

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Nina Royle

Down Your Tresses

There is something fundamental about the relationship between making art and making sense. It's to do with the questions that confront artists when they enter the studio. What am I going to do? Why am I doing this? Not only must they wrestle with existential dilemmas like this, but also with what has gone before. With art history and all the ways artists have addressed these questions already. And then of course how to make sense of this activity that takes place in a space set physically and imaginatively apart from the traffic of daily life? What flows between? How to do art here, today, at all?

Nina's work is richly layered, combining dreamlike imagery with a sensuous thingness, an assertive presence in the world. She brings together the real and imagined to approach something intuited about the way we experience life. Every work has the sense of a fleeting point of still clarity in the tidal rush of the everyday: a feeling as nebulous and vivid as that conjured by the image of a shawl hanging (caught?) on a nail in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. Impressions as ineffable as this are necessarily approached by circuitous routes, often returning to/reworking the same motif or way of painting over and over; building what the artist calls a kind of muscle memory.

Nina paints mostly on gesso panels, which she prepares herself. This is where and how I imagine she begins, easing herself into the work of the studio, into the questions that greet her: through a mindful, ancient practice associated with religious icon painting that dates back to the third century. For the painters of these early Christian images, the painstaking preparation process was much about reaching a state of mind before painting can commence. Gesso is a mixture of chalk or alabaster, gypsum and a binder (animal glue) that must be applied as a very thin liquid in up to ten layers, brushed in alternating directions (top to bottom then left to right) to ensure even tension as it dries, and sanded afterwards to an ivory finish. It can't be rushed. The resulting surface has exceptional qualities of absorption, luminosity and smoothness.

Much of her imagery already exists in the world; it comes from a variety of art historical sources but sometimes also draws on the visual environment of the mass-produced, from postcard landscapes to decorative fabrics. She says that the limb-loosening influence of her Shiatsu practice brings a lightness to the process of mining the languages of others. She might start with a detail from a Roman fresco or the gutsy impasto surface of a Philip Guston, and draw it into her own lexicon, an ever-expanding glossary where every motif, every technique, is the start or an end of a painting.

And why make a painting? The language of paint is like any other language: a tool, a tongue, to make emotional or intellectual sense of the world. To paint is to bring lyrical order to what is felt, perceived; to sort and sift and assemble contingent relations between content and form, between the symbolic order of images and the physical agency of materials. Each painting is a momentary resolution of this process, a point of rest and departure.

Nina's paintings are complex; they hover in a liminal place like the studio itself. Through iconographic allusion and formal devices she choreographs movement between imagined and perceptual space: there are frames within frames, spaces within spaces; windows opening onto other worlds and veils (lacework, fishing nets) to look through. Mirrors and reflective surfaces – which held special significance in Mayan mythology as portals to other, spiritual realms – are recurring features.

The symbolic mirrors also hint at ways in which the work mediates ideas about self-presentation and female representation. There are classical nudes (*Tapestry*) and partial self-portraits (*In the Depths of Thought*); subtle gender ambiguities and occasionally the artist's likeness in iterations of a Roman woman at her toilette (*Searching For Silver; Down Your Tresses*). In the complex staging of *Times Hands in Reflections* the viewer is caught in the interlocking, appraising gazes of figures, mirrors, shadows and reflections (all works 2022).

In the warp and weft of brushstrokes, braided hair and daddy long legs, of fishing nets and perspective grids, I am reminded of the 'meshwork' metaphor used by anthropologist Tim Ingold (borrowing from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari) to explain how life unfolds along emergent, indeterminate, contingent, historical, narrative *lines* of becoming. Lines that, as Nina demonstrates, might be drawn, woven, walked; lines that come together and drift apart; straight and rambling lines that tangle, cross and knot. Connections made, pathways altered, new lines of enquiry opened.

As an idea such lines of becoming are not so far from the meridian 'strings' of Chinese medicine: channels connecting points in the body along which energy (chi) flows. Nina describes her Shiatsu practice – which is based on the concept of chi – as a form of release from western ways of thinking. Setting aside the primacy of the cerebral, Chinese medicine calls for other (sensory or aesthetic*) ways of knowing: ways that weave back into her artistic practice and to the intuitive way she works both physically and imaginatively; sensing and sense-making. She talks about attending to the surface of a painting in the same way one practices on the body, feeling what is needed through touch. Being as attentive to the physical qualities of her materials as to the constellations and etymologies of imagery within her visual imaginary requires that Nina bring aspects of life outside the studio into her work. She calls on her whole body and its cumulative experiences to think with, in, and through that which is thought about.

Her paintings enact creative entanglements – another phrase coined by Ingold – where materials, energies and forces of all kinds mix, meld and act upon one another in, as he puts it, 'the generation of [new and remarkable] things.' Such things are for Ingold what allow us as a species to continue to make meaning in the moving through and doing of life; such is the work of artists like Nina. But meaning is transient, her paintings tell us, like the quicksilver shimmer of fishes through the nets and hands of men. Bind and unbind these lines she says, let them tangle and knot and loosen again. Trust your senses and down your tresses.

- Dr Lizzie Fisher, 2022

*The etymological root of aesthetics lies in the Ancient Greek word αἰσθητικός/aisthētikós and pertains to sensory perception. This derives in turn from αἰσθάνομαι/aisthánomai, or "I perceive, sense, learn."

References:

Ingold, T. 2010. Bringing Things to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials. Working Paper #15, *Realities*, ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. 2004. *A Thousand Plateaus* trans. B. Massumi. London: Continuum.

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