

In Paul van Somer's *The 1st Earl of Monmouth and his Family* (1617), likely commissioned to mark Robert Carey's appointment as Chamberlain to Prince Charles, the family gaze out at the viewer, their pale faces and elaborate ruffs appearing almost to float amidst the velvet gloom. In the centre, Carey appraises us, his jaw set with pride as he clasps the long white Chamberlain's rod in his left hand. His wife's hand appears just above his own, drifting out of the darkness to graze the rod lightly with her knuckles, as if seeking reassurance of its presence. The women, aside from this cautious gesture, appear almost disembodied, their forms relegated to the shadows by the ornate attire and confident postures of their male counterparts.

Three paintings in *Bow* take van Somer's family portrait as their source: *Carey I, II* and *III* (all 2013). The *Carey* trilogy is unusual for Selina Foote whose process usually begins by finding a historic painting reproduced in a book and using this image to glean not only a colour palette, but to inform an abstracted drawing which then acts as a kind of scaffold for a new painting. From there, an intricate series of rules are followed to develop a composition that bears only the faintest traces of its source. Based in London during 2013, Foote was able to visit van Somer's painting in the flesh at The National Portrait Gallery, alongside other paintings that became the foundations for works in *Bow*.

Searching for the source material in the liting prisms of *Carey I*, I discern what I feel must be the diagonal line of Carey's white rod shining against the dark ground, repeated over and over, transformed from left to right, portrait to landscape, forming a mesmerising, spiky grid. As I draw closer, I see the spikes are not so sharp, the paint not white and black but cream and shades of grey. I am reminded of Andrew Berardini's meditations on grey, specifically this grey, slate grey, of which he writes, "Slate's hardness is only in the eyes, it takes only a tender tap to break the stone sheet into shards."ⁱⁱ Foote's painted fragments of slate confirm this propensity towards fragility. Slate is softer than black, and here it curves and wobbles gently, geometry turned impure and undisciplined. I return to the reproduction of van Somer's paintings on my laptop screen and zoom in on the blackness, wondering at the shades of grey I cannot see, how different the painting might feel if I could stand close as I can with *Carey I, II* and *III*.

While being in London gave Foote unprecedented physical access to historic paintings, the environs restricted her practice in other ways. The title of this exhibition, *Bow*, evokes the suburb in east London where Foote's little flat was located and where she painted these

works, using her tiny Ikea dining table as a studio. Such a small space necessitated small paintings, but the scale was also kept compact as a way of creating intimacy. Foote explains that, given the works were all based on portrait paintings, she “wanted people looking at the works to stand close, like you would stand with a person.”ⁱⁱ

Stand close to a person and you will notice the most intimate details. The patch of hair they missed when shaving. Fallen crumbs of eyeshadow like freckles on a cheek. The medicinal smell of their shampoo. Broken capillaries on their nose. You’ll notice things you’re unsure they would want noticed, things you’re unsure they’ve even noticed about themselves. Standing close to Foote’s paintings has the same effect. You’ll notice uneven brushstrokes, a drip or smudge where perhaps it shouldn’t be. You’ll notice the careful pencil lines peeking out from behind polygons of opaque colour, marks the artist could have erased but chose to leave, hinting, as curator Sarah McClintock proposes, at the liminality of preparatory sketches, “artworks that... exist in the space between the artist’s mind and the ‘final’ artwork”.ⁱⁱⁱ In leaving these residues, Foote directs our attention to the painting process, invites us to imagine the original series of shapes sketched out and consider how this might act as a kind of antecedent choreography, helping to guide the more intuitive rhythms of painting. The surface chosen for a painting may also inform the painting process, especially with works on silk such as *Suzon II*, in which the grain of the wooden stretchers and the cavity behind the painting can be glimpsed behind chains of polygons painted in shades of sand, sage green and terracotta.

Standing close to Foote’s paintings and I am reminded of a definition of intimacy offered by cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, who writes, “To intimate is to communicate with the sparsest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity.”^{iv} More than their small scale, it is the subtlety of the gestures in Foote’s paintings that grants them the quality of intimacy.

Lucinda Bennett, 2024

ⁱ Andrew Berardini, *Colors*, (Los Angeles: Not a Cult, 2023), 103.

ⁱⁱ Selina Foote, email correspondence with the writer, January 29, 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah McClintock, “Selina Foote: On a Clear Night”, The Suter Art Gallery, <https://thesuter.org.nz/exhibitions/selinafoote>

^{iv} Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue” in *Critical Inquiry: Intimacy* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344169>