

Pippa Gatty:

AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT

There is something to Pippa Gatty's paintings that is like standing at the edge of space. Terrifying, abyssal, infinite, maybe. Like peering out of six-inch thick glass, a bathysphere drifting through curtains of sea snow falling into the deepest trenches of the ocean, and there framed in the ellipsis of the submarine's yellow-green headlamps a glimpse of some wonder, or nighttime horror.

What creature is this? The shell of some monstrous crab? The glistening dust of moth's wing upon a window? Or a way-off planetary system glinting through pinpricks in the backcloth?

These scenes ("I've always seen them as landscapes," Gatty insists), seen as if through shielding fingers and squinting eyes, are on the verge of recognisability, like something our mind might make out in the shadows. Sure enough, Gatty describes how she often finds forms and faces in her everyday environment, in the patterns of the wallpaper, the formation of branches in the trees and the shapes in the clouds, and how she gives these visions credence in her paintings. This does not simply look *like* a face grinning through my dinner plate and bits of rice; it *is* a face, both accessible and real.

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The 17th century German mystic, theologian, and cobbler, Jakob Böhme, famously had a vision of a divine abyss or "groundless ground" (*ungrund*) triggered by a beam of sunlight reflected off a burnished pewter dish. He saw in this luminous sheen the structure of the universe. As he describes in *Aurora*, written in 1612, more than a decade after his vision, "my spirit directly saw through all things, and knew God in and by all creatures, even in herbs and grass...".

Gatty's paintings similarly challenge us to see so much in so little. Insects, fruit, shellfish, ships on a collision course, the sea, the sky, the milky way – "mystic truths", to borrow a phrase from artist Bruce Nauman. And if that sounds too grand a claim, I assure you, it is not.

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Painted on linen stretched over ply and often made to a scale no larger than a human head, Gatty's landscapes find focus in glints of light at their centre, vignetting towards their edges where they fade into rich, oily blacks. The effect is such that despite their diminutive size the scenes stretch out to fill one's mind, totally. And in this way they are truly vast, confusing all sense of relative scale like the magnificent miniature worlds of naturalist Robert Hooke (1635-1703) or the close-up nature movies of pioneering micro-cinematographer F. Percy Smith (1880-1945).

From the planetary to the microbial. Are we witnessing the birth of a galaxy? Or a *de novo* protein being formed in the soil? Is this the spray of seawater against a rock? Or a rock-hard temporal bone excised from a skull? A planet? A piece of fruit on the turn? Same thing, really.

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The title for Pippa Gatty's 2019 exhibition at Edinburgh's Arusha gallery, *AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT*, is borrowed from Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction novel of the same name. The setting for Clarke's story is an Earth a billion years from now where the oceans have dried up and life has all but left save for the last community of humans crowded into a city rising from the desert planet like a sandcastle on a beach. Though the city is technologically advanced, its citizens are a conservative, insular bunch, fearful of the external universe which they perceive as a threat to their longevity.

'Against the Fall of Night' was first published in 1948 then revised and expanded twice more; once in 1951 and again in 1956 when Clarke altered the title to 'The City and the Stars'. Its original title was taken from a line of a poem called 'Smooth between sea and land' by the English poet A.E. Housman and published after his death in 1936. The poem explores themes found elsewhere in Housman's writing: the loss of innocence, of childhood wonder at the countryside, and of our diminishing connection to the natural world. Here Housman uses the image of the beach to confront the futility of creative endeavour in an uncaring universe. We follow the prelapsarian bliss of a summer afternoon tracing names with a stick in the sand only to have one's work erased at nighfall

by a land-grabbing limb of the sea, eternally stuck in a compassionless cycle of claiming, relinquishing and reclaiming:

*Here, on the level sand,
Between the sea and land,
What shall I build or write
Against the fall of night?*

What shall I build or write when nothing lasts? Why build an empire, a city, a work of art if it will inevitably be erased by time (and tide)?

The beach, the space between the sea and land, is a liminal space; that is, it is a threshold between one type of place and another, a place that doesn't really belong to anyone. It is also a place of possibility, a place where one might upset the norms, where one might get naked or spill one's fluid, blood, oil, scrawl a cock and balls in the sand just as much as write a lover's name, only to have it censured at the end of the day. Wiped clean. Never here. Never mind.

The studio, too, is a liminal space.

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Pippa Gatty lives and works from her studio on the north-western edge of the Isle of Mull minutes from a beach that looks out to the North Atlantic. "It's wild," she says. "My art is rooted in this environment and my concerns for it. I'm trying to reconcile what I know of Nature, one that is dying but still alive. And I feel, working in this landscape, a sense of living grief. The world is falling apart and I ask myself, 'Could I do something more worthwhile?'. And the answer is 'No,'" she jokes. "'I'm a painter!'"

What water, what weather threatens to wipe away our work? Yet still, we build. Yet still, we write.

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Housman's message may not be an entirely hopeless one. (Neither is it in Clarke's novel, for there is an oasis to be found in the middle of the desert planet.) Read another way, and more akin to the tone of Gatty's art,

it points to the value of creative exploration whilst on this earth; but equally to the value of humility, a caution against our desire to impress ourselves too heavily (via our culture, our genetic legacy, our polluting behaviour) upon an Earth that is ultimately indifferent to us. For we too will be washed away, and soon.

This is the humbling power of Pippa Gatty's paintings, and their ability to appear, like all the best art, both timeless and utterly contemporary. Standing in front of them, lost in their fathomless shadows, you suddenly become aware of your feet, of where you are right now. That is, they put us in our place, on the Earth in its twilight, and on the threshold of something catastrophic.

*SIÔN PARKINSON is an artist and singer based
in Dundee.*