

Words Pause and Leave an Idea

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“Words Pause and Leave an Idea” reads the first in a series of *Redactions* drafted by the artist Pippa Young. As a redactor of words, images and feelings, Young takes charge of the novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) and meticulously obliterates the official narrative from select pages. All we are left with are enigmatic terms set against a red monochromatic background. Markers of a bygone narrative, the surviving words evoke new interpretations. A white line connects them and the reader is invited to locate meaning in this repurposed form. The radicality of Charlotte Brönte’s first-person narrative dissolves, as Young invites us to take “a line for a walk” – a concept which I am borrowing from Paul Klee’s legendary *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1925). Offering formal advice, as much as pedagogical guidance, Klee’s *Sketchbook* empowers the ‘line,’ setting it free to roam the graphic landscape. He describes it as: “An active line on a walk, moving freely, without a goal.”¹ Young’s white line is also charged with a similar freedom of intention, but unlike Klee’s it does not move without a goal; it is there to direct our reading of Brönte’s redacted text. Line and language are complementary here, channelling the unaccustomed readership.

The same structure carries over into the other *Redactions*, which are also redolent with existential riddles. “We remain destined to live”, reads *Redaction 2*. While *Redaction 3* and *4*, are respectively concerned with “whisper not you gather on the edge of consent” and “What is the nature of reality” *Redaction 5* predicates instead: “A strange life would be certain where doubt is removed.” Meaning remains elusive throughout. Nowhere, do we get a clear sense of what the truth is and that is precisely the point. The various *Redactions*, conceal the original meaning, only to reveal a new array of possible ones.

Redaction, as a practice, implies the removal of words or information from an existing text. To redact is to edit and revise a work. It can lead to betterment, but it can also keep out of sight key pieces of information, turning it into a powerful instrument of control. Young is aware of the highly charged nature of redaction, which she exposes explicitly in the works described above and invokes implicitly in her pictorial practice more broadly. Her paintings are, in fact, rooted in collage. As such, they are constructed out of altered and decontextualized imagery, which have been redacted by the artist herself. For Young, collage is a metaphor for contemporary life.

Chaotic and fragmented, the everyday is filled for most people with thousands of images, which trigger disconnected thoughts. Collectively, we are the product of an image saturated world and Young assumes the onerous task of redacting it on our behalf. In her paintings, she lays bare the structure of painting and asks us to step away from the chaos and acknowledge the “unknown knowns” - in Slavoj Žižek’s words. The philosopher qualified as such, “things we do not know that we know – which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the knowledge ‘which does not know itself,’ as Lacan used to say.”² In her knowledge of painting, Young acknowledges the unknown knowns of contemporary life with its many contrasting narratives. In her words: “For me the act of painting is often like navigating in a dense fog, at night, to an unknown, and possibly non-existent destination.”³

Dancing on the Brim of Chaos

¹ Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, trans. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. London: Faber, 1968. p. 16.

² Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London: Verso Books, 2008. p. 457.

³ Pippa Young statement, February 2022.

In the 1980s the physicist Norman Packard coined the phrase “edge of chaos” to describe the transition space between order and disorder. Packard’s concept has since been adopted by others in the field of physics and beyond. Defined by the constant interplay between instability and reason, the edge of chaos can be understood as a generative locus, where polar opposites come together in a dynamic exchange. Young adapts this notion to her own work and taking the lead from Packard’s phrase she invites us to “dance on the brim of chaos.”

As a transitional space, Young’s brim of chaos is the site of exhilaration and restraint, certainty and uncertainty, past and present, young and old. It captures, in other words, many polar opposites, which are usually impossible to reconcile. For Young it also acts as a metaphor for the status of painting in the age of rampant mechanical reproduction. At a time when photography is accessible to almost all, how can painting still be relevant? This conundrum has accompanied Young’s pictorial journey for many years now and with every new work she probes the concept further. Chaos, thus, epitomizes the fast consumption of photographic imagery in an image saturated world. Whereas painting, with its more pondered approach to image-making, acts an antidote to the image deluge.

The sheer materiality of painting, as well as the relationship of painting vis-à-vis digital media plays an important part in the conceptualization of Young’s work. For instance, in *Proposal 1* the artist deploys the pixelated form of an enlarged image. Here, she lifts an image from the digital ether and methodically goes on to reproduce it in gouache and pencil on paper. A sort of hyper-realism of the digital medium is at stake and we, as viewers, are invited to parse this out in order to reveal the hidden figure. Central to *Proposal 1* and its fellow gouaches *Proposal 2* and *Proposal 3*, is an attempt to reckon with the loaded concept of identity. In this day and age, which sees identity politics at the forefront of many social and cultural forms of expression, artists are increasingly interrogating the relationship between identity – real and imagined – and its visual representation.

With her three proposals, alongside the more programmatically titled *Proposal for a method of establishing identity*, Young invites us to question: how identity is defined? And who has the power to define it? Next to the grey-scaled pixelated portrait, a grid with numbers suggests that a scientific method could be applied to the understanding of identity. Obviously, in proposing that such a formula exists, Young challenges its validity as an instrument of knowledge. Criteria such as gender, race and age, which supposedly identify every single being on planet earth, are forms of categorization that fail to provide a rounded account of who we are as individuals. Data, like the algorithms, determining which advertisements will pop up on our screens, attempt to reframe selfhood according to a set of predetermined criteria. With her “painting by numbers” Young disputes this narrow-minded logic and reasserts how individuality cannot be controlled by numbers or statistics.

Another chief concern for Young is the notion that as individuals we are made of lots of moving parts and are thus prone to constant change. She explores this concept in the drawing *Disrupted 1* and in the two paintings, *Disrupted 2* and *3*. In the latter works, the ‘disruption’ evoked by the title is materialised through the tripartite canvases. The disruption is imposed here on the faces and gestures of the two genderless figures. Made up of collaged fragments (rendered pictorially) each portrait is conceived as a visual metaphor for the fragile nature of contemporary selfhood. Prone to disruption and constant deconstruction, individual selves are presented in a precarious state construed out of contemporary and historic examples. Young’s reference library – if one may describe it as such – counts on the pictorial tradition of Bronzino, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Joshua Reynolds and Peter Paul Rubens.

Like the written words in *Redactions*, the body parts in the *Disrupted* series invite close reading. The overarching tone is surreal. Meaning is evenly split between the jumbled configuration of

Disrupted 1, 2 and 3 and their individual components. Eyes, ears, noses and lips are each a self-contained entity and part of a larger whole. Some were culled from Old Master paintings, while others are the product of contemporary sources – the range is deliberately eclectic. Young seeks no reconciliation here, she indulges in difference, by retaining the body parts' original form and style. In *Disrupted 1*, the two eyes clearly belong to distinct faces. While the left eye looks upwards with reverie, the right one stares at us in a prying way. In this misalignment the precarious nature of mankind, or the brim of chaos, as Young defines it, is revealed at its fullest.

Identity, as well as vulnerability and human frailty are at the heart of Young's quest. What is it like to be human in an uncertain world? And how does this impact our identity? Through disruption Young evokes the constant fluctuation that we experience as individuals in a world that is all but stable. Integral to this – even though it might not be discernible at first – is the question of time. While the figures speak to the disruption and gender fluidity of the present moment, their component parts take us back in time. In particular, the hands with their eloquent gestures evoke past creations imbued with symbolical and religious meaning.

The seductive charge of *Aurora abducting Cephalus* in Rubens' painting of the same name is summarised in one small gesture – Aurora's hand faintly touching the arm of Cephalus as she is about to make him hers. Equally charged, but with a different meaning, are the hands of Jesus in Ingres' depiction of a *Blessing Christ* (1834). Devotion and worship are invoked here, as Christ's hands bestow happiness on the lucky onlookers. Young's repurposed hands are, thus, saturated with symbolical meaning, speaking to ideas around attraction, blessing, reprimand and seduction. The larger context may have disappeared from sight, but the allegorical charge is retained. Even in their transplanted form Young's hands are historicized, emphasizing how the contemporary moment is inevitably bound to the past.

This is not a Portrait

In his most famous painting of a pipe dating from 1929, René Magritte insisted that 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' – 'This is not a Pipe.' At the time, and still today, lots was made of this idiosyncratic statement, which on the surface appeared to negate the painting's visual form. In essence, what we *see*, is not always what we assume we are *seeing*. A brain flexing exercise of sorts, 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' asked viewers not to take images at face value, and in doing so paved the way for Conceptualism.

The question of how this relates to Young's figures may arise here. Even in her use of language Young does not challenge her viewers directly as Magritte does with his painting. Yet, her figures are not portraits, in the same way that Magritte's pipe is not the real thing. For Young, portraiture is an explorative device and not a locus charged with the representation of likeness in the most traditional sense. In other words, she turns the very function of portraiture on its head, stripping it of its intent to represent a specific human subject. No recognisable individual is at the heart of Young's practice, rather archetypal figures take centre stage.

The Artist, The Hero, The Beauty, The Icon, The Sophist, The Incredulous and *The Custodian* are the cast of characters enlisted by the artist in her exploration of human vulnerability. Like the works described above, these are also fashioned out of redacted parts. Fleshy fragments are juxtaposed with wire-like geometries, lush draperies are countered with thin veils and hair is displaced by exuberant headgear. The memory of Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man* (1433) lingers on the surface of multiple of Young's paintings. With his deep red chaperon van Eyck's man - believed by some to be the artist himself - combines presence with artistic skill. The portrait was, in fact, conceived as a tool in the promotion of van Eyck's artistry, boasting his reputation with potential commissioners. By lifting van Eyck's headgear from its source and reproducing it across several of the archetypal figures, Young is able to parade her own artistic skill. As an attribute, the

chaperon lends a certain degree of solemnity to the figures on which it has been bestowed and by concealing what lies underneath it also casts to one side gender – making the archetypes unspecific. More so, Young’s decision to remove hair from the human equation, speaks to her wish to make the archetypes timeless, and by extension ageless. Hair, and specifically hairstyles tend to speak to a specific trend and time period; Young remains keen to avoid these types of associations for her imaginary sitters.

However, in works such as *Bones beneath the world* (2021) and *A dark plumed melancholy* (2021) the artist breaks her own rule and endows the two figures with exuberant hairstyles, reminiscent of Marie-Antoinette’s famous *pouf*. Like cotton-candy the mass of hair rises high above the two painted faces, enforcing a stark contrast between the black and white visages and the buoyancy of the hairdo. Like memories about to fade, the muted faces are overpowered by the lively hairstyles, which despite their historicised roots remain conversant with the present moment. More alive than the faces themselves they take charge of the portraits, rescuing them from the treacherous melancholy and otherworldly sphere, inferred by the works’ titles. At stake here is a play between what we *see* and how we *read* it – meaning is slippery and the viewer is entitled to apply his/her own subjective filter to the understanding of these and Young’s other figures.

The archetypes, like all of Young’s compositions, also confound easy identification, both in terms of time and meaning. As a model, the archetype is steeped in philosophical and psychological references. Starting with Plato, who believed that all things have an ideal form of which a physical manifestation is just a copy and carrying on with Carl Gustav Jung, who conceived of the archetype as an inherited idea; the term archetype encapsulates multiple discourses at once. In adopting it as the overarching title for her series of full-length figures, Young builds on the archetype’s existing conceptual baggage. More so, by ascribing a specific trait; be it beauty, heroism and incredulity, to each of her archetypal figures, Young charges them with the power to subvert ingrained perceptions. Take beauty; as a noun it is supposed to be neutral, and yet, historic links with feminine beauty lend it a gendered connotation. Heroism operates according to a similar mindset. The noun is almost exclusively linked to masculine discourses, despite the neutrality of the term. By associating beauty and heroism with gender neutral figures, Young liberates these loaded terms from prevailing misconceptions.

Freed from rehearsed narratives, the artist’s archetypes are ripe for new interpretation. Like the rest of Young’s oeuvre, they are also the product of multiple visual registers. *The Artist* is inspired by Alfred Drury’s statue of Sir Joshua Reynolds, permanently installed in the courtyard of the Royal Academy in London. Honouring Reynolds, one of the founding members of the RA, the statue portrays the artist at work. Standing in front of an invisible canvas, with a paintbrush raised in his left hand and a palette in his right one, Reynolds is presented as the archetypal artist. In her version, Young deploys Reynold’s pose to conjure a portrait of a contemporary artist; one which is not quite as self-assured as the archetypal model, but speaks to the uncertainty of our present moment. Likewise, *The Icon* strips Dosso Dossi’s *St. Sebastian* of its religious prerogative. Retaining the serpentine pose, with its upward thrust Young’s portrait of an *Icon* is theatrical. The lavish ochre cape acts as a backdrop to the performance of self, while the graphic headgear with its intricate pattern nods to Christ’s woven crown of thorns. Secular and religious symbols come together in this portrait of an icon for the twenty-first century.

Drury’s take on Reynolds and Dossi’s *St. Sebastian* are just two of Young’s re-purposed ‘art historical poses’ – as she defines them. This appropriative strategy allows the artist to strip existing masterpieces of their original meaning and reconfigures them as modern-day devotional works. Beware though, religion is not part of Young’s preaching. Her aspiration is to put the brakes on rampant image consumption and “provide a pause, a moment of meditative

contemplation.”⁴ Redaction is a powerful instrument in the achievement of this goal. And while Young acknowledges the brim of chaos, which enraptures us all, she also provides respite from it with her redacted figures.

⁴ Pippa Young statement, February 2022.