

Fiona and Sidney Myer Gallery

Everyday Raptures and Repairs

wani toaishara discusses his work with curator David Sequeira

DS Can you tell me about the main themes of this new body of work.

wt The main themes of this work are care, survival and the everyday as a site of rapture. I am interested in how Black people compose themselves in the in-between moments: in kitchens, backyards, barbershops, on couches after long shifts, in the soft chaos of family. These are not grand scenes but accumulations of gestures that, together, form a grammar of staying alive.

I think of the portraits as small devotions. Each sitter meets the camera with a particular way of holding themselves, sometimes defiant, sometimes vulnerable, sometimes tired and radiant at once. The work circles questions of who gets to rest, who gets to be seen as beautiful, and how we might image Black life beyond spectacle and beyond the narrow scripts of pain. It is an ongoing attempt to visualise Black rapture not as escape from the world, but as something made *inside* it.

DS How does this differ from your previous works?

wt In *a most beautiful experiment*, I was responding directly to Jean Depara's photographs of Kinshasa's nightlife, using film and performance to blend past and present in a kind of temporal collapse. That work operated through movement, rhythm and the collective energy of the dance floor as a stage for freedom-making. It was bodies in motion and a deliberately cinematic sense of time.

Everyday Raptures and Repairs is slower and more interior. Where *a most beautiful experiment* leans into the urban environment as a stage and foregrounds dance as an agent of self-possession, this new work lingers in stillness and the charged quiet of the posture. It is less about the event and more about the aftermath; less about the collective scene and more about the way collectivity lives inside individual bodies. It feels closer to the family album than to the nightclub, even as it remains grounded in an understanding of Black life as inherently political and magnificent.

DS Can you talk about the role of portraiture in your practice.

wt Portraiture, for me, is a site of communion — a meeting between gazes that makes visible the unseen labor of existence. It is an act of care, a method of witnessing that affirms presence. To make a portrait is not just to depict but to listen, to hold space, and to imagine another way of being seen beyond domination. It matters because Black people are constantly asked to perform visibility while being denied recognition. Portraiture, in my practice, becomes an archive of feeling and a gesture against erasure.

I came to portraiture through family albums and vernacular images, those photographs that were never meant for galleries, but for living rooms, wallets, and wardrobe mirrors. I was compelled by the way they held entire lineages in a single frame: the way a pose, an outfit, a wall, a plastic chair could speak to histories of migration, precarity, joy, and stubborn survival. Portraiture became, for me, a way of making my own visual mythology, one that honours the Black body and experience in all its complexity.

In my practice, portraiture is a meeting place. It is less about 'capturing' likeness and more about building a temporary world with the sitter. I think of each portrait as a collaboration in which my role is to hold space, listen, and frame the sitter in a way that recognises their dignity, humour, fatigue, sensuality, or refusal, whatever is present that day. In an Afrophobic world that routinely distorts, exploits or erases Black presence, portraiture matters because it can act as an assertion: *we are here, worthy, still*.

DS How do you understand 'Blackness'?

wt Blackness, to me, is not a category but a cosmos. It is both the wound and the balm, something fugitive yet generative, a set of practices that refuse enclosure. In my work, Blackness appears as light breaking

through shadow, as the texture of skin and silence, as movement and pause. It's expressed through rhythm, repetition, and the refusal to be contained within the colonial frame. It's always becoming, always escaping.

In the work, Blackness manifests in the faces and bodies, of course, but also in the textures, colours and temporalities that structure the images. It appears in the use of light and shadow, in the refusal to flatten people into stereotypes, in the way the portraits oscillate between vulnerability and opacity. I am interested in a Black gaze that challenges dominant representations, one that insists on presenting Black life as it is always already: abundant, complex, contradictory and ongoing

DS Can you talk about the notion of diaspora in your work

wt My practice is shaped by dislocation: I am Congolese, with histories that move through D.R. Congo, New Zealand, and so-called Australia, always negotiating the realities of Indigeneity, migration and statelessness. Diaspora, for me, is not just about movement across borders; it is also about the psychic and emotional distances we travel between languages, customs, expectations and memories.

In *Everyday Raptures and Repairs*, diaspora appears in the details: a haircut that references one place, a piece of jewelry from another, an accent held in the mouth, a particular fabric, the way someone sits in a room they do not quite own. I am drawn to how photography can hold these layered locations at once, how a single portrait can contain the weight of several geographies and the longing for a home that might never have been stable to begin with. Diaspora here is both wound and resource; it is something that hurts and something that teaches us how to care for each other across distance. I'm concerned with how photography can hold these migrations, not geographically, but emotionally and how repair might happen across those distances.

DS What is about photography that interests you?

wt Photography appeals to me because it sits between evidence and imagination. It is often treated as proof, a record that something happened, that someone stood there at a particular time, but in practice it is full of omissions, desires and projections. That instability interests me. It gives me room to work between documentary and conceptual modes, between the real and the speculative.

What photography makes available is a way of freezing gestures that would otherwise vanish: a glance, the way a hand rests on a shoulder, the slight slouch of someone finally relaxing. It enables me to take seriously the emotional life of my sitters and to build an ever-expanding archive of Black presence that is not confined to trauma or abstraction. Photography also allows me to think with time—to stretch it, layer it, and, as in a *most beautiful experiment*, collapse past and present into a single image or sequence.

DS What is the relationship between photography and performance in your practice?

wt My photographic and performance practices are two faces of the same ritual. Performance generates the gesture; photography preserves the vibration. The body rehearses freedom, and the camera remembers it. Performance gives the photograph its soul, and the photograph gives the performance its afterlife.

Across my practice, photography, film, installation and performance feed each other. Performance is where the body tests new ways of being; it is where we rehearse futures and embody memories we might not yet have language for. Photography and moving image step in to hold those gestures, to give them an afterlife and a form that can be revisited, re-read, and re-felt.

The relationship is reciprocal: performance energises the images, while the images inform how I choreograph bodies in space. In a *most beautiful experiment*, the urban environment became a stage for transformative acts of freedom-making; *Everyday Raptures and Repairs* brings that same performative awareness into more intimate spaces, where simply sitting for a portrait can be a radical act of self-possession. Together, photography and performance allow me to explore loss, connection, spirit, agency and reciprocity in ways that are both embodied and visual, both fleeting and archival.