

# ARUSHA

## GALLERY

### **Bobbie Russon - 'Cold Comfort'**

Arusha Gallery, Bruton

**'Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.  
It took me years to understand that this too was a gift'.  
- Mary Oliver 'The Uses of Sorrow'**

I first encountered Bobbie Russon's work at a prestigious London art fair several years ago. There, amid a multitude of old masters, contemporary sculpture and modern abstracts, a series of small faces caught my attention. Isolated figures sat in chairs, stood defensively with their backs to the wall or watched inquisitively from the gloom. Their large appealing eyes and concerned expressions held me transfixed. 'Hello' they seemed to say, 'Do you recognise me?' 'Are you lonely too?' 'Perhaps we could be friends?'

This was my first introduction to the sad, anxious children who populate Russon's drawn and painted world. Looking guarded and perplexed, but holding the viewer's gaze, they clutch their 'transitional objects' - cloth dolls and stuffed animals - tightly for support and companionship. These are the items which take the place of the mother-child bond and which we associate with comfort, family and the concept of home.

The lonely figures, which inhabit gloomy, windowless interiors reminiscent of interwar Britain, are conjured from memories of the artist's peripatetic existence during her formative years - an only child of a struggling single mother, moving from bedsit to bedsit with only her dolls, books and pet cats for company. The titles Russon chooses for her works - for example 'Shadow', 'House of Memories', 'Missing', 'And Still the Rain Falls' - offer further insight into the emotional states of her subjects.

In addition to functioning as poetic self-portraits, these solitary, distracted, self-absorbed individuals, (almost always girls) occupying the darkly confusing, twilight zone between childhood and adolescence are, in part, drawn from the troubled heroines of the artist's childhood reading; Estella from Great Expectations, Mary from The Secret Garden, Bobby from the Railway Children, Anne from Anne of Green Gables, Cathy from Wuthering Heights, Tess from Tess of the D'Urbervilles. That the artist has observed her own daughters growing up and trying to navigate their own way through this emotionally turbulent period has no doubt also influenced her subject matter.

Russon's complex characters, with their comforters, also reference our 'wounded' inner child; the part of us that in our formative years may have felt a sense of rejection, of abandonment, of not fitting in, of guilt, sadness, an inability to clearly communicate our needs or form significant, lasting relationships, problems we can carry through into our adult life.

**'I need a father, I need a mother, I need some older, wiser being to cry to. I  
talk to God but the sky is empty'  
- Sylvia Plath**

In this new body of work, for her first solo show at Arusha Bruton, Russon looks beyond the dark interiors of her childhood, casting around for alternative objects or belief systems – the stories we tell ourselves which define our personal sense of reality and provide us with hope in our increasingly secular, multicultural and fragmented society. They can take many and various forms: amulets and talisman (pieces of jewellery, a lucky charm, a favourite teddy, a faded, sepia photograph in a wallet – in fact any object imbued with the imaginary power to encourage, protect, reassure or inspire the wearer or carrier) as well as superstitions, ancient rites and shared community-based folk traditions which have persisted for centuries.

The subject of the largest work in this show entitled ' Hopes and Dreams' is a Cloutie Tree, usually a hawthorn or ash, which almost always stands beside a sacred well or spring – a place of pilgrimage in Celtic times. According to pagan tradition, pieces of cloth were dipped into the water of the holy well and tied to a branch as part of a healing ritual. Often considered to have the power to heal sick children, the ailment was believed to fade as the strips of clothing disintegrated.

In this work Russon depicts an ancient gnarled tree, its bare branches strewn with various strips of delicate pale fabric. The artist has used dark tones and large sweeping gestural brushstrokes to create this work. There is tension here between the barren landscapes and wide dramatic sky and the small spectral figure, casting a long shadow, occupying a space between the tree and the coming storm. This is a timeless image which speaks of the enormity of the universe, the overarching power of nature and of individual suffering through the ages - of a common belief system which has persisted through centuries and continues today in many rural communities. Will there be a miracle or will the ominous and portentous storm clouds of illness keep rolling in?

'Protection Doll' returns to more familiar territory but on a larger scale. Here a young woman in a plain brown dress stares directly at the viewer. Gone are the schoolgirl plaits and bunches from earlier works. This girl's hair is cut, artlessly and practically, short. Her expression is blank - her eyes tired and haunted, her hands red and sore. She clutches a stiff black toy dog with one unseeing eye,

reminiscent of a crucifix. In the background are newly washed sheets strung tautly on the line.

The image is unsettling and ambiguous. What has happened here? Does this young woman need protection and if so from whom? Is this an image of transition from girlhood to womanhood? Has she been forced to grow up too fast? How much comfort / protection will this childhood 'toy' be able to offer in her current circumstances. Is this a depiction of separation anxiety or something darker?

The fifteen 'Miniatures' that appear in this exhibition take their inspiration from a family story. Russon's Nana lived in a noisy, chaotic household from which she managed her family business. With constant comings and goings it was often a challenge for her to cope. She took great comfort however from a small Victorian portrait of an anonymous girl which hung on the wall and when it all became too much Nana would directly address the painting saying 'Luv - if you can take it so can I'.

These intimate, small-scale works, set into hand-carved wooden frames designed and made by Russon's partner, are dramatically juxtaposed against the larger unframed works in the show. They reference the tradition of religious icons prayed to in times of need. They are also reminiscent of the fashion for miniature portraits of the Tudor age conceived as personal mementos and tokens of affection. These intimate images were carried and worn by both men and women as a means to keep loved ones close in the same way that today we keep photographs in our wallets or digital images on our mobile phones.

Here Russon has conjured a series of luminous, keenly observed and highly detailed portraits of young girls, their beatific faces and calm, contemplative gazes fixed directly on the viewer. Perhaps these are the contemporary saints of today's multi-cultural Britain, virtual online friends or followers from social media sites, wise virgins, ancient deities in twenty first century clothing, lost children, portraits of our younger selves or characters from the well-loved stories of our youth? Whatever our perception or interpretation the artist's hope is that they will offer the viewer the same comfort as the small Victorian portrait gave her Nana.

**'The artist can show what others are terrified of expressing'  
- Louise Bourgeois**

Where, to whom or to what do we turn when we are afraid? To relatives or friends if we are fortunate enough to have them? To our many and various 'gods' or 'deities' if we believe in them? To folklore and superstition or to objects in which, rightly or wrongly, we place our faith and trust? These are the questions posed in this body of work. Highly personal and based on the artist's own life, memories and observations, these powerful paintings are timeless metaphors for the enduring issues of loneliness, isolation, separation, immigration, exploitation, poverty and ill-health in society.

In this exhibition Russon places herself alongside other female artists such as Frida Kahlo, Paula Rego and Jean Cooke who have created their own unique, dramatic and sometimes harrowing narratives relating to the roles women play in family life - homemaker, mother, lover, wife, daughter, friend, nurse, caregiver, keeper of secrets, victim - and to the physical and emotional burdens and abuse they frequently suffer.

‘What do we call ‘a thing’ into which we place our doubts, worries or prayers?’ Russon asked me as we were discussing her work. ‘Are we missing a word for it in the English language?’ I wonder if, through this new body of work, she has answered her own question. It is quite simply called ‘Art’. Through creativity, be it painting, writing, drama or music, we give vent to the most personal yet omnipresent feelings. ‘If I can evoke a memory or emotion in a stranger by my own personal interpretation of a shared but private experience without having to use words then I feel I am succeeding’ states the artist.

In finding a receptive, appreciative and understanding audience, we, as artists, also find kindred spirits, those who empathize and sympathise with our plight and who recognize, appreciate and decode the coded messages we send. And it is through this shared knowledge that we come to terms with our own anxieties and fears and realise that we are not actually as alone as we often believe ourselves to be. That there are in fact, other rags tied to branches fluttering in the wind, other portraits on walls or mantelpieces that act as confidants and countless worn and battered teddies that we still keep close long after we have left our childhood behind. These ancient rituals, painted icons and comforters unite us, regardless of how or where we live. They may offer ‘Cold Comfort’ but they also offer ‘hope’.

**Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all.**

**And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.**

**I’ve heard it in the chilliest land  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.**

**Emily Dickinson.**

*- Alison Swan, June 2022*