

## **Julie Fragar: Leviathan Stirs**

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**Julie Fragar is known for her sumptuous paint and partially-autobiographical work, but her latest series has taken this into a whole other place: her past. Or, more accurately, her history. Jonathan McBurnie gets out the family tree.**

Julie Fragar's work has always had an autobiographical element to it. Working from snapshots, and occasionally from staged photographs, her work often reminds us of our own quiet lives; a poolside scene, a walk in the park, an embrace. Fragar routinely commentates these images of her own life with sly references to art (an open Marlene Dumas book, or a portrait of Gustave Courbet), or with her text works, which often give the images a disquieting tension, without fully intruding. Her latest series is no exception, with the devastatingly-titled *Father Takes Control, Mother Goes Mad*.

This dramatic text work prefaces the amazing story of Fragar's ancestor, Antonio, and his perilous journey from the Azores to Australia, which has formed the basis of the series. The story marks a dramatic shift from the calm, introspect moments of the artist's earlier work into a vanished nautical world of dangers, both physical and spiritual, a world of metaphor.

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The story has been bubbling away in Fragar's mind for some time, with various members of her family researching Antonio's life from the few surviving documents and word of mouth reports. Even now, the narrative is incomplete, but what is known is this: to avoid conscription, Antonio's father put him on a whaling vessel at age 12. The whaling vessel was shipwrecked, and Antonio survived, stranded on an island with the other survivors. If that wasn't enough Antonio fled the island for fear of cannibalism, assisted by missionaries, eventually making his way to Australia. This is all documented, and it is also known that Antonio's family never heard from him again.





Fragar's latest work is a big departure from her recent exhibition, *Marathon Boxing and Dog Fights*, which was a heavy, personal affair. Comprising of visceral, confronting paintings, the exhibition was a physical evolution of the way the artist paints. A sinewy materiality replaced the creamy sensuality of previous work, suggesting organic matter. 'That show was pretty difficult to produce. It had to be done, cathartically at least, and they are some pretty powerful works as a result. But yeah, I made a conscious decision to go elsewhere for a while', says Fragar.

Deftly executed, the exhibition of dogfights, bleak self-portraits and images of meat exposed raw, sore emotions of the artist's personal life. However, in her latest work, Fragar has clearly made some progress, drawing us in with storytelling, rather than buffeting us with the same raging catharsis. The meaty, mutating paint is still there, but now it is weaving a story, rather than a bandage.

Fragar still refers to autobiography, but now, through Antonio, with the safety of distance. Many of the artist's friends and family have appeared in her work sporadically, which has sometimes caused problems. 'I had bad experiences of painting people close to me who were not impressed. The problem lies in exactly what you are saying, that human subjects necessarily become something else in painting; this isn't always comfortable for people', explains Fragar.

Cautious of such difficulties, Fragar's latest works have been made with her son Hugo, who, at the same age as Antonio upon embarking upon his journey, is an appropriate stand-in. Hugo's presence in the paintings works as a link between Antonio and Fragar, extending upon the parts of the narrative that are documented. Hugo's resemblance to the artist is striking, and blurs the distinction between reality and fiction, a parallel to Antonio's fragmented story.

Tribal cannibalism was a highly ritualistic practice which incorporated elements of taboo, eroticism and spirituality

Antonio, stranded on an island, and fearing cannibalism, is a haunting aspect of Fragar's family history, but at the same time is fascinating fodder for artistic fancy. Tribal cannibalism was a highly ritualistic practice which incorporated elements of taboo, eroticism and spirituality. Antonio's escape, aided by missionaries, forms an opposition to this, lending the series a sense of allegory. The narrative sets up a tension between the eroticism of the flesh, inseparable from death and taboo, and then a kind of salvation, aided by a culture in which cannibalism is presumably very much a taboo. Unwittingly, we become entangled in these life and death scenarios.





Fragar's paintings incorporate an ambiguous metaphysical element into the narrative. In the work *Penned Like Chickens, Eaten Like Chickens* stand two figures, one of whom partially obscured by the frantic shapes of chickens flapping about. Both figures have a striking resemblance to Fragar herself. This ambiguity makes the series more complex. Is Fragar the cannibal? Is her son, Hugo? If so, the eating of the ancestor becomes a symbol of regeneration, as well as artistic appropriation; Fragar is cannibalizing Antonio's story in the name of art. 'I am a cannibal, it's true, and you are too. Eating up anything at all for the work! In this painting, Hugo is superimposed on the head of a Fijian Cannibal chief'. The drama of the story is almost too astounding to be made up. 'The chickens, or the crew, are fighting for their lives and Antonio bears the burden of watching his friends die'.

And how does Hugo feel about standing in for Antonio? 'He is interested in art himself and so participates in a sort of for-the-cause way. He is a good sport about it and I think gets some sense of pride when the works are hanging somewhere, replies Fragar. 'I always ask him if it's okay. I paint him in such and such a way before I do it and sometimes I use my daughter too and sometimes they get a cut of the commission which helps their enthusiasm'.

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Fragar's painting *The Whaling* displays the artist's sometime propensity to draw from a jumble of references, reconfiguring images almost as a collage of separate elements. The painting is so visually dense that it becomes hard to tell the different forms apart. It almost appears as if the whole landscape is made of whale flesh, and the figures are mining it. A figure in the bottom left corner resembles the artist, modelled by one of the artist's cousins. 'She's the stand-in for Antonio's mother,' explains Fragar.





‘In this painting, Antonio is falling over and skidding in all the whale flesh and metaphorically in the experience of being there. The whole scene is spilling over with whaling and whale flesh. Can you imagine being 12 years old and working with men who were catching and butchering whales?’ Fragar asks. It is almost impossible to imagine. ‘This went on for years of Antonio's life! If you look closely you will see Antonio skidding amongst the whale flesh but also fighting with the memory of his mother, who I imagine he wished would take him home,’ Fragar explains. Once again, memory is the thread that binds the scant fabric of (documented) history to Fragar’s familial recollections and the narrative inventions made to ‘finish’ the story.

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While many of Fragar’s paintings have been made using personal photographs, such overlaying or cutting and re-collaging of imagery, is not used as a distancing tool. ‘I see it as the reverse. By combining images and changing them, I am shaping them to look more like the way I imagine things, mixed up and multi-faceted,’ Fragar explains. ‘If I think about it, I've always worked liked this, even in the way I make and hang shows; it's never about ten individual paintings, it's about all of them together’, says Fragar.

Fragar does not appear once throughout the work, as such. With many of the paintings being made of collided images, their snatches and passages hint at possible incidents, and Fragar’s presence— or, rather, Antonio’s presence— permeates the work. By filling out the fragmented narrative of her forbear, Fragar not only examines a fascinating part of her past, but engages with the metaphysics of art making and history. By fleshing out and then interpreting and expanding upon Antonio’s story, the core of portraiture and self-portraiture is exposed for the half-truth, the construct, that is has always been.

***-Jonathan McBurnie, Sneaky Arts Editor***

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Boy is conscripted at the  
age of 12. Mother bawls.  
Father takes control and  
sends boy to Australia on  
whaling ship instead.  
Ten years later the father  
wakes up to the fact that  
the boy is gone forever.  
The father goes mad.  
Imagines there must have  
been other options.  
Mother consoles the  
father though she hates  
him for what he has done.



