

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Pippa Young Interview with Rebecca Birrell

The work in Pippa Young's latest exhibition began its life just as the UK national lockdown confined many to their homes, a state of sudden, open-ended restraint which starkly pared back the components of everyday life. Public space emptied, rooms marked the outer limits of our environments, and time distended. Yet Young's work is not content merely to observe these new conditions, providing strategies for living with our newly small, anxious existences. Young's is an art of resourcefulness and reconstruction, ingenious adaptation and pleasure. Cut-ups make use of the exclamatory language and theatrical figures found in newspapers, acts of redaction reimagine literary classics as luminous koans, fragments of lyrical needlework in the tradition of embroidered samplers yield jolts of beauty. The mood veers from whimsical to mournful, grave seriousness to play. These are the collisions of subject matter, emotion and material elicited by sustained time spent indoors, circling around the same space and repertoire of activities, looking to small creative acts for a productive, restorative distraction which remains alert to – but not overwhelmed by – the unfolding global crisis. In our conversation, Young identified the Covid 19 outbreak, its connection to broader economic and ecological pressures, and its cataclysmic aftershocks in all aspects of civic life, as the conceptual basis for the show, in particular its reliance on the fragment as a form. As the world came apart in vivid, visceral detail across a dizzying array of social media platforms and news outlets, Young picked through the rubble of images and information, and grafted together fresh, unexpected forms. Her hybrid compositions unite sensuous organic textures and artificial shimmer, human skin and steely geometric structures, pixelated surfaces and reassuringly substantial fabric, elaborate Georgian pompadour hair and exposed flesh. Old Masters drapery is made to resemble cellophane, and medieval halos squares of gold-leaf tinfoil, the domestic and the divine intermingling. Young's work proposes a reality in which the chaos of contemporary life – our scattered attention, pervasive uncertainties and dependence on technology for private reassurance and communal feeling – are not cause for despair, but are instead a possible resource. In Young's guide for surviving this altered present, the disintegration of our established routines and imagined horizons clears the way for experimental dialogues, transhistorical affinities, unanticipated intimacies and a new attunement to beauty.

Young was as eager to talk about art historical leitmotifs as the practicalities of process: how her singular paintings emerged through digesting an omnivorous range of intellectual and cultural source materials, but were equally the product of many small, deceptively simple physical acts. Brushstrokes accumulate slowly and insistently over the surface of the canvas, their progress its own measure of the passing hours. For Young it is this inconspicuous, diligent work which at once transforms her painting into a contemplative practice, and lends the images themselves their serene, introspective feel. With the body engaged in the rhythm and familiarity of a repeated gesture, ideas, sensations and memories are drawn out and into new relation with one another, and flow between the artist's mind and her medium. 'Your subconscious flows through,' Young says of the daily work of filling 'each square inch' of the canvas, 'the meaning comes out through that repetitive action'. Indeed, for all her work's carefully calibrated ambiguity – its refusal of a single authoritative meaning or any clear narrative – there is at least one aspect of its visual imaginary which emerges with a luminous clarity: its meditative nature.

Young's paintings invite us to linger over precisely detailed, almost photorealistic, facial features and angular structures, while her collages and redactions present us with enigmatic texts which reward re-readings, and aphorisms which under closer scrutiny shape-shift into private confessions. The small-format works speak to the paintings in subtle, teasing gestures: flashes of red, motifs of silence, eloquent hands. Uniting these experiences is a desire to kindle into being capacities for attention and concentration that may – as a result of the pandemic, or simply through the abrasions of ordinary time – lie dormant within us. Young shares with the viewer her blueprint for a slower, more thoughtful being in the world.

Over email and via video call, Young and I spoke about a range of topics: perfectionism and self-restraint; the tension between illustration and fine art; the history of embroidered samplers in relation to women's self-expression; and contemporary influences – Jennifer Packer, Barbara Kruger and Prunella Clough appear amongst many other luminaries. What is reproduced below captures the central drift of our freewheeling conversation.

On art school and early inspirations; on portraiture, and subversions with its form –

I went to art school as a mature student, after a career in design and marketing consultancy. Initially I found the experience challenging. Solving clients' problems meant I was not overly accustomed to self-reflection, and now the focus was asking questions and self-exploration. A trip to Berlin rekindled a love of Early Renaissance painting; a class in grisaille painting and colour mixing with a limited palette cemented the foundations for future work. My dissertation explored the role and intention of figurative painting in the age of photography: why paint with an attention to realistic detail when a photograph achieves something similar – often with greater accuracy, and quicker. What can painting do, or what can it offer, that photography doesn't? These questions continue to feed into my use of a figurative language. Figures are a way to speak directly to the viewer: recognition is hard-wired within us; the first thing a child draws is a circle shape with two sticks for legs. Figures are a hook on which my work's central concerns hang: the slipperiness of truth and meaning; the constructed nature of identity; how juxtaposition of visual language can alter interpretation; the place of painting in a contemporary, digital world; how the act of painting can be both cathartic and a source of anxiety; the canvas as a repository of psychological explorations, and a device through which to communicate about the world.

Given the predominance of the human figure in my work – often although not always a single figure – there is an assumption that it is portraiture. However, my intention is not to create a likeness: the figures are not real people, they are portraits of the human condition. Through the collaging of slightly mismatched body parts, and the inclusion of non-traditional elements of portraiture, I wanted to make clear these were not real people. I am trying to see where I can take the genre.

On source material, and the history and tradition of figurative art –

In technique, a primary influence is Renaissance painting, but the iconography of early Flemish painting (such as Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling, Robert Campin and Roger van der Weyden) is another important reference point. A jug is meaningful in itself, but it can also be a vessel containing a multitude of interpretations and meanings. History painting deals with grand, expansive ideas and tells diverse stories about humanity. My interest is in the little details, the everyday things which illustrate the experience of being human. Pieter Breughel's *Netherlandish Tales* was an early influence: it shows how to use the human figure to unconventional ends, and about how human beings work, rather than who they are.

In an image saturated culture where we consume images without thinking, figurative painting offers a possible antidote to the noise of digital channels. It can provide a pause, a moment of meditative contemplation; a way of slowing down mass media's pace of image consumption. Devotional painting served a similar function in medieval times, offering viewers quiet moments of private worship.

On feminism, gender, and the status of the woman artist –

As a woman I must have a feminist subtext, but I don't refer to myself as a 'woman artist': I am an artist. The female artist label has a sense of sub-categorisation - as if the women's art is going on over here and the real art is taking place somewhere else. In the same sense, I would like the viewer to see the figures as human first. A successful piece for me would be a purely androgynous figure where, without gendered distractions, the viewer could focus on the human, psychological content. The historical representation of women is always a something at the back of my mind though; as is contemporary representation. The 'male gaze' is ever present. I overheard a comment once where the (female) viewer discerned 'a homoerotic content' in one of my pieces where the figure was male. This painting was modelled by my son. The intention was a non-sexual representation of a youthful human body. But it's an interesting example of the slipperiness of meaning and how, whatever the artists' intention, you cannot control the personal filter of the viewer's perception. I like to weave in ambiguities which might make the viewer look at things from a different perspective: to be quietly subversive from within the castle walls, than to shout loudly outside them.

On the poetics of titles, literary intertexts, and the interplay of verbal and visual, text and weaving –

Some earlier works were titled with phrases found in poetry: the Syrian poet Adonis provided a number of phrases that resonated. For 'Dancing on the brim of chaos' I sought out a new source for titles. Initially, I experimented with cut-up techniques before moving on to a process of redaction, using in this instance Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*. The process was so absorbing that it became work in its own right as well as a source of titles. It involved scanning pages of a text without any intent and allowing random words to leap out at me, then redacting the rest of the text to see what emerged. The words selected were random, but there was a level of mediation, an interest in particular themes and ideas, which came through the choice of text.

Many of the words in the redactions formed phrases that ultimately loosely resembled haiku, and these texts would later form the basis of the stitched pieces. Stitching became part of my practice after an inspiring encounter with the Victorian amateur craftswoman Elizabeth Parker, and her extraordinary sampler – now in the collection at the V&A. Parker was intensely mistreated by her employers while working as a nursemaid, and felt great despair that had no outlet in either public or private life; ultimately she was rendered mute by her experiences. Stitching the sampler became her medium of self-expression: weaving worked when words failed her. A friend allowed me to see a connection with Ovid's story of Philomela. Philomela is raped and has her power of speech taken from her, to silence her and protect the powerful men around her, but she weaves a tapestry attesting to her experiences nevertheless. I wanted to weave these themes together: of women telling unspoken, compelling stories with thread and stitch, embroidery as a conduit of self-revelation and rebellion, and all through a medium largely practised by women.

On white space, the limits of context and the suggestiveness of the void –

Figures are set against blank backdrops, removing any specific historical or social context. I often avoid showing hair for the same reason, as it fixes the figure in a time and place. There are no clues for identification, so the viewer is encouraged to think differently about the figure, to focus on psychological depths rather than surface characteristics. I have tried different backgrounds at various points, but with certain details added the work inevitably becomes overly narrative-driven, which is not my intention; those experiments always get painted over. Rather than tell a story, I want to plant questions in the viewer's mind. The blank space also emphasises the pictorial context: it nods to Clement Greenberg's theories about medium specificity and flatness whilst, at the same time – contra to Greenberg – populating that flat space with pictorial illusion, the representational subject matter he insisted painting must exclude in order to advance as a form.

On uncertainty and doubt –

Uncertainty is at the core of everything. Painting itself is precarious and unpredictable as a practice, but as a feeling it goes deeper than that: it underlies my world view. The world seems perpetually poised on the edge, with order threatening to collapse into disorder, and our psychological identity – how we fit into the world – requiring constant recalibration. Perhaps this is a good thing. Certainty implies closure, set boundaries, but uncertainty suggests endless possibility.

On process –

There are some core ideas which are always a part of the work, but I often circle back and approach those familiar concepts from a different angle. I also have a collection of favourite images which I draw on to start a painting. This body of work came about through an experimentation with collage and text which led me to ideas about fragmentation. There is always the question 'What if?' in my mind. Sometimes this experimental thinking goes nowhere, or reaches an impasse, but this time it led me to play with fragments in an exploratory way: a hand gesture in a Rubens painting; a gorgeously rich piece of fabric in a van Dyck; a headdress from a medieval illuminated manuscript; a face from the internet; a leg from one of my photographs; a wire frame construction from a CAD package. What if I stuck them all together to make a pose similar to a St Sebastian image? And how can I extend the idea of fragmentation physically as well as conceptually? I spend a lot of time thinking about how I can best translate an idea and then when I start painting the theoretical gives way to the practical, to the process of painting itself.

There is always something I didn't anticipate that means changing course and reevaluating. Recalibration is key, and solutions to pictorial problems emerge in doing. I use a grid system to transfer an image to canvas and those little squares have gradually been incorporating themselves into the central structures of the painting. For me, they emphasise the skeletal structure of the painting but they also allude to the constructed nature of the pictorial object, as well as referring to the digital external world. The painting is completed in layers, in a process similar to traditional Renaissance painting. The work in this exhibition has a monochrome feel although past work has layers of colour over grisaille. In this body of work, the paint layers have been metaphorically 'peeled back', like flesh, to reveal the anatomy and structure of the painting. Like the uncertain world around us, our identities fluctuate, some elements are more formed, others less so.

- Rebecca Birrell