

Shadows in the undergrowth: on the paintings of Rachel Lumsden

Rachel Lumsden constructs narratives without telling stories. Her surprisingly large paintings confront the viewer head-on, insisting on engagement. They exude a strong sense of how they were created, of a painter who is remarkably confident in her loose, generous handling of the brush, but simultaneously sensitive to the character of her material and how it operates. In choosing to work with subject matter that combines fantasy, the surreal and a dose of kitsch, Lumsden is in tune with the current "Zeitgeist" in painting. On the other hand, whether she is focussing on the autobiographical or the overlooked paraphernalia of the everyday, the themes are zany individual.

This publication reflects Rachel Lumsden's practice of painting in series, a process that allows her to construct a narrative without being descriptive. The structuring in groups, where each work deals with the same basic subject matter, uses the repetition of imagery and ideas to both chart Lumsden's exploration over a period of several months and to reinforce their impact on the observer. The resulting impression is of a strange two-way temporal process: whilst the series structure creates a staggered dialogue, each individual work is so dense that it functions like a film whose temporal sequence has been collapsed into a single powerful image. This constant shift between the two is due in part to Lumsden's relationship to her materials. Like any good painter she allows or wants her ideas for a project to be taken over by the language of the paint that, in working for itself, diffuses the subject matter. She makes decisions intuitively, seeking an equilibrium between her control of the work and the developments determined by her materials.

When looking at Lumsden's work one can clearly imagine the artist at work. Her paintings communicate the vigour and physical energy with which they are made. She not only uses a variety of brushes but also pours the paint, working on the wall and floor and breaking the rules of her trade by, for example, using wash directly on top of impasto.

The earliest series to be discussed in this publication is **Ancestral Inheritance**, in which each painting depicts an item of furniture that once belonged to the artist's grandmother. The confrontational larger-than-life size of the image conveys Lumsden's reaction to her surroundings as a small child. This is heightened by the darkness underneath that is both thrilling and scary. The curvaceous outline of the upper edge of the console or wardrobe, as well as the delicately turned legs are visible in each but the object is otherwise dissolved in the sweeping, gestural painting. The whiteness of this in *The Dresser* and *Glory Hole* transforms the objects into the ghosts of furniture as if to express the artist's fading memories of her grandmother's house. In *Windy Cave Meadow* the console is so transparent that its shadow appears more solid than its own disappearing contours, depicted with the minimum of paint. Floating on the neon green background that recalls both old-fashioned wallpaper and the flickering of a myriad of insects, it suggests the uncanny inner life that lies at the heart of inanimate objects.

The subsequent series of work, **Arc Light**, also concentrates on a single item of furniture, in this case a stolid, old-fashioned lampshade such as might have been owned by Lumsden's grandmother. The glowering dark background to each work counterbalances the kitschiness of the subject matter but it is the exaggeratedly long drips of colour that transform the work from being a simple figure/ground relationship to a sinister interpretation of the accoutrements of everyday life. It is as though, brooding on past offences, they are internally combusting rather than innocently staking their claim to a patch of carpet. Lumsden is interested not in the formal quality of lampshades but in how, abstracted from their usual context and imbued with a painterly energy, they take on psychological dimensions more powerful than a human portrait. Contrasts of light and dark are a key element in Rachel Lumsden's work, exploited in this series particularly in the depiction of light in its various strengths and tones. Like the protagonists of **Ancestral Inheritance**, the lampshades develop in their repetition a kind of pact with their gloomy surroundings that is based on their spatial interdependence.

Homeland Security continues Lumsden's investigation of the trivial and overlooked. Her choice of tea cosies is directly linked to the artist's arrival in Switzerland around the time of

9/11 and the war in Afghanistan. Disturbed by the negative propaganda directed at the UK and conscious of her displacement in a new country, the artist focussed on the tea cosy as both archetypically English and vaguely reminiscent, when grouped, of the shapes of manoeuvring tanks. Usually associated with elderly ladies and/or bad taste - in both cases, the epitome of 'naffness' -, Lumsden's tea cosies are made to go to war. Through the scale and repetition of the pink and orange flowers that attempt to transform banal functionalism into decorative object, the images become voluptuously surreal. The bulky, organic forms and off-key colours echo the vocabulary of Philip Guston's painting. Like Guston, Lumsden frequently employs in the **Homeland Security** series the stepped contours of 1930s architecture as a shorthand for the city. In this way she removes the tea cosy image from its traditional twee context and juxtaposes it with a vague sense of urbanism.

Like many contemporary artists, Lumsden unabashedly mixes a broad array of influences, approaches to painting and strategies for achieving effects that collages together traces of earlier artists with various methods of printing, constant shifts between figurative and more abstract elements and deliberate irritations that jar and interrupt the flow of looking. The painting *Unmanned Drones* from **Homeland Security** evokes the uncanny that lurks beneath the surface in David Lynch's films. In the following series, **Dashboard Talisman** Lumsden plays even harder with the ambivalence produced by the elevation of something small and insignificant to a weighty painterly subject, exploding the scale, exaggerating the angle and shifting between camouflaged and recognisable elements.

Lumsden's determination to choose as her subject matter objects that are normally ignored, merely tolerated or outrightly disliked continues doggedly in **Dashboard Talisman**. Always seeking ideas in the murky undergrowth of the everyday and what it says about human psychology, the artist's attention was attracted by the furry animal-imitation mascots that hang from rear-view mirrors in cars. Feeling a certain sympathy with these talismen that are left to swing pathetically and take motorists' flak, Lumsden began to photograph them, eventually recording their dormant life in 500 parked cars. Her obsessive voyeurism is as interesting as the ensuing blown up images of garishly coloured creatures, not least because her enforced position leaning over the bonnet of the car resulted in a perspective from above the object that renders it abstract and slows down the process of reading the work.

As with all Lumsden's paintings, the investigation of a theme through the structure of a series encourages the accumulated understanding of clues and the transfer of meaning between works. In the case of **Dashboard Talisman** the central tragicomic character of the fluffy figures is intensified in the confrontation, one after the other, of the goofy features of the mascot that fill the large and claustrophobic space of the canvas. The stippled paint used to imitate fake fur in *Driving Sideways* is more realistic than the fluidly painted denotation of look-alike animal skin in *Diamonds on my Windshield* but in both Lumsden is concerned less with loyally reproducing her glimpses into driving fetishes than in using these as a pretext for creating spatial relationships. Occasionally, as in *Freefall*, one has the vague sense of rushing by the conglomeration of dashboard, driver's knee and paraphernalia on the car seat, as if we were the ones moving. However, in the majority of works in **Dashboard Talisman** Lumsden transforms the background into her own semi-abstract painting, washing paint over sprayed areas, partially obscuring the figure with clouds of white or suspending them in a free-fall comic-book space of densely layered colour.

Lumsden's process of combining various techniques in order to best express the subject of a work is epitomised in the series **Schmarotzer**. Ironically, her adaptation of materials is echoed in the subject of mutation for we are confronted with flowers, birds and insects that are parasites or have transformed in order to survive in a new environment. Once again, the scale of the work is critical in evoking the viewer's mixture of fascination and horror. An enormous spider sits astride the humming bird it is consuming; brilliantly coloured flowers look too artificial to be real and the recurring acid green evokes a nuclear fall out. Lumsden acknowledges the work of the Japanese filmmaker, Miyazaki as an important influence but this series also demonstrates her interest in natural or mechanical structures such as microcells or motherboards. In *Adaptive Engineering* the tree on which the humming birds perch has mutated into such a system as if to underline the increasing artificial interventions into the natural world. The seedpods

in *Cold Fusion Code*, on the other hand, appear to be inhabited by new life forms created by the decorative structures surrounding them. These are always ambiguous, an uneasy combination of support system and alien mechanism. In *Kriechstrom*, for example, Lumsden uses a nailbrush dragged across the canvas to create irregular, spidery lines that imbue the work with a sense of rushing energy and are also the nearest visual equivalent to white noise. Both the lines and the printed pattern resembling an electrical pathway diagram are devices to ground the birds within the overall image, creating a background that emphasises the general sense of nervousness rather than developing a specific narrative.

In spite of the toughness of both their subject matter and the way in which they are made - their visual noise - the lasting impression of these series is of a muffled silence, a still space that exists between what the artist chooses to reveal and what to conceal. However the most recent group of works, **Bird Wars** has a different tenor, demonstrating Lumsden's continuing need both to challenge her own capability and to allow ideas and sensations to emerge through the painting process. These paintings deliver a more direct punch, coming closest to presenting a traditional picture yet hardest of all her work to date to pin down. In spite of their immediately recognisable construction from a combination of tree, figures and birds - a tight knit vocabulary characteristic of each of the series - their subcutaneous content refuses a straight reading. Recalling the disturbing characters that occupy children's storybooks, the falcon men of **Bird Wars** are inspired by 17th century book illustration and prints, the caricatures and fantastical figures created by Hogarth and Goya, as well as computer games. At the heart of the work Lumsden continues the theme of mutation in the male figure, wearing military dress, which has transformed into a falcon man, his helmet having become an integral part of his body.

Lumsden is clearly interested in the research necessary for recreating details such as the way clothing functions, an area she investigates through the costumes of Goya and Velázquez. However the theme is also a pretext for experimenting with how a two dimensional surface can be used to create the illusion of space. The flat tree in *Friss Vogel, oder stirb!* gives the impression of having been painted by numbers and yet the block of colour is nevertheless readable as a tree. The pink background has a similar effect of flattening the overall image, yet it is crucial in providing space for the figures to stand in, fixed in their pools of green like toy soldiers. The glowering city in the background is also flattened out in *Fall Out (One of These Fine Days)*, focussing attention on the sickly looking birds that have been painted with a craquelure effect that corresponds with their dissolving environment. The sensation created by the **Bird Wars** series of being suspended in the residue of a nightmare is brought to a head in the post-atomic land-scape occupied by an Otto Lilienthal flying figure in *Keeping Bad Company*. Bringing the subliminal aggression and warmongering of **Bird Wars** to the surface, *Clutching at Straws* freeze-frames the moment in which the animal is consumed by shock and rage as it is destroyed. Still ferocious, the bear's energy radiates a poisonous green into its surroundings.

Like most artists of her generation Lumsden makes no clear distinction between figuration and abstraction, believing that painting can oscillate between materiality and the evocation of illusion, between surface matter and the imaginary dimension. Her paintings are both seductive and nightmarish, sensuous and awkward, reminiscent of traditional painterly values and wholly contemporary. As the six series investigated in this publication demonstrate, the artist has gradually shifted her attention from the potential inner life of subjects taken from the sphere of memory and domesticity to more explicit scenes of aggression and threat. Lumsden's interest lies primarily in the endless ways in which pigment can be applied to a surface but this exploration excludes neither illusionism nor psychological effect. On the contrary: as **Bird Wars** demonstrates, Lumsden is becoming ever more adept at delivering a crossfire of sensations that leave us numb but never quite sure what it is we have experienced. We are left sitting on a knife-edge between the rawness of the paint and images that refuse, for the artist as well as for us, to coalesce.

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