

## FEELING THEIR WAY

Jacqueline Alkema, Mabli Jen Eustace, Llinos Thomas.

Currently showing at Bay Art Gallery in Cardiff is the work of three painters brought together by the gallery's director Philip Nicol, a painter himself. Nicol's eye for the formal language of painting is much in evidence here, not only in his choice of artworks but also in their curation. A seamless momentum is achieved between very different styles and approaches so that each group of paintings is both distinctive and connected by comparison with others. This exhibition is as much about the language and process of painting as it is about the subjects that each artist puts into play.

Llinos Thomas' refers to her paintings as *nature vivant* – neither *nature morte* nor *tableau vivant* in the photographic sense, but more of a hybrid. Thomas sets out to subvert conventional notions of still life as the representation of passive objects. Instead, she says, her objects have a life within the picture: "... they move around the picture plane and interact with abstract shapes". This has the effect of transforming them into active subjects, sometimes recognisable, at others times, ambiguous. I was intrigued to be told by Alkema that Thomas constructs some of her models expressly for the purpose of painting. Some are even crocheted, though once painted, little remains of any sense of cosy craft. Even given the vibrant colours, the playful brushwork and the abundance of large patches of glitter, there is only the smallest suggestion of whimsy in these paintings. Instead, Thomas' active subjects give off a sense of pent up energy. There is darkness and disturbance in them as they lurk between the flamboyant patches; things boil beneath the surface.

Jacqueline Alkema's *Bridal Suite* is a series of four paintings of plump, pouting, porcelain-skinned girl-brides dressed to the nines in white frocks, with each one slightly squashed into her frame. They have the innocence of first communicants until you look up close. There you discover that they have been sponged, washed, scrubbed and stroked, much as a body might be. Ominously, there is also scratching, scraping and marking to be seen. Blood red and loosely drawn hands float in front of one such figure; her lips sewn up. In another, there is the suggestion of a translucent ruff (the metaphorical millstone around the neck). To achieve the backgrounds in these paintings Alkema rolls on a variety of dark translucent pigments that eventually achieve the dense blackness required to lend a sense of fragility to her figures. With the alternate applications of these dark glazes and the whites of the diaphanous taffeta and taut skin, indistinct edges emerge so that the figures appear to breathe. Other paintings of Alkema's pursue similar themes of rites of passage and autobiographical experiences, each poignantly suggested by their title. Some of these, such as in the series *Handmaid*, trust even more to the serendipity and suggestibility of process. By way of further insight into the artist's working practice, the exhibition also includes a small selection of Alkema's drawings. Here, with the lightest of touches, she delicately coaxes figures out of the gloom with chalk, tissue and pastel.

While Alkema's paintings draw heavily on inscribed memory and Thomas' on observation, abstraction and free association, Mabli Jen Eustace's paintings make use of photographs she has taken of herself. She cuts and reconstructs these images into a multiplicity of views and movements. The resulting collages become the compositional source for her paintings. Unlike Alkema, whose figures emerge during the process of painting, Eustace plots her compositions on the canvas with ink and pencil before embarking on a work. Her paintings are complex, ambiguous and full of movement. To achieve this, effective use is made of a narrow range of complementary colours and their variable saturation. Combined with the inventive layering of a variety of opaque and translucent marks, this causes her paintings to vibrate and shimmer. The paintings in the exhibition are large, including some 'six footers'; their effect is immersive. Eustace makes use of all these ploys to confuse and delay recognition of her subjects; the viewer is left unsure whether form or content predominate. There is feeling here, not psychological in the manner depicted in the paintings of Alkema and Thomas, but rather in the artist's familiarity with the articulation of her own body, both as model and painter. There is certainly a sureness of expressive gesture deriving from both. Eustace is an exceptionally talented young painter who understands, even at this early stage in her career, the wider community of painters to which she belongs and from whom she can learn.

All three painters share an expressive approach to painting, one that is coupled with introspection, introversion and intimacy. All appear mindful of artistic debts to predecessors and contemporaries. And though I am being speculative and selective here, I sense that these seem to range between painters as far apart in time and place as the loosely-worked monochromatic portraits of Frans Hals and Marlene Dumas in Alkema's painting to the complex interactions between figure and plane in paintings by Umberto Boccioni, Cecily Brown, and Jenny Saville in Eustace's. In Thomas' *nature vivants*, despite her protestations, there appears to be a debt to expressionist painters of still life such as Alexej von Jawlensky and perhaps also to Howard Hodgkin's abstractions of things remembered. But what most impresses here is that the paintings in this exhibition are sentient and sensuous responses to women's life experiences, afflictions and self-reflection. This is a show that will surely appeal to painters and the wider public alike.

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