

I spoke to Charlotte Keates about her travels, rituals, haikus and other inspirations for her dreamlike architectural paintings in the exhibition *A Constant hum* at Arusha Gallery. As a segue into our conversation, we started chatting about our individual practices as a painter and curator/writer, exploring some interesting overlaps in our experiences.

- Sonja Teszler

Sonja Teszler : Every artist feels differently about the involvement of the curator, but what's your take on other people arranging your work?

Charlotte Keates: For me, working with a curator definitely helps if it's a collaborative and respectful process. I often feel like my paintings morph into these bizarre objects when they get framed and hung in a pristine gallery space, as opposed to when I'm working on them in the studio. A pair of objective eyes that sees them differently in that space can be very useful.

ST: I think I know exactly what you mean. With writing, where language and the given text is like your baby and you get completely consumed by it as you're working on it to the point that you're almost incapable of stepping away from it. You don't see it clearly as an external object in the world. That's why editors or curators are crucial in a creative process - to help 'format' your art for the outside world.

CK: Yes, and I like this parallel between creating art and the art of language because these two realms have been interconnected within the works for *A Constant Hum*, which was inspired by memories of architectural spaces during my travels from Singapore through Indonesia to Japan. I was strongly influenced both visually and conceptually by haikus for these paintings and used fragments of them for some of my titles as well, such as *Where the Peach Blossoms Light the Path Beneath* (2019) or *Night Deepens with the Sound of a Calling Deer* (2019). The title for the exhibition is taken from a quote 'memories are like a constant hum in our mind', which I think is a really beautiful way of thinking about our own memories.

ST: That's very interesting. I love reading haikus and found them to be extremely helpful when struggling with anxiety over the pandemic. They carry a quiet yet profound sense of viscerality and the sublime, which I can definitely also recognise in the atmosphere of your paintings...

CK: I'm happy to hear if they achieve that effect because I think the visceral aspect of haikus inspires me a lot. I love the idea of seeing words as forms and attaching them to paintings. During the making of these paintings, I would hold some words or parts from haikus in my mind to channel them onto the panel as a kind of ritual.

ST: Are these sensory ways of working from memory rather than concrete sources new for you?

CK: It differs from how I made work previously, using architectural blueprints or old Kodachrome slides as reference material ... but I do find with photos that I become too wrapped up in the idea of trying to portray the physical place instead of emulating the idea, feeling and experience of a space. I prefer working very intuitively and instinctively, for me to react to how the physicality of paint is working. A lot of it all becomes about your own mental state, feelings, what's going on in my own world. With the paintings in *A Constant hum*, it was mostly my imagination and sensory world in my mind that was guiding me.

ST: You mention rituals which seem to have had a particular influence on your paintings for *A Constant Hum*. Is this something you've discovered during this recent trip?

CK: Yes, my time in Japan had a major influence on how I perceive rituals in both my life and in my work. It felt like rituality blended everyday life there, and everything was charged with a sense of purpose. It made me think a lot about the difference between routine and ritual, and I've found that it lies in the perception of that routine and

making it meaningful and magical for yourself. The *Rituals* series of drawings in the exhibition are a part of my personal ritual to create a drawing every single day. But these drawings would never really lead to a painting - they are not a means to an end - they feel as if they do not need to be an extended idea, as if they are resolved within a drawing and there is something quite wonderful about the immediacy and simplicity of a drawing.

ST: Has Japan inspired you in any other ways than haikus and rituals? I'm thinking primarily of architecture, given that architectural drawings and design has been such a prevalent theme in your practice.

CK: Japanese design is inspired by the seasons and the senses and I loved the idea that I could subtly use this treatment within my works through a seasonal colour palette that isn't too literal at the same time. Working from memory and incorporating words from haiku poetry are part of the same process of focusing on the senses, wanting to maybe see if I can hold the idea of that particular smell, or taste or sound whilst I painted the piece. I'm curious to find out if a painting can affect different senses, other than just a visual in their viewer.

ST: Can you talk about what other aspects of architecture interest you more generally, and how do you view the relationship between humans and architecture?

CK: I think I've always been so drawn to architecture, geometry, form, shape, line. There is something so beautiful about the way all of these elements can work together to make up a structural space, but when isolated and removed or considered on their own - they are just sort of forms in their own right. I like to consider the ergonomics of a space, how we decide to place objects in our home or interior, and how we choose to lay out and display it all. I think often furniture can look like it's in conversation: facing each other as if two people have just pulled up a seat and turned to each other engaging in a long chat etc. I quite like the idea that our furniture and our homes represent our inner mental state, and this can be subtly alluded to with the placement of objects. The architectural spaces I depict are entirely unfeasible yet initially convince the viewer. I hope for the spaces to feel warm and inviting so the viewer is drawn in and becomes the inhabitant, but also upon further looking all is not as it first may seem.

ST: The way you're describing architecture really highlights the relationship between external space and an inner state of mind or subjectivity that is also present in your paintings.

CK: Yes, I want there to feel this sort of push and pull between the two, while working together in harmony and convincingly. I'm thinking about the buildings that we choose to use for ourselves as almost representing our own mentality: how we organise thoughts, file away memories and store information. The external always fighting its way in.

ST: ...which is also apparent in how you portray nature and the outside world constantly penetrating and being a part of the interior, the man-made world. Could you talk about how you're bringing these two realms together?

CK: I've always been intrigued by how one can blend into the other in a believable way - how we bring the outside in, plant our buildings in the middle of nature and the tension between both man-made and natural worlds. I think this was even more ingrained after visiting Singapore... the idea that this city had been so newly designed and placed in the middle of the jungle. They have to maintain the plants and foliage so much so that the jungle doesn't claim back the city. There is also an incredible painting by Mamma Andersson (one of my favourite artists of all time) titled *How Green was my Valley* and I think this is the first painting that truly sparked that intrigue in the blend and merging of indoors and outdoors.

ST: Would you say that this tension you describe between the indoor and outdoor worlds also manifests in your practical process in any way while you're creating a painting?

CK: Usually, I would begin with a section of a photograph or a part of a blueprint of a building as my starting point for a painting, and my process would unfold increasingly intuitively as I would get to the depiction of organic forms and nature. So there is an interesting parallel between control and intuition, artifice and nature in physical reality and how I work...

ST: You've mentioned the theme of memory before and how it played an important part both in the creation of these recent paintings and also in their perception by viewers. It feels like the lack of human subject in the works allows for these subjective impressions to unfold more freely...

CK: Yes, people are always absent from the paintings because I think they would divulge too much and don't allow the viewer to feel engaged and like they are a part of the narrative. I love how people always associate an intimate connection and particular strong memory with my paintings, like a specific building or room, even though that's not what it was originally based on at all.

ST: In addition to balancing the two spheres of the organic and the man-made, the spaces you depict also play a lot with imagination and have a kind of otherworldly, dream-like quality.

CK: Yes, I think that dream-like essence is exactly what I am hoping to achieve. A play on illusion and familiarity is definitely a huge part of that - I want people to recognise the spaces and to make them believable but still illusory at the same time. I have been looking at the idea of portals and windows, how you can see them in almost any space in one form or another. This is why a lot of my works have a very thin painted border, representing a window into somewhere otherworldly - somewhere utopian or dystopian. I hope the paintings feel familiar, but also generate a sort of escapism, like a great book that allows your mind to be transported somewhere else.

ST: Can you talk about how you work with colour and light in your paintings to create this illusory quality?

CK: Colour is a huge part of my work and I am always trying to achieve a certain amount of balance within each piece. I like to guide the viewer around the space by using certain colours to take your eye on a journey. Using certain colours on top and alongside each other and making a space feel feasible even though the colours are so unlikely. The monochromatic, single colour drawings in this exhibition are a way of focusing on texture, mark making, line, form, composition without the use of colour. It's almost removing the option of relying on colour combinations to make a piece work - it's been an interesting task. I like to use light and shadows in a way that helps create the sense of liminal space. Some elements float, isolated, while others are grounded or rooted by their shadows that often defy the lighting in another section of the painting. I'm interested in light projections, caustics and the way that light can feel painterly in itself. I think all of these processes combined add to this dream-like feeling and ambiguous uncertainty.

ST: Are there any artists - besides Manna Andersson whom you mentioned - that are influential for you in terms of your painting style? Do you get people mentioning Jonas Wood and David Hockney in relation to your work a lot?

CK: I can see why people would make the comparison to Jonas Wood, given the similarities in the graphic style and merging nature and interior. I have heard it before, but I've never really viewed his work in that way. David Hockney came up a lot when I started painting swimming pools and works inspired by my California road trip, which makes sense as there are parallels in subject matter and source material. Funnily

enough I'm most inspired by very 'painterly' painters like Peter Doig, Hernan Bas and Cecily Brown, who have such confidence in their brushstrokes and their treatment of paint on the surface. This goes back to how I often use architectural elements as a starting point and the organic comes intuitively, but I really admire painters that do that on a huge scale, within the entirety of their process.