

ARUSHA

GALLERY

I take what is mine

To take what is yours is to give yourself agency, ownership over something that is entirely your own. It is for you to do with it what you wish; keep it hidden until it becomes a vague memory, share it with the world. In *I take what is mine* by Arusha Gallery, each of the artists, in a sense, takes what is theirs. Through their shared interest in the landscape of memories and imagined realms, their exploration of inner psyches, and their attention to the mystical properties of symbolism and art making, Plum Cloutman, Robert Fry, Anousha Payne, Helen Flockhart and James Owens present work that challenges us to find, within their narratives, answers to the questions that have been posed to us.

What is evident throughout the show, is an unveiling or unravelling of interior worlds, not merely in physical terms, but in the sense of interior psychologies. For Plum Cloutman, her meticulously detailed and highly textural works in pastel, watercolour pencil and oil give the viewer carefully crafted insight into the world of her protagonists. Her painting *Cube Ass Hookup* (2022), for instance, shows a man laying naked on a bed, head resting on his hands as he stares directly at us. Behind him, a figure leaves, naked, through an open door, without looking back or acknowledging whatever came before. From the title, we can infer that perhaps the night had not gone according to plan, or else that they had done what they came to do. Still, the way the male figure stares at us, his body in full view, it is almost as if he is inviting us to be the next ones to make our way into his bed. The precise focus of his gaze is somewhat unnerving, and we are left wondering what he wants from us, what he is trying to take. But we are drawn, too, to the receding figure, the way their back is turned so that we have no way of knowing how they are feeling, what may have been taken from them. And yet Cloutman presents us with a somewhat absurdity image, the figure's bum, humorously, cubed shaped as the title suggests.

Bedtime Water (2022) offers an alternative story. A naked woman leans over her sleeping lover as she reaches for a glass of water on the bedside table. Her eyes are averted from our gaze, as if she does not see us watching. As with *Cube Ass Hookup*, there is the sense of the absurd; her small, round breasts perch comically on her lover's back, while her bum sticks out behind her. As is often the case with Cloutman's work, we feel, as viewers, as if we have stumbled upon

something that does not belong to us, as if we are stood spying through the window of someone else's house. But with her paintings, there is also a feeling of anonymity. Often closely cropped to the figures, we know nothing of who they are as people—their personalities, their thoughts. They are unknowable. It is as if the paintings are vignettes to a larger story, one that is only hinted at, that we must decide ourselves. As Cloutman describes, they are 'something you look at, rather than something you exist in.'¹

Robert Fry, too, is interested in human psychology, but while Cloutman creates unknowable characters, Fry portrays the way our interior thoughts and torments are revealed and exposed. His psychologically charged paintings often meditate on the idea of dual identity, of opposing personalities. The figures in his paintings are often mirrored, representing split selves, two halves of a whole. In *Lost Men Study 5* (2019), Fry uses an abstract visual language to explore the complexities of what it means to be lost, in its many iterations. Part of the artist's 'Lost Men' series, *Study 5* utilises a limited palette of purples, reds and pinks to create what initially looks like an abstract painting made up of various shapes and tones. And yet, the more you look, the more you begin to pick out—as if you are looking at a Rorschach inkblot test—a pair of feet at the very top of the painting, which each lead down to a leg, a body, a head. Then you see more feet, more legs, more bodies, more heads; a small army of lost men suspended from their feet, facing each other on either side of the purple void that runs through the centre of the painting. These men are mirror images of each other, a different version of the same person. Like Cloutman's figures, they are anonymous to us, but here, Fry takes that anonymity to a greater degree; we do not know what they look like, how old they are, what they wear. He has stripped them of all of their identifying features, so that it is as if they are shadows or rather a symbolic stand-in for the lost men they represent. The fact that the painting is human sized adds to the uncanny feeling, the way they approximate a human being without being recognisable. But it also gives the painting the quality that it is all-encompassing, as if you could penetrate the surface of the canvas, become one of those lost men suspended in the dark mass of purple paint.

With Anousha Payne, it feels as if we are on a journey into the in-between. Her three vessels are neither one thing nor the other, existing dually as a multiplicity of associations and references. Drawing inspiration from her dual Irish and Indian heritage, Payne often uses both Irish and Tamil folkloric stories as sources of inspiration. Building up characters—often female—over a series of sculptures or paintings, she brings life to these stories, creating her own iconography and lexicon. Here, her vessels take on the characteristics of spiritual talismans or totems, imbued with specific qualities, such as 'vessels for enjoyment' and 'vessels for fulfilment', which

reference the types of vessels often used in religious ceremonies or rituals. With their open mouths and closed bottoms, they are able to both contain and uncontain, to hold within them magical properties as well as releasing what may be trapped within. Payne's interest in animism—the spiritual belief based on the idea that inanimate objects possess souls—is evident in the way she has constructed these pieces. Both *Surahonne* (2022) and *Serpent-maiden* (2022) feature the silhouettes of heads emerging from each side of the pot, gold earring attached like an offering. *Dogmother* (2022), blends the human and animal, the outline of a dog, also with the gold earring attached to bring it close to what we might view as a hybrid. Payne believes that “humanising and animating objects [...] allows us to get closer to the idea of them having agency or a soul.”²² Because of the way they are constructed—head on each side like handholds, the dog's tail curved to form a handle—we are reminded that these vessels are both decorative and functional, able to fluidly transform from art object to a means of providing sustenance.

Just as Payne draws inspiration from Irish and Tamil folklore, so Helen Flockhart references the stories of Greek mythology and Scottish history. Often focussing on a female protagonist, Flockhart paints a red-haired woman into many of her paintings. As this woman moves from place to place, painting to painting, it is as if Flockhart is unspooling for us a tale of her own making. We see as she moves through forests, through bare interiors, morphing from naked to clothed, alone to accompanied. The paintings are always strangely surreal and beautifully rendered, with a kind of Pre-Raphaelite attention to detail. In *I was Chloris, who am now called Flora* (2022), we see the familiar red-haired woman play the part of Chloris, a nymph from Greek mythology, who was abducted and raped by Zephyrus, the West Wind, transforming her into her Roman counterpart Flora, goddess of the flowering of plants. Perhaps one of the most well-known depictions of this story in art is Botticelli's *Primavera*, where we see Chloris (on the left-hand side of the painting) just as she is being captured by Zephyrus, who swoops down through the trees to grab her. In Flockhart's version (who's title is taken from Ovid's *Fasti*), Chloris is trying to hold Zephyrus at bay as he crawls sinisterly toward her on all fours. He is depicted as a green man, in reference to Beltane, the Celtic equivalent of The Floralia (Flora's festival in ancient Rome), where a procession of fire-bearing participants is led by a May Queen and a Green Man. Chloris is shown in transformation, her skin almost completely covered by flowers, only her face and hand revealing her former self.

All of the works in *I take what is mine* are drawn from an exploration of narrative, the way stories are woven into the art objects created. bell hooks wrote that art objects are “merely mirrors, giving a glimpse that is also a shadow of what was once real, present, concrete.”²³ In this

sense, they portray the reality of the past, a moment that once was and no longer exists. They allow the viewer a glimpse into interior worlds, into the ephemerality of memory, thoughts and events. This, in many ways, rings true to the works of James Owens who, with a dream-like quality, conjures scenes intermingled with memory, heritage, contemporary culture and the imaginary. Having lived in the Cotswolds when he was a child, Owens developed a closeness to the countryside and nature which is evident in his works, often situated outdoors and populated by a plethora of flora and fauna. His painting *Death of the black swan* (2022) appears aquatic in its use of varying shades of blue, a woman sitting at the centre of a murky landscape as the black swan glides past, shot through with arrows, and what looks like a small white tear dripping from its eye. What is typical of Owens's paintings is the way they seem to exist in a liminal state. Like many of the works in this show, there is a feeling that we are entering into a world different from our own. The titular character of the black swan (which appears in other works by Owens) gives the painting a kind of folkloric quality that stretches to the way the plants seem to envelope the whole landscape, while the backdrop to the painting looks as though it has been patchworked together, displaying different locations, time periods, memories. Similarly, others of his paintings from the show employ these techniques, such as *Hunt no more* (2022), while a painting such as *Resting in violet light* (2022) has the narrative sensibilities of a Plum Cloutman painting in which the characters are deep within their own interior worlds.

I take what is mine is a deep dive into the strange, and at times humorous, realms evoked by mythology, reality and imagination. Viewed together, these works present a dialogue through which we see the world in its many iterations; the real and unreal, the past and present. It asks us to consider the broader context that exists outside of the 'snapshots' given, while challenging us to decipher their many symbolic idiosyncrasies.

Rochelle Roberts, 2022

¹ Stephanie Bailey, 'miart 2022: Artists Highlights', published on Ocula, 6 April 2022 <https://ocula.com/magazine/insights/miart-2022-artist-highlights/>

² Anousha Payne, published on YMC <https://www.youmustcreate.com/2022/anousha-payne/>

³ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: visual politics* (The New York Press, 1995, p. 49)