



In their own words:
Madelynn Green

“
I’ve always been passionate about art, but I’m also passionate about politics. I try to explore both through the visual language of painting.”



‘Summer ‘97’ 2018
oil on canvas

© Madelynn Green

I wish I’d known more about the arts as a career

Deep down I always knew I wanted to be an artist but I needed to support myself, and art felt like a massive gamble, so for a year I worked with the government in New York City. I thought I was going to show up and change the world, but I was shocked by how little was accomplished.

Art is cultural diplomacy

You affect someone’s perspective by what they see and hear. Storytelling is a powerful tool: when people reveal parts of their story, it helps you understand and connect with them better. If we feel connected on a personal level, we’ll be stronger.

This is my own history on display

My family comes from the American South, and we would always go back to Mississippi for the holidays. There are references in the painting to the specific time and place - like the date on the tee shirt, and the can of *Off Spray* - a mosquito repellent, which tells you this is somewhere hot.

“

I was reflecting on my background, the past, my heritage and nationality. ”

You can use your artistic licence

There's a blanket in the background that in the original photo was grey, but I decided to make it red white and blue - so it's back in America, 4th of July - little clues.

My great-grandmother loved photography but never did it professionally

It's almost a collaborative piece: this is her image taken 24 years ago, and I'm reimagining it through my lens, working with an ancestor who I'm really close to.

I saw myself through her eyes, as an adult looking at a child

It gives you more perspective, thinking about growing up - what that looks like. It helped me to understand her, and feel closer, and also to understand myself, as it's a study of me as well, a self-portrait of me at a different stage.

The process was very personal

I don't think I'd have painted 'Summer '97' if I'd been back home, I wouldn't have had that homesickness. For those two weeks that it took me to paint I felt more connected to home. It was a really positive experience. I was reflecting on my background, the past, my heritage and nationality. It speaks to what art can do on a personal level.

A painting is a way of bringing a photo out of obscurity

We consume photos so rapidly. A painting of a photo brings unseen, private things to the fore.

I was surprised when 'Summer '97' was acquired by the Government Art Collection

I thought the Government Art Collection was only for British artists, or people of British descent, or artworks specifically about UK culture. Here's a scene celebrating independence from the UK: I thought, wrong subject! But it shows how the story of the UK is the story of a lot of places. I'm not from here, but my story is still valid, and contributes to the cultural fabric of this place, and that makes me feel welcome.

Document your life

A lot of people don't take photos, they move through life without recording. I'm confused by that - I think, 'Don't you want a memory?' Slow down and take some photos - your mum making food, your dad making food. In ten or twenty years, they'll be really special.

What now?

Looking back:

Round up your archive

Do you have photos of your own childhood?

If you do, are they framed and on display, shared across social media, or buried on an old phone? Who are the photographers in your family, and where do they store their pictures?

Do some digging.

Ask permission to make copies (there are free apps for scanning originals). Start to create a collection you can dip into.

Is there a photo of a younger you that grabs your attention?

Spend some time with it. You can work on screen, or ideally print a copy.

Slow looking:

What can you work out from the photo

Who else is in the photo?

Where are you? How can you tell?

When was it taken? How old do you reckon you are? What else is there that helps date it?

Why was it taken? Was it a special occasion?

What are you wearing? Can you remember those clothes, what they felt like?

Who took the photo, and why do you think they captured that exact moment?

Are you aware of the camera?

Are you smiling?

What does the photo reveal about your family, your culture, and your heritage?

Shared looking:

Try these with a partner, in person or across a screen.

Swap photos

Ask your partner to describe your photo to you as if you've never seen it. Are there words and details that surprise you?

Describe your own photo to your partner

Do this as accurately as you can, as if you were a radio journalist. Your partner can close their eyes and try to imagine it, or they can draw from what you say.

Once you're done, compare notes/drawings

Did your partner imagine what you intended? Does their drawing resemble the photo, and does it matter if not?

Re-imagining through your own lens

If 'Summer '97' inspires you to create your own artwork based on your own photo - What (if anything) might you change?

Are there themes you would like to turn up the volume on? Details you'd like to fade out?

Use your artistic licence.

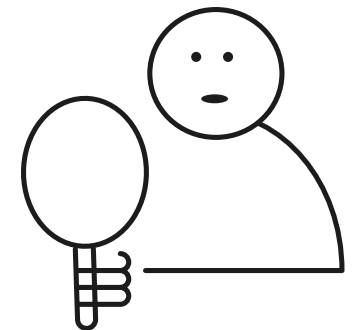
Be your own muse

Write to your younger self: what do you wish you could tell them?

Write in the voice of younger you.

Write as if you're the photo-taker.

Freewrite.



No archive?

If you don't have access to your own photos, use images from popular culture. Research what was happening in the world around you when you were 7 years old. Browse magazines from that time, find the TV programmes you were watching.

Find an image that speaks to you.

British artist Lorna Ryan uses this technique. Here's her painting of Nichelle Nichols (b, 1932) actor, singer and voice artist.

Ryan writes:

Here she plays Lieutenant Uhura, translator and Communications Officer in the original 1960's US television series, 'Star Trek'.



'Lieutenant Uhura' by Lorna Ryan

© Lorna Ryan

As a child I thought she was amazing! It was so inspiring to see a black woman playing a positive role, she looked great too! The first screened interracial kiss was between Uhura and Captain Kirk in 1968.

Looking forward

Don't you want a memory?

Archiving for the future

Whether it's documenting your home during lockdown, taking one photo of the same subject every year for the rest of your life, or filming one single second a day - here are some projects to inspire you.

- "There are so many tiny, beautiful, funny, tragic moments in your life - how are you going to remember them all?" Cesar Kuriyama

This TED talk is about taking one second of film every day

- A photographer takes a portrait of his wife and her sisters every year for forty years. We are family: Nicholas Nixon's 40 years photographing the Brown sisters

- Depicting our lockdown lives - The Museum of the Home is collecting photographs that depict our home lives during lockdown. Take a look at what they have been given

What would you donate? Why?

What next?

Digital and physical archive, Black In The Day (Twitter/Instagram: @blkintheday) documents Black British culture through the everyday moments and rituals depicted in photos donated since 2016.

I love this book about how to look at a painting (Madelynn Green recommends)

Looking at Pictures by Susan Woodford

