

SOPHIE BARBER: HOW MUCH LOVE CAN A LOVE BIRD LOVE, CAN A LOVE BIRD LOVE A LOVE BIRD

3 September–2 October 2021



Sophie Barber, *Mohamed Bourouissa holds a Love Bird*, 2021 © Sophie Barber

Alison Jacques is delighted to present 'How much love can a love bird love, can a love bird love a love bird', a solo exhibition of new paintings by Sophie Barber (b. 1996, St Leonards-on-Sea, UK) and the British artist's inaugural show at the gallery.

Sophie Barber's work is less concerned with the *practice* of painting than the *process* that brings it to life: the way in which certain images appeal to us, press into us and, ultimately, become part of our visual language. From the standpoint of subject matter, Barber's paintings are decidedly incongruous. A-list celebrities brush shoulders with pastoral scenes and varicoloured birds of paradise; fragmentary allusions to the artist's coastal hometown are brought in line with rough-hewn replications of works from art history. Aside from the doughy materiality through which these works are brought into being, the sole constant amongst Barber's paintings is Barber herself, at the centre of the flow as the many images of the world wash over her.

When discussing her work, Barber uses her own organisational logic. The paintings are, where appropriate, *TV-size*, *iPad-size*, *iPhone-size*. This technologically informed shorthand obviates the need for a precision otherwise uncommon to Barber's paintings, but it also tallies with the provenance of much of her material.

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Whether singers or songbirds, artists or artworks, these multiform images are scraped from laptops, phones and tablets, from fugitive screens seen in the corner of an eye. Kendrick Lamar is lifted from an Annie Liebowitz portrait shot in 2018; a cerulean-eyed blackbird migrates from a YouTube video documenting an intrepid group of twitchers. 'It's like having a conversation with people', Barber says of these duplications, these fond dedications, 'images as people'.

As such, the assured material presence of Barber's work makes heavy and felt a visual experience of the world that is, by design, fleeting. Wrapped in thick bundles; drooping from walls; built up from oil, crayon and the occasional footprint, these paintings bring visibility and physicality to the way in which images glide over us online, not leaving the perfect imprint of their likeness but the hazy memory of their form. 'It's not about the image being right', Barber says of her portrait of Justin and Hailey Bieber, who seemingly coalesce in a garden of uneven greens, 'it's about how you remember it'. In this, Barber's artistic impulse could be read as a need to pull images back from the brink: to liberate them from the loose vagueness of memory and paint them into the world once more.

And just as memory is fallible, liable to twist and turn and fold in on itself, so too are Barber's painterly dedications defined by their instinctive yet calculated imperfection. Brazen brush marks push up at edges; drooping surfaces twist against forms; bright declaratives play associative games with their famed subjects. ('KENDRICK LOVES CAMBER SANDS'; 'JUSTIN LOVES GARDENERS' WORLD'.) Through this uniformity of painterly application, Barber not only speaks to the imprecision of recall but enacts a material flattening of our visual world. Celebrities are stripped of social status, reduced to the level of blackbirds and toucans and forced to survive as images alone. 'High' and 'low' culture are treated with the same brush. In this, Barber enacts an egalitarian approach to image selection; a democracy of depiction seen through layer on layer of heavily worked paint.

Barber's chosen title, 'How much love can a love bird love, can a love bird love a love bird', began life as an otherwise innocuous entry in the artist's search history. (Contrary to popular belief, lovebird parrots do not die when separated, although the strength of their connection is inspiring.) But in its alliterative repetition, the title rhythmically gestures to the unseen thread that binds each of Barber's subjects. Beneath the paint and presence, this is an exhibition about affection, attraction, memory, love; the way in which images attach themselves to us, and we to them, for reasons more profound and important than subject matter alone. 'To do this', Barber says of her practice and painting more broadly, although she could be speaking of life itself, 'there has to be a level of obsession with an image. You have to be *obsessed*.'

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Forthcoming exhibition:
Lenore Tawney Part One, 11 October–6 November 2021