhat) 3, حب (hub) // LOVE series, 2021
Purchased with funds provided by The David C. and Sarajeon Ruttenberg Impact Fund for Photography; Courtesy of Foto Relevance, Houston.

LOVE: Still Not the Lesser concludes as the visitor encounters a single artwork, the تاذرا (aldhat) حب , 3 (hub) from the 2021 *LOVE* series by **Alia Ali** (b. 1985 Austria). Ali’s honors and awards include the ARTSY Vanguard and NIKON Global Ambassador. Her recent solo exhibitions and commissions have been extensively written about by the international art press. She exhibits as well as holds residencies across Asia, North Africa, Europe, and the United States. In 2022 MoCP purchased تاذرا (aldhat) حب , 3 (hub) for the permanent collection, and is delighted to debut this recent acquisition.

تاذرا (aldhat) حب , 3 (hub) is an inkjet print mounted on aluminum. The Arabic word for love repeats as text pattern in bright red, overlaying lilac fabric and a deep purple background, while the lilac cloth fully covers and obscures a human form. Lacking an individual identity, the sitter conjures multiple politicizations of the body (viewers likely sense these allusions).

Yet as an apt closing note for the exhibition, in the image by Ali—and the wider composition of her well-known series overall—love wins, through definitive repetition and insistence. Over an anonymous yet politicized body, love becomes a cloak. Truly, when she, when we, say it over and over again, and when our interpersonal as well as broader societal interactions remain aligned and consistent—love really can win.

Afterall, love is love. Love is a right of existence. Love is a language of justice. Love is peace. Love is growth. Love learns tenderness. Love is something that we forever remember, even when it is mourned.

And sometimes, love begins with passionate fire.

Endnotes

- 1 Chris Champion, "Punk Prosthetics: The Mesmerizing Art of Living Sculpture Mari Katayama," *The Guardian*, March 6, 2017. <https://doi.org/05/01/2023>.
- 2 Mari Katayama, "My Way of Conveying Feelings beyond Words | Mari KATAYAMA," TEDxKobe, July 10, 2015, Kobe, Japan.
- 3 *Love Jones*, directed by Theodore Witcher, director, Love Jones. (New Line Cinema, 1997).
- 4 Quote attributed to Frida Kahlo. Unclear original attribution. "Frida Kahlo Quotes." <https://www.fridakahlo.org/frida-kahlo-quotes.jsp>.
- 5 CLAMP (n.d.). "ARTIST SERIES Jess T. Dugan | Family Pictures." Clampart.com. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://clampart.com/2022/01/family-pictures/#thumbnails>.
- 6 Dugan received their MFA in photography from Columbia College Chicago in 2014.
- 7 Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) 96. "Love isn't just something you feel. It's something you do every day when you go out and pick the paper and bottles scattered the night before on the corner, when you stop and talk to a neighbor, when you argue passionately for what you believe in with whoever will listen, when you call a friend to see how they're doing, when you write a letter to the newspaper, when you give a speech and give 'em hell, when you never stop believing that we can all be more than what we are. In other words, Love isn't about what we did yesterday; it's about what we do today and tomorrow and the day after."
- 8 Tom Merilion, email (personal statement) to the author, June 28, 2023.
- 9 In 2012, Mike Forbes was named "Top Scot," a Glenfiddich Spirit of Scotland Award.
- 10 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, excerpt from "Sonnets from the Portuguese 43: How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" (1850), *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1954), 57.
- 11 References the three most-followed Abrahamic faiths: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.
- 12 Myrna Ayad, "Moroccan Photographer Mous Lamrabat on Finding Success While Thriving Through the Warmth of Women," *Vogue*, Arabia, March 14, 2021. <https://en.vogue.me/culture/moroccan-photographer-moustapha-mous-lamrabat-interview>.
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LOVE still not the lesser

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