

ART

How Do You a Paint Portraiture Without a Portrait?

By negating the figure, Fallah expands the limits of portraiture to make space for multiple interpretations.

Caroline Liou October 14, 2020



Amir H. Fallah, "Remember My Child, Nowhere Is Safe" (2020), acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Shulamit Nazarian)

LOS ANGELES — What does it mean to paint portraiture without a portrait? Though [Amir H. Fallah](#) has spent his career grappling with this very question, his newest series — now on view in the show-stopping exhibition [Remember My Child](#) at Shulamit Nazarian — represents a departure from his previous work. Whereas Fallah has often obscured his subjects' faces in his portraits, playing around with legibility, his new body of work takes a step further and removes the figure entirely.

A sumptuous mix of Dutch florals, children's book illustrations and cartoons, Persian miniatures, photorealistic snapshots, and various textile and decorative motifs, the paintings meld together disparate references so seamlessly that they seem to feature no

single subject nor style — not even a hint at a compositional or visual hierarchy.

By negating the figure, Fallah expands the limits of portraiture to make space for multiple interpretations, moving away from essentializing the subject to a single image. Here, decorative motifs are no longer relegated to the margins of the



Amir H. Fallah, "I Got So High To Fall So Far" (2020), acrylic and collage on canvas, 72 x 72 inches

canvas and are instead front and center, both formally and conceptually, as the core of his content. Questions circle around the construction of the self: How is identity formed? How do you become a person? What influences do you absorb, what lessons do you take away? How do you define personhood outside the confines of one's image?



Amir H. Fallah, "Science is the Antidote, Superstition is the Disease" (2020), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 240 inches

These are questions that cannot be easily answered, but ones Fallah nevertheless poses and tries his best to answer as a father. The title of the exhibition, *Remember My Child*, is taken from messages he relays to his five-year-old son, which are woven into the rich tapestry of his paintings: "Remember My Child / Nowhere Is Safe," "Science Is The Antidote / Superstition Is The Disease," "Empathy / Even For Those Who Do Not Speak," "They Will Smile / To Your Face."



Amir H. Fallah, "They Will Smile to Your Face" (2020), acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72 inches

In knowing who they are for, the paintings feel intensely personal, and almost intrusive. They reveal snippets of family life — books that Fallah and his child must have pored over, favorite movies and music, cultural traditions and family legacies, landmarks around the city (spotted: Phoenix Bakery in Chinatown) — that must hold a special importance for the two. Fallah has so clearly labored over these paintings, not just as works of art, but also as a diary, as a record of the hopes and dreams he has for his child's future, and as an ode to their relationship.

[Remember My Child](#) continues at *Shulamit Nazarian* (616 N La Brea Ave, Hancock Park, Los Angeles) through October 31.)