

Border Lands

Essay for Clare Woods' monograph *Strange Meetings*, Art/Books, 2016

Jennifer Higgin

'No "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain.'

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)

Recently, Clare Woods has been making studies of ballet shoes and dancers' feet. When I asked her why, she explained that she is fascinated by the contrast between the bloody, damaged toes of the ballerina and the pink silk of the pointe shoe; the tension between appearance and reality, perhaps. In her small painting *Forget Me Not* (2015), the shoe and the skin merge into one. The choppy, meaty reds that form the lower part of the foot evoke heat and pain, while higher up, the ankle softens into dreamy, fleshy-pink-and-pale-blue brushstrokes, as if the dancer, transcending her hurt, is dissolving into the movement of the dance. At once an image of joy and pain, it embodies the contradictions between the deceptive delicacy of the ballerina and the punishing training and constant agony that she must experience in order to create an illusion of lightness and grace. As I looked at this painting, it struck me that perhaps the ballerina's struggle is simply another version of the one many people face in the ever-changing choreography of daily life.

Like so many artists before her, the tension between what we see and what we actually experience has long inspired Woods. (What do we share? What drives us apart? What inconsistencies do we live with? How do we live with the knowledge of suffering, both of others and ourselves?) She has often spoken of her interest in the idea of borders, whether between countries, people, centuries or ideas. She has even lived for many years in the countryside that borders Wales and England, and has taken countless photographs of the natural landscape (she told me that 'a perfect view is hard to find'). For almost two decades, she has translated these photographs into deliriously high-gloss, semi-abstracted compositions on aluminium – muddy browns and deep blues pierced with vivid shafts of light – that, despite their obvious artificiality almost smell damp with undergrowth and unease (what is hidden here?). Look at these paintings closely and it is hard not to feel that you are actually in them.

These deeply immersive and often enormous landscapes shift between description and something beyond; while the actual, physical world of thickets and forests and fields is beautifully conveyed, so too is a more oblique, enigmatic site of mood and atmosphere and feeling: the particular in the universal, experienced and translated by one person.

Woods originally studied sculpture, and her preoccupation with forms in space – which she now, of course, translates into two-dimensional images – is manifest. Like bodies themselves, these paintings are not simple things, moving as they do between resemblance and evocation. They do not let you rest. Despite often hovering in a netherworld of delirious figuration and abstraction, each one of them stems from an image of *something*, be it a newspaper, a postcard, a photograph or the work of a sculptor or painter she admires. In some paintings, this relationship to a physical source is less obvious than in others. In recent years, she has replaced high-gloss acrylic with oil paint, a medium that can soften a harsh blow in an instant and glow with the subtlety of filtered sunlight. Relative to the artist's earlier work, her latest paintings are also quite small – a painted head is not so different in size from an actual one. This creates a new kind of intimacy. *Scream Loop* (2015), for instance, feels more like a glimpse into a confused and anxious state of mind than anything else: structures are broken down into an ambiguous vortex of swirling greens, pinks and yellows interrupted by what could be an inverted top hat or an anvil. Yet *Strawberry Thief* (2015) is very recognizably a monstrous, see-through, chocolate-brown head, its eyes and mouth cut out to reveal a rosy background: a kind of inverted X-ray. Although *Dazzle* (2015) could easily be described as a picture of a tree reflected in a lilac pond, its stark branches silhouetted like witches' fingers against a fading sunset, it could also, very simply, be an explosion of paint. I doubt that hierarchies of 'realness' (a slippery word at the best of times) count for very much here. After all, as well as alluding to a state of mind, a vortex could also describe the swirling interior of a nest, which, to the artist, is a 'perfect form' and 'the ultimate sculpture'.

The realm that Woods pictures is a highly charged and malleable one, held together more tightly by tension than harmony. In *A Push and a Shove* (2015), a phallic, peachy-pink shape thrusts through a maelstrom of greens, shitty yellows, dark blues and greys. Despite the free urgency of the brushstrokes, as with many of these

paintings, parts of the surface have been taped and repainted until precise layers overlap each in the chaos. It is unsettling. Reality, here, is an unstable thing and associations inevitably bleed into another: this pinkish form could be a flaccid penis or a sausage or an intestine or an airless balloon or an amputee's stump, while a smear of blue paint is no less 'real' or figurative than the smear of paint that evokes a flash of blue on a bird's wing.

Of course, tensions abound not only in the borders between countries and people (and between paintings and looking, and what we allow ourselves to see or not to see), but in the very personal relationship we have with our own bodies – the fragile border we all inhabit between sickness and health, confusion and understanding, and, ultimately, life and death. Perhaps this explains why bodies spring to mind even when these pictures are not ostensibly about them. Despite their wild, painterly distortions and abstractions, allusions to heads, limbs and intestines abound: it is like seeing a familiar world through a very distorted lens. In this sense, the ambiguity here reiterates how mysterious bodies are and how little we seem to really know about them, despite inhabiting them. That said, it is important to remember that a painting is not an explanation: good ones exist because they express something that cannot be said in any other way (each image follows its own logic). And what this something might be is up for grabs.

I recently visited Woods in Hereford and she showed me around her studio. Above her desk was a wall of images; a kind of mood board for her paintings and collages. Seemingly countless clippings, photocopies, photographs and postcards formed a desperate, concentrated study of the terrible things that can be done to, and experienced by, bodies. Many of the images were of masked, bandaged or severed heads. Time was slippery. Dreadful fragments ricocheted across centuries: a classical sculpture of a warrior holding aloft the head of a slayed enemy eerily presaged the composition of a video still of a recent atrocity in the Middle East. Ancient statues of soldiers and gods, their limbs missing or damaged, echoed newspaper images of the victims of suicide bombers; a clipping about Harry Patch, the last soldier from the First World War to die, was thrown into sharp relief by illustrations from bandage manuals. An Egyptian mummy jostled with reproductions of great works by twentieth-century masters: Eduardo Paolozzi wax heads, a small, anguished face by

Edvard Munch, a fragile sketch by Louise Bourgeois, Phyllida Barlow's monumental abstract sculptures, Barbara Hepworth's organic forms. I also spotted a small picture by the famous war photojournalist Don McCullin, who has moved to the English countryside and now takes landscape shots. I asked Woods about her interest in his work and she described his photographs as containing 'a kind of unarguable truth'. What was made clear in this pantheon of pain was how frightening, how out of control the world – and by association, humans – can be and conversely, how art, in its own oblique way, can help scabble back a semblance of sanity in the midst of this horror by its calm filtering, arranging and interpreting of information. If we can see it and name it and reproduce it, perhaps we can also learn to reflect upon it and control it.

I feel that Woods' interest in pain – that of others, generally, and her own, specifically – is, in her reiteration of its infinite variations, an attempt to understand how we transcend the grief and hurt that this planet seems to deal out so easily, by honouring both its subjectivity and universality. But that said, I think the great humanity of her paintings lies in their emphatic celebration of living as a singular experience. There is no certainty here (is there, anywhere?). What any of this means is up to you. You complete the picture.

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