

ARUSHA

GALLERY

A Floating World

‘When I start painting, I think of things far away.’

- Patrick Caulfield, quoting Willem de Kooning

Opulent gardens that weave themselves in and around imaginary modernist architectures are defining features of the paintings made by Charlotte Keates in 2022 and early 2023. Coaxing the viewer into delirious fantasies of magical spaces awaiting our intervention as viewers, these intricately rendered representations of trees, shrubbery and dense foliage appear to multiply and grow as we gaze upon them, however still and precise their rendering. In their teeming complexity and hallucinatory detail they convey through their imagery the reality of the artist’s underlying process, by which one element of the structure leads to others, gradually accumulating to a point of fullness marking its arrival in the world as an independent entity that is complete unto itself.

Though certain motifs within the paintings are triggered by things Keates has seen and witnessed in photographs or on her travels through East Asia or closer to home at her studio in Guernsey, the paintings are emphatically not depictions of actual places. The specificity of the leaf forms and streamlined architectural features, with interior and exterior interpenetrating as in traditions of Japanese architecture, lends credibility and conviction to scenes born almost entirely from the artist’s imagination and reconstructed memories. At a time when so many of us are exercised by the climate crisis and dire predictions of irreparable damage to the environment, these contemplative pictures of a built world in absolute harmony with a clearly very healthy nature provide solace and a sense of well-being and tranquility on a subliminal level.

Keates proceeds methodically but with total trust in her intuition by allowing each painting to grow organically from the initial elements, some of which arise in response to the material features of the supports she favours: the plywood surfaces with their flowing wood-grain patterns or the more porous, paper-like, surfaces of the clay boards that allow the paints to soak into their very fabric. In the writings gathered together and published posthumously as *A Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci had exhorted artists to follow his example and to find inspiration in the random evidence of nature – the stains left on walls by damp or the uneven colouring of stones – for ‘really marvellous ideas’ with which to invent landscapes and other backgrounds for paintings. Such practices, revived centuries later by Surrealists including Max Ernst, underlie Keates’s wholly unpretentious delight in interacting with her chosen materials for unexpected results that feed her imagination. Deliberately avoiding a reliance on any single visual source, let alone on preparatory studies or under-drawing, Keates waits to surprise herself as the motifs accumulate over a period of weeks until they have reached a point of saturation.

Rather than painting with her supports hung on a wall or placed on an easel, Keates works flat on the floor, observing the gestation of the composition from above almost as if having an out-of-body experience. This contributes to odd sensations of weightlessness, the ground sometimes appearing to disappear from under our feet. Any attempts to read the architectural spaces through logic are constantly undercut, as in the largest of the new paintings, the three-metre wide *Novel unbegun*, in which the angles of the walls and screens in relation to each other repeatedly subvert any attempts by the viewer to map the spaces. If one of the first things one notices about these paintings is their chimerical atmospheres, that is because the elements constantly emerge and then dissolve for as long as one looks at them, just as images do when we are in a state of suppressed consciousness. One can no more articulate these spaces as rational than one can describe one's dreams: the intensity with which certain features suggest a confrontation with reality makes the subsequent dismantling of that reality all the more confounding. Despite the intoxicating, joyful and unconstrained decorative appeal and undeniable lure of beauty in these pictures, there is an underlying sense of unease that guarantees a nagging understanding that what we are witnessing is an arrested moment within a perpetual sense of becoming.

The fan or kimono-like shape of the image of a tree-house placed within a succulent orange ground of a small acrylic painting of 2023, *Whispers in tones I cannot hear*, is one of many nods to the Japanese sources of inspiration within this body of work. As in the *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints created by 19th-century masters such as Kunisada and Kuniyoshi, fantastically elaborate and colourful flat patterns intersect here and in other paintings within architectural settings treated volumetrically, as if seen at an angle but with several vanishing points that deny the reductiveness of the single vanishing point privileged by a conventional European treatment of perspective. In this respect Keates's paintings take us on a journey that has much in common with David Hockney's explorations of 'wider perspectives', also inspired by traditions from East Asia, over the last few decades.

Keates acknowledges an enthusiasm for the history of Japanese woodblock prints as artistic precedents. They are known colloquially in translation – and with an uncanny relevance to her own work – as 'images of the floating world.' Keates takes cues also from the isometric projections first used in geometry and later adapted to architectural drawings as a means of displaying the interiors of spaces as if experienced from within. This contributes viscerally to one's sensation as a viewer of moving into and around the depicted spaces, rather than witnessing them at a distance from the outside.

Several of these paintings – including *To seek you in dark water*, *A shadow in the light* and *From beyond skies and stars, this echo arrived inside of you* – concentrate all the imagery within a centrally placed circular shape on the surface of a wood panel in a square format. Whether the surrounding 'frame' is left with the wood grain visible or is painted over in a dense monochromatic hue, the highlighted area acquires a hypnotic presence, as if spotlighted into existence from within an atmosphere of ambiguous limitless space. More fancifully, these circular shapes become emblems of planet Earth – still to our knowledge the only one bearing life – within the unfathomable mystery of the cosmos.

The deftness with which Keates varies her marks, overlaying passages of flat or mottled paint with features made with very fine brushes, is inextricable from the experience offered to the viewer of each painting as a series of decisions and interventions. Much art over the past half-century has relied upon immediacy and boldness of impact. While Keates's paintings certainly have that quality in abundance, they offer far greater rewards the longer and the closer one looks at them. As one studies the trails of tiny leaves on the uppermost surface, one becomes privy to the sequence of mark-making that has shaped each painting over time.

Though the precision of Keates's delineations might be said to have an illustrational quality, or a commonality with medieval illuminations, one of the great strengths of these works is their supreme attention to their materiality. Some of the paintings are completed with passages in oil paint over the first layers in acrylic paint; the glossiness of the one over the matt quality of the other catches the light differently, subtly changing the appearance of each painting under varying light conditions or when seen from a variety of angles. There is an additional pleasure to be had in recognising the origins of some of the motifs, such as the depiction of the green terraced area below the glass-box house of *To seek you in dark waters*, in the found structures of the wood grain on the wood panels provided by the fabricator. Working in this way in harmony with a natural material, placing herself at its service, Keates succeeds both in paying homage to the infinity of nature and in conveying the joy of the life force that lies at the origins of art itself.

Had I been asked to provide an outline of my intended essay, I would have been at a loss, since for me any piece of writing, however short, unfolds as a train of thought. Keates's methods thus strike a particular chord with me, her pictures emerging as a continuous stream of decisions: a latter-day equivalent of Paul Klee's metaphor about drawing as 'taking a line for a walk'. In a striking departure, a series of nine paintings on clay board, collectively titled *A seed of growth* (all in a very intimate portrait format of 25.5 x 20.5 cm), suggests the germination of a visual idea from a small but already fully-formed seed through to its fullest resolution, the deep blue border eventually reduced to the narrowest margin. At each interval, the scene dramatically changes form. Displayed together, they present powerful and visually dazzling testimony of the patient process by which Keates's art, like the plant forms she habitually depicts, surfaces into sparkling life.

- Marco Livingstone, 2023

Marco Livingstone is an art historian and independent curator who has written extensively on contemporary art. His most recent publications include major monographs on Adrian Berg (2021), Peter Blake (2022) and Joe Tilson (2023).