

12 June 2023

Press release

## Real Families: Stories of Change

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

6 October 2023 - 7 January 2024



Scientific and social advances over the past 50 years have brought significant change to how families are created and structured. This autumn, the Fitzwilliam Museum will present *Real Families: Stories of Change* (6 October 2023 - 7 January 2024), a major exhibition exploring the intricacies of modern family relationships, as seen through the eyes of artists. Featuring over 120 artworks spanning painting, photography, sculpture, film and installation, this exhibition will reveal how artists including Alice Neel, Chantal Joffe, Sunil Gupta, Donald Rodney, Nan Goldin, Paula Rego and Lucian Freud have represented different facets of family life.

Developed in collaboration with the world-leading Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge, this unique exhibition will bring together artworks which reveal how the joys, tensions and transitions in families have little to do with conforming to traditional structures, but instead arise from relationships within families, and with the outside world. Featuring key works from the University of Cambridge museums collections as well as significant loans from institutions in the UK and internationally, *Real Families* will focus primarily on artworks from the past five decades, but will also feature historic works by artists including Joshua Reynolds, Nicolas Poussin and Albrecht Dürer, to reveal the changing ways in which family life has been depicted throughout art history.

## **What is a Family?**

*Real Families: Stories of Change* will invite us to consider what makes a family today. Underpinned by the Centre's pioneering research within this area, the exhibition highlights artists who portray new forms of family, including those formed by assisted reproduction, single parents by choice, and families with LGBTQ+ parents. Highlights will include Aliza Nisenbaum's portrait *Susan, Aarti, Keerthana and Princess, Sunday in Brooklyn* 2018 depicting a lesbian couple and their children, as well as JJ Levine's photographs chronicling the different stages of a trans-man's pregnancy and parenthood. This section of the exhibition will also explore living without children, whether by choice or not, represented in works by Sophie Calle, Miriam Schaer and Elina Brotherus, as well as the idea of a chosen family, based on mutual support rather than biological or legal ties, in the photography of Sunil Gupta.

## **Family Transitions**

*Real Families* will continue by examining the family life-cycle, considering the ways in which different relationships develop over time. Bringing together works by artists such as Joy Labrinjo, Nan Goldin and Tracey Emin, the exhibition will reflect on the changing role of parents, siblings and grandparents over the course of our lives. Beginning with artists' representations of parenthood from early infancy onwards, such as Alice Neel's portrait of her daughter-in-law and infant granddaughter, *Nancy and Olivia* 1967, as well as photographs from Zun Lee's series *Father Figure* 2011-2018, this section will culminate with a selection of moving portraits by artists of their ageing parents, including Celia Paul's painting *My Mother with a Rose*, 2006, and Lucian Freud's *The Painter's Mother Resting*, 1975-76.

## **Family Dynamics**

While families are often portrayed as extremely happy or deeply dysfunctional, the reality usually lies somewhere between the two. The exhibition will explore how artists are uniquely placed to represent emotional bonds and tensions between family members, exploring feelings of acceptance, rejection, comfort, and conflict, as well as wider social and cultural influences on family relationships. This includes photographs from Jim Goldberg's *Rich and Poor* 1977-1985 series, speaking not only of the devastating impact of social inequality on family life, but also of resilience in the face of adversity; as well as Paula Rego's subversive painting *Split* 2017, which looks at a dysfunctional family alliance and the divides this can create.

## **Family Legacies**

The final part of the exhibition will explore the transmission of family from one generation to the next through genetic inheritance, social and cultural practices, language, and objects. Within this section, Donald Rodney's photograph *In the House of My Father* 1996-7, contemplates hereditary disease, while Cathy Wilkes's powerful installation *Untitled (Possil, At Last)* 2013 considers the way poverty and mental health problems can be passed down through generations. Artworks by Zineb Sidera and Hardeep Pandhal address the challenges faced by families affected by migration, and what happens when families are separated by linguistic divides.

*Real Families: Stories of Change* will conclude with a spotlight on British artist Chantal Joffe, whose works often focus on her own family. Bringing together ten paintings made over the past twenty years, Joffe's captivating depictions of her family encapsulate the complexities and tensions, and comfort and joy, that family relationships can bring.

**Susan Golombok, curator of Real Families: Stories of Change and Professor Emerita of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge, said:** “Working with the Fitzwilliam Museum on this exhibition has been an immensely enriching and enlightening experience for the Centre for Family Research. We have learned so much from the outstanding team at the museum, not only about communicating the findings of our research through art, but also about the insights into family relationships that artists offer. In addition to the exhibition itself, it has sparked new conversations and collaborations between the museum and the Centre that will continue well beyond the life of the exhibition.”

**Luke Syson, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, said:** “The artworks presented within this exhibition offer compelling stories of how artists have responded to their own family experiences and sensitively recorded those of others for generations. This unique collaboration with the Centre for Family Research has demonstrated how many of the Centre’s discoveries over the past 50 years have simultaneously been interpreted by artists. Showcasing art as a way of evidencing the Centre’s groundbreaking research has offered an exciting new model for the Fitzwilliam, and offers a platform for future collaborative work within our university museum.”

*Real Families: Stories of Change* is curated by Susan Golombok, Professor Emerita of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge. The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue including new texts by Mary Beard, Rebecca Birrell, Dorothy Byrne, Pasco Fearon, Susan Golombok, Alex Graham, Katy Hessel, Claire Hughes, Olivia Laing, Jackie Kay, Olivia Laing, Rosie Millard and Andrew Solomon.

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6 October 2023 - 7 January 2024 | Admission Free

Follow updates via #RealFamilies on Twitter @FitzMuseum\_UK, Instagram @fitzmuseum\_uk & Facebook @fitzwilliammuseum and sign up to our e-news.

**NOTES TO EDITORS**

**The Fitzwilliam Museum**

Founded in 1816, the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation funded programme. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and

other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

[www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)

### **The Centre for Family Research**

The Centre for Family Research is a multidisciplinary research institution within the Department of Psychology at the University of Cambridge. The Centre has undertaken groundbreaking and influential research since the 1960s, and has an international reputation for its investigations of families and children.

<https://www.cfr.cam.ac.uk/>

### **Susan Golombok**

Susan Golombok is Professor Emerita of Family Research and former Director of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge. She has pioneered research on modern families, including families created by assisted reproductive technologies such as IVF, donor insemination, egg donation and surrogacy, as well as families with same-sex parents, transgender parents, and single parents by choice. Her research challenges commonly held assumptions about these families and has contributed to policy and legislation on the family nationally and internationally. Her most recent book *We Are Family* shows that what matters most for children is the quality of family relationships rather than the structure of the family in which they grow up.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00; CLOSED: 24 - 26 & 31 December, 1 & 2 January, Good Friday.

Images: Chantal Joffe, *Self-Portrait Combing Esme's Hair*, 2009, oil on canvas © Chantal Joffe. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

Alice Neel, *The De Vegh Twins* 1975 © The Estate of Alice Neel, Courtesy The Estate of Alice Neel and David Zwirner, photo by Malcom Varon