

von Goetz

Drawing like a Painter

You would be forgiven for thinking that Hannah Murgatroyd's drawings and paintings tell a story. The characters that populate her images all appear to have their own personality, locked in a fairytale landscape that captures a sense of paradisiacal bliss made strange. Characters recur, giving the impression of lives lived beyond the surface or frame of paper and canvas. The suggestion of relationships kindled, duties fulfilled, hopes dashed, desires sated, senses piqued is certainly there, in the cock of a finger, the flaring of a nostril, the curling of a toe, the upturning of a lip, the furrow of a brow. But the real narrative of Murgatroyd's images is less easy to articulate. Her sensoria of line, colour and form lends a depth of focus to qualities like surface, style and sentiment, often dismissed as superficial, but which for her serve as the driving force.

Drawing

At the root of all this is the craft of drawing. The limitations of the medium frustrate but at the same time it is through drawing's restrictions that, she says, 'I'll find things out'. She sees drawing as a place of potential, where ideas emerge almost of their own accord. It is a process of discovery where forms and characters are not so much drawn but uncovered or kindled. This uncovering appears through pencil, charcoal or pastel marks that assert themselves on the paper with a confident but unpredetermined openness, as if blown along by force of swirling winds. Her depiction of hair, styled in particular and historically specific ways, is a favourite conduit for her blustery lines as much as her outlining of trees and bushes. Tousled locks appear alive, restless, as if activated by the kinds of gales so familiar to Murgatroyd's childhood self, growing up on Dartmoor.

Such spirited lines animate her drawings as much as her paintings, their vitality stemming from drawing's relationship with the unconscious. The immediacy, scale and portability of drawing lends itself to an openness, a risk taking and a sense of 'enquiry', as she puts it, to

von Goetz

which she feels enthral. When embarking on a new work she's never sure where it will lead, which is how she likes it. It allows the drawing to take on a life, a character, a setting, an unspecified story of its own. In *Noble Sentiment* (2016), for example, she had no idea that the brawny figure, eyes closed in contemplative concentration, would end up holding an ox-eye daisy to his nose. But the emergence of this detail gave rise to a proliferation of symbols of flower forms through her most recent works.

Though coming to painting later in life, after art school, Murgatroyd has always been aware of her facility for drawing. During her time at the Royal Drawing School in 2005 a tutor remarked that, 'you draw like a painter'. This, she says, changed everything. Up to this point she had little experience of historical painting but during this year she was tasked with drawing from the National Gallery's collection. Skeptically at first, she settled down in front of Peter Paul Rubens's *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1635–40) and became hooked on, what she calls, his 'circularity, his perspectival pull and rolling line', qualities that persist in Murgatroyd's work to date. She became quickly taken with other paintings too. It was their formal qualities that struck her. At the time she had little prior knowledge of biblical or mythological stories and so, to decode them, had to rely on her eyes instead, on the surface skin of the paintings. She focused on colour, mood, atmosphere and the human relationships – set in often fantastical landscapes, or at least natural scenes filtered through the cultural frames of eye and hand – captured in the application of paint. Despite this initial excitement it was not until an artist residency at the Spinnerei in Leipzig in 2009 that she herself began to paint.

Time

This introduction to painting through the Old Masters proved formative. Murgatroyd draws more from the language and landscape of art history and visual culture than she does, the so-called real. She is drawn to artists who whole-heartedly embrace fiction and artifice. The other-worldly subjects of art-historical painting have also endured. In her works, grapes are mouthed, scents inhaled, wheat fronds clutched, sacks lugged, rocks fingered, bread stolen.

von Goetz

These actions, performed by the various vagabonds, putti, and shepherds that inhabit her work, are not the stuff of contemporary life. They are throwbacks to a past, often make-believe, life. Murgatroyd's part-clad misfits, familiar to genre and landscape paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, appear to combine Antoine Watteau's decorative depictions of human gesture, say, with the sentimentality of François Boucher's wide-eyed, reclining shepherdesses.

Such references to the Old Masters are not a simple postmodern appropriation though. Rather, they amount to, what Murgatroyd calls, 'inhabiting the past through marks made'. The bristling surfaces of Jean-Honoré Fragonard butt up against the looser energy of a John Constable study, and the languid line of a Leonardo drawing. There are contemporary influences in there too, like David Salle's explicit borrowing from other artists, or Douglas Coupland's compression of history, personal anecdote, social commentary and sci-fi narratives of the future. Other seemingly more low-brow points of reference exist too. The virtuosity of a Disney landscape, Murgatroyd insists, comprises some of the best landscape drawing in art. She sees Mary Blair's early work on *Snow White* (1951) as having much in common with Helen Frankenthaler's mid-twentieth century handling of colour. Similarly, Murgatroyd's characteristic mark-making style while suffused with rococo fancy and excess, is located in a relationship with mainstream cultural references from the 1950s and 60s: the bouffant bob, a chunky turtleneck jumper, exaggerated cartoon-like eyes, the hourglass figure, and saucy seaside postcards. Murgatroyd sees this accumulation of wide-ranging points of historical reference as the 'permeable slippages of past, present, future held in one image, representing No Time.'

The Bucolic

Murgatroyd's magpie-like picking through art history and visual culture serves simultaneously as a commentary about class, cultural value and hierarchies of worth. She deliberately borrows from visual languages not always deemed tasteful by the fine art establishment. Her interest in certain recurring themes like the pastoral, for example, is a case in point. She

von Goetz

observes how mainstream middle-class values now aspire, unreservedly, to bucolic lifestyles: clean living, eating organic, growing your own. Murgatroyd's sense is that when contemporary art deals in such idealisations of the landscape it is expected to be done in the spirit of critique because the bucolic is deemed inauthentic. But her experience of the landscape, growing up on the edge of Dartmoor's wilderness, was genuinely characterised by the kinds of blue-skied liberties, and intimate encounters with bodies, as well as with nature, so familiar to the language of the bucolic.

She cites other reasons for her interest in mediated depictions of archetypal pastoral landscape as well. 'The bucolic,' Murgatroyd says, 'has been a much maligned art form'. This is, in part, why she is drawn to it. Like her cast of outsider figures or her borrowing from a Disney aesthetic, she seeks out the overlooked and undervalued. The appeal of the bucolic goes further still. Like the storyline of a Disney animation it is underpinned by idealisations, by hopes and dreams. Such desires or aspirations, at least in contemporary Britain, are widely ridiculed as saccharine, delusory or, at best, culturally conservative. But Murgatroyd is attracted to such social figures, cultural forms or sentiments precisely because they are rebuffed by so-called high culture. The allure of these tropes, it turns out, is even more personal. Though now enjoying emerging recognition, Murgatroyd's debut with von Goetz gallery at Draw Art Fair marks the first solo presentation of her work in London, at the age of 42. She recalls, however, the years that she has drawn and painted in almost complete isolation. She feels an affinity, therefore, with the incongruous solitary female vagabonds and hermits that populate her work, who function as a metaphor for the years in which she made art alone, without audience.

'For a long time,' she says, 'no-one was interested in figurative paintings, especially depictions of the face. The face is seen as a kind of despot,' she observes, 'people assume its meaning is fixed, as if you're being told what to feel. People are unwilling to treat a face as ambiguous.' She argues, however, that her figures remain aloof, inscrutable, because they are never drawn into direct eye contact with the viewer. Their gaze is set elsewhere, among landscapes

von Goetz

and figures either within or beyond the picture frame. There is no suggestion of the voyeuristic male gaze here, no confrontation between viewer and viewed. Her figures are self-contained and otherworldly. They are lent an air of unselfconscious, even innocent, freedom appearing, in the manner in which Murgatroyd has long worked, to transcend the human need for external validation.

The Absurd

Despite the unselfconscious self-sufficiency of her figures' gaze Murgatroyd's work is, paradoxically, streaked with theatricality and flamboyance. She recalls warmly Dylan Thomas's florid evocations of landscape, similarly tinged with eroticism:

Where no seed stirs,
The fruit of man unwrinkles in the stars,
Bright as a fig;
Where no wax is, the candle shows its hairs.¹

She puts the lure of such sensual expression down to her Welsh ancestry, finding affinity with the ridiculous yet heart-felt sensibility associated with figures such as Tom Jones and Shirley Bassey. Take *Sacred* (2019). The dressed figure, whose mass of riotous curly hair and huge doleful eyes is set amongst less heavily worked areas suggestive of foliage. From these fronds giant drops of liquid erupt. The figure – combining an extravagant bosom standing comically to attention and a protruding Adams apple – sticks out their tongue to catch a droplet. Another droplet catches on their upturned button nose, still another runs down their breast, determinedly making its way towards a prominent nipple. So many elements of this drawing, when articulated in words, have the potential to be construed as highly sexual: the open mouth, the outstretched tongue, the erect nipple, the liberal spray of fluids. But this is a tease. Murgatroyd undoes these sexual overtones by so heavily overdoing them as to make them

¹ Dylan Thomas, 'Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines', 1934.

von Goetz

ludicrous: absurd rather than provocative, the baby-faced figure naive and unselfconscious rather than seductive.

This is much more than straight pastiche however. It is easy to mistake Murgatroyd's work as being guided by a spirit of caricature and innuendo familiar to Carry On films or Robert Crumb cartoons but in fact many of the bodies that Murgatroyd paints are much closer to her personal lived-experiences. The bodies she depicts are roughly based on her own hourglass and, in her words 'cartoon-like', figure which might be assumed to be exaggerated, synthetic, even absurd. In fact, Murgatroyd's repeated depiction of large breasts is a provocation to us, the viewer. How ridiculous, her work appears to say, that because you see large, smooth, pert breasts you think erotica, because you see erect nipples you think sexual arousal. In fact, breasts, though a prominent feature of her work, are rarely truly sexualised. The female figure in *Curiosity* (2019), for example, is based on Saint Jerome who is often depicted bare-chested through art history. Her breasts, lit up by candlelight, form the painting's focal point, yet they appear almost detached from her. Both of the two figures in the painting seem entirely oblivious to them in fact. It's just us that either can't help looking or prudishly avert our gaze altogether; these are some of Murgatroyd's challenges to us: can you see beyond the breasts?

Even in a drawing like *Hermit* (2019) in which breasts are more deliberately exposed the gesture of the figure pulling up her jumper to just above her nipples, still strikes as something other than titillation. Hermit is alone in the landscape; eyes turned skyward she sits mermaid-like against a backdrop of hills or mountains, maybe at sunset. The revelation of her breasts appears self-gratifying, a liberation, a sensuous desire for the exposure of skin to the elements, nothing whatever to do with us, our gaze, or the gaze of an unspecified other.

The timeless human urges and desires that compel Murgatroyd's characters are made known not just through their actions but by their physical rendition on paper and canvas. Murgatroyd's exuberant and hyper-sensual painterly techniques create variations of moods through surfaces that swim before our eyes: heavily worked areas of smooth flesh combine

von Goetz

with expanses of barely-touched canvas; forms emerge, sometimes from a scrawly rough handling, at others from an economy of judiciously placed hatching; colour palettes lurch from unrestrained saccharine pastels and muddy browns to more classical graphite and red crayon; and emotions fluctuate between rapt wonderment, nostalgia and bliss. As Murgatroyd leaps from one texture, tonal range, historical moment or fiction to the next, she enacts bold shifts in perspective; associations wheel, gestures transcend, and her appetite for visiting and revisiting her own circular narratives goes unsated.

Lizzie Lloyd 2019