

# Smithsonian's 'Kinship' ponders the meaning of personal connection

National Portrait Gallery exhibition showcases eight artists whose work is based on an expansive and inclusive sense of family

By Mark Jenkins

December 15, 2022 at 6:30 a.m. EST



"Bored," from Thomas Holton's photographic series "The Lams of Ludlow Street." (Thomas Holton)



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Traditionally, national portrait galleries exhibit likenesses of people who are important to the country. The exhibition "Kinship" at the

**If you go**

## **Kinship**

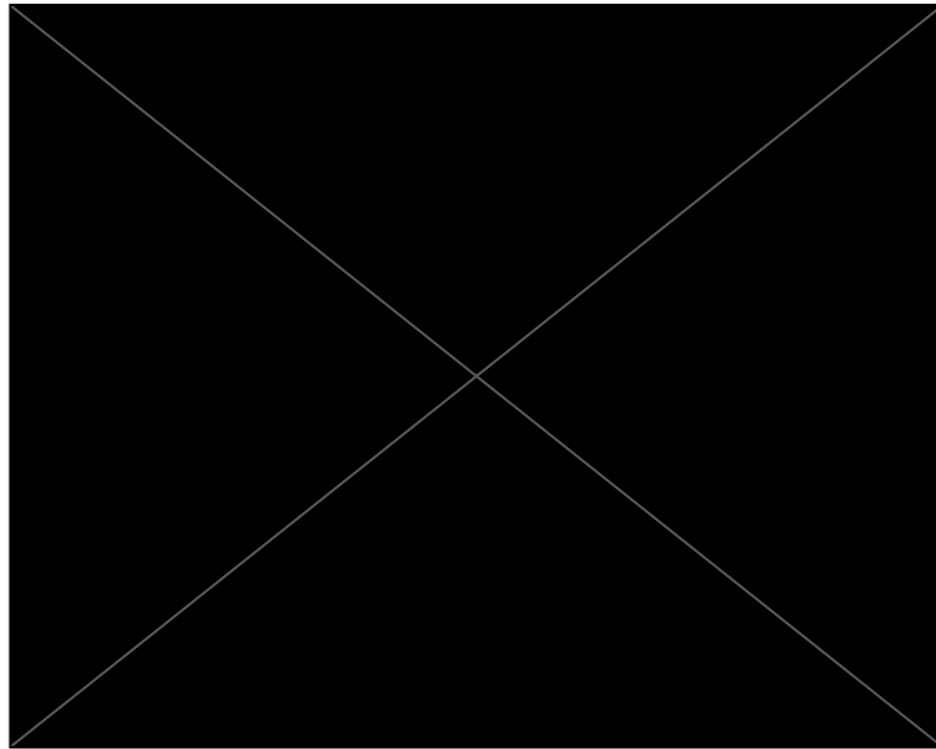
National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and F streets NW. [npg.si.edu](https://npg.si.edu).

**Dates:** Through Jan. 7, 2024.

**Prices:** Free.

Fabric is equally integral to the pictures of [Ruth Leonela Buentello](#), a first-generation Mexican American whose work is hung in a gallery that's been wallpapered for maximum homeyness. The San Antonio artist doesn't idealize her family background, however. In both a self-portrait and a painting of her parents, the female mouths are painted over to symbolize the silencing of women in patriarchal cultures.

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Departed generations commune with the living in [Sedrick Huckaby's](#) work, which juxtaposes painting and sculpture. Several of the Fort Worth artist's canvases depict people wearing memorial T-shirts bearing the names and pictures of deceased loved ones. This is a practice in the Black community, according to the catalog's introductory essay.

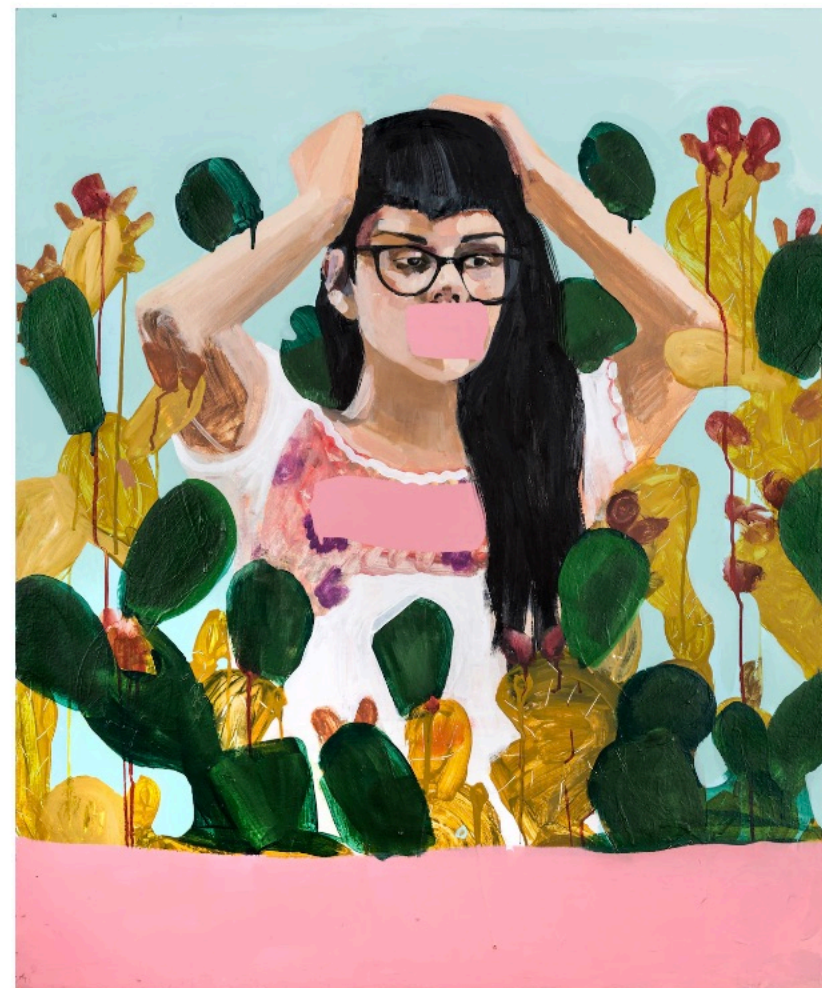
Huckaby uses it to unify multiple generations in a piece that pairs a painting with a papier-mâché rendering of his young daughter. Where most of these artists highlight physical closeness, Huckaby attempts to reach across the abyss. His artist's statement includes this food for thought: "Perhaps kinship can surpass mortality."

Tsouhlarakis, a Native American, is concerned with missing Native women whose cases have been neglected by law enforcement agencies. The centerpiece of her contribution to the show is a performance in which she will build a sculpture made from wood collected near her Colorado home. The event is scheduled for next year on May 5, which is [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Awareness Day](#).

In addition to photographs, the selection includes works by three painters whose expressionist styles transform family photos. [Njideka Akunyili Crosby](#) collages photo-transfers of old snapshots into the clothing and backdrops of her subjects; these include the Nigeria-born Californian's husband, who's depicted faceless while wearing a tunic and trousers covered with faces. The man can be seen as the artist's new life, cloaked in her previous one.



"Gone But Not Forgotten: Sha Sha," by Sedrick Huckaby. (Sedrick Huckaby/Jesuit Dallas Museum)



"Nopalera," by Ruth Leonela Buentello. (Ruth Leonela Buentello)



“Self-Portrait with Elinor (screen)” by Jess T. Dugan, from the series “Family Pictures.” (Jess T. Dugan)



“Shea Cobb With Her Mother, Ms. Reneé, and Her Daughter, Zion, at Nephriti’s Wedding Reception, Standing Outside the Social Network Banquet Hall, Flint, Michigan,” by LaToya Ruby Frazier, from the series “Flint Is Family in Three Acts.” (LaToya Ruby Frazier/Gladstone Gallery)

The sense of menace is stronger and more specific in the work of [LaToya Ruby Frazier](#) and [Anna Tsouhlarakis](#). The former made several visits to Flint, Mich., to photograph the city’s toxic-water crisis. Frazier focuses on the Cobb family, whose struggle with industrial pollution she associates with her own family’s travails over three generations in the steel town of Braddock, Pa. The Chicago artist followed the Cobbs to Mississippi as they fled the plight encapsulated in a black-and-white close-up photo in which Shea Cobb pours water from a plastic bottle into the mouth of her 8-year-old daughter, Zion.



“The Beautiful Ones,” Series #3, by Njideka Akunyili Crosby. (Mario Todeschini/Njideka Akunyili Crosby/Collection of Caren Golden and Peter Herzberg)

Where Holton’s pictures emphasize the tight spaces of the Lams’ apartment, [Jessica Todd Harper](#)’s photos of her family and friends are roomier, reflecting a more affluent and less urban lifestyle. As in the photos of the Lams, children are often central to the compositions. The Philadelphia photographer herself, holding her infant son, stands at the center of the most striking image. The twosome are illuminated softly from the rear by sunlight through a bathroom window, yielding a vision of enchanted domesticity that Harper likens to Vermeer’s paintings.

Scenes of a mother or a grandmother with a child are also common in [Jess T. Dugan](#)’s photos of the nonbinary artist’s queer household. The series, begun in 2012, portrays the St. Louis artist and their partner, Dugan’s mother and her partner, and the younger couple’s daughter, Elinor, born in 2018. The pictures are warm and emotionally revealing, if occasionally guarded. In one shot, Dugan holds Elinor and gazes at the camera through a screen door that places an almost invisible barrier between home and the world.

Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery takes a different course. The eight artists in this eclectic and often moving exhibition depict people who are important — but to each other. That's a very different kind of community, but one that's just as powerful in its way.

Most of the contributors depict their families, and often themselves. But there are many kinds of kinship, as [Thomas Holton](#) demonstrates with a suite of crisp, intimate photographs that document a couple and their three children in New York City's Chinatown over nearly two decades. Holton is not related to the Lams, but 20 years of regular visits to a tiny apartment made him almost a member of the clan. "I have learned to love the Lams as much as my family," the photographer's statement acknowledges.

