



Creative Process

STORY BY SUSAN HORSBURGH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ASHLEY MACKEVICIUS

CLARA ADOLPHS

In her nostalgic paintings, this artist uncovers the constancy of human nature.

Exhibited at:

HOTA, Gold Coast; Chalk Horse, Sydney; Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide; Art SG, Singapore.

Awards:

Eva Breuer Travelling Art Scholarship, 2017; Archibald Prize finalist, 2016 and 2019; Sulman Prize finalist, 2019 and 2021; Wynne Prize finalist, 2022; Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship finalist, 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2016.

Breakthrough moment:

As part of the Eva Breuer Travelling Art Scholarship, Adolphs was awarded a residency in 2018 at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, where she reinvigorated her arts practice.

What the critics say:

“In transforming faded memories into contemporary paintings, Adolphs invites her viewers into a stranger’s world, where the narrative possibilities can be pushed and pulled as readily as paint across canvas.”
– Chloé Wolifson, *Vault* magazine

Clara Adolphs spends much of her time trawling through op shops and deceased estates, eBay and dusty encyclopedias, looking for old photos to inspire her art. She can’t explain what she’s looking for but she knows it when she sees it – usually a picture that dates from the 1940s to 1960s, one with a mysterious, universal quality that makes the anonymous figures seem somehow familiar. “I like when you can’t really see where it’s from,” she says. “It keeps me guessing and can keep the audience guessing.”

Intrigued by notions of time and memory, the 37-year-old UNSW Sydney fine arts graduate has become known for her dreamy impasto paintings, often of people swimming, skiing or sunbaking. The photos she starts with lack detail – like fuzzy memories – so when Adolphs blows them up into works sometimes 2.7 metres wide, she has to fill in the blanks: if they’re black and white, she opts for a muted palette that won’t distract from her subjects; she might take figures out or add others in. She works speedily with brushes and palette knives to capture the feeling of a fleeting moment. “I like to keep the painting alive by working quite quickly – I don’t get bogged down in detail,” says Adolphs, who is based in the NSW Southern Highlands town of Bundanoon and has an exhibition at Adelaide’s Hugo Michell Gallery until 20 May. “You allow the paint to do its own thing. I’m trying to discover what the truer evidence of time is – the photograph or the painting?”

Like old photos, Adolphs’ paintings allude to a constancy, suggesting that our experiences aren’t so different from those of our grandparents. “The wider world and society might change but the human condition doesn’t.” The youngest of three girls who grew up in Sydney’s suburban north, Adolphs has always savoured flipping through her family’s photo albums so she finds it shocking, and a bit heartbreaking, that so many snapshots are thrown away. “They just get chucked out because people don’t know what to do with them. It’s almost like I’m saving them.” ●