



ERICA D'ALI
APPARITIONS

23 JAN 23 – 14 FEB 2026

Exhibition Essay

Genevieve Felix Reynolds

Perhaps an angel looks like everything
We have forgotten, I mean forgotten.
Things that don't seem familiar when
We meet them again, lost beyond telling.

Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, John Ashbery

Erica D'Ali's paintings are the ghosts of medieval masterpieces. On first glance, her work reveals subtleties of gesture and colour in fields of white and cream cotton. When viewed from a distance, Western pictorial traditions are recognisable (arches, vaults, angels and saints) but up close, these dissolve into delicate yet decisive painterly gestures. References to Italian Late Medieval and High Renaissance painters, including Giotto, Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca, waver in and out of recognition.

For many Australians, cultural inheritance is shaped as much by absence as by familiarity. For the Italian diaspora, tradition and history are ever renegotiated and evolving, and in the absence of public monuments or institutional reinforcement, cultural memory is often carried through domestic experiences: textiles, kitchens, family photographs, and routines of care, often passed down via women.

In the context of migration, what is fragmented, unknown, or reconstructed does not diminish lineage or authenticity, but instead creates space for reinterpretation and invention, evidenced throughout D'Ali's practice. Patterned motifs are reminiscent of table settings or delicatessen paper, and lacework may be made sculptural, representing memory and tradition while linking the dense, distant and patriarchal art history of Italy to the mundane, familiar, loving

and maternal. One could argue that this is an attempt to unite the two registers - both high and low art, craft and culture - bringing D'Ali's experience as a diasporic woman into dialogue with a hazily remembered past, pieced together through photos, cathedrals and art history.

For D'Ali, when working from photographs, historical fidelity is besides the point. To some extent, images, through printing, pixelation, scale, and memory, alter and degrade representations of art. Like most contemporary practitioners, reproductions are essential to D'Ali's encounters with art history. Reduction and distortion become productive constraints, leaving room for new subjective interpretations and gestures. Like history itself, what is withheld is as significant as what is presented.

The idea of reproduction is also structural: paintings are built from small sections and incremental gestures that accumulate across a surface via paint transfer techniques. In works such as *Three Blue Skies* (2025) and *Angel's Arch* (2025), composition emerges through direct repetition or slight variation. Individual elements remain visible and scarce, as though the canvases are still imbued with potential for further, perhaps infinite, additions. Unlike the classical paintings from which they borrow, this method of disciplined restraint resists spectacle and monumentality. Elements operate closer to the size of reproductions commonly viewed in the 21st century, on a page or a screen. Quietness, accumulation, and repetition remind us of how images circulate and persist today.

Curtain Up (2025) presents two angels united within a roughly hewn proscenium. Within this framing device the thespian pair mirror one another through form and colour; a tongue in cheek proclamation of the monoprinting process that underpins their making. Angels are agents of revelation, but these figures are also performers in front of an audience, ready to entertain as they draw back curtains of paint. From the threshold of representation, they invite us: watch, look. As their viewers, we have two choices. We can look past the figures, to the cloth and timber structure beyond, or we can follow the gestures of paint. In each angel's hand, a fine painted line returns the eye to the edges of the work, underscoring the frame-curtain as the conceptual key to the composition. The boundaries and structure of the canvas are the mechanisms that produce the scene. Painting is material performance; the medium is the message.

Transparency is crucial. Timber stretcher bars are purposeful additions to these compositions, materially insistent, often window-like and architectural. Structure, visible through the light touch of paint and delicate stretched cotton, is unveiled. Through exposure, gaps and

the risk of incompleteness, the work resists closure and remains responsive. In this sense, visual permeability is also vulnerability.

This vulnerability is also embedded in D'Ali's technical process. Monoprinting begins with transfer: a painting on glass is impressed, irreversibly, into cloth via contact. The authority and confidence of the traditional brushstroke is replaced by friction, chance, and ambiguity. As monoprinted images are not directly applied, they cannot be fully planned, and results may be surprising. Images are formed through subtraction as much as addition, that is, through loss as much as presence. Rather than stabilising the image, the process allows transfer, erosion, and alteration to remain visible, treating cultural inheritance as something ongoing, reinterpreted and continually reformed.

At great geographical distance from Italy, and in the present tense, history is encountered through layers of translation. In *Apparitions*, these constraints are richly generative. Through repetition and residue, the past continues to be reworked as a site of new knowledge.

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