

Jack Trolove: Contemporary Baroque

Jack Trolove is the quintessential *painter's painter*. His works are all about oil paint and how he applies it. He paints 'wet on wet', layering thick portions of fresh, intense colour beside and on top of one another to create the illusion of roughly hewn, three dimensional form. At a time when more and more artists are stepping away from the canvas in favour of their computer screens, the luscious tactility of paintings drenched in heavy impasto feels almost wickedly satisfying.

Wet on wet is not a popular technique with painters these days, probably because it's extremely difficult to master. The paint needs to be freshly mixed before each application and laid on thickly in one stroke to retain its vitality. If it's not exactly the right consistency it'll smear into the layer below and become featureless mud. But the satisfying immediacy of this technique comes with high risk - hundreds of dollars of expensive art materials can be rendered worthless with one wrong scrape of a palette knife - but, when the painting succeeds, as Trolove demonstrates, the result is sensational.

Working *wet on wet* denies the painter the indulgence of fussing with meticulous detail. Features have to be reduced to their essence and modelled broadly with contrasting light and shadow. This necessary simplifying of form means the faces Trolove paints share a similar, boldly sculptural structure. When the colours used are more restricted, as in *Eclipse* for example, perceptions of depth are suppressed and the face almost becomes a phantom image, partially submerged beneath the turbulently knifed surface of paint. With so much detail left out, the unconscious mind inevitably tries to fill in what it considers to be missing, 'joining the dots' to recreate something familiar.

Although they're often loosely based on images of people he knows, Trolove's initial subject matter is only ever the starting point, providing "some scaffolding" for him to begin sculpting paint onto. The image he started with is then put aside and the painting takes on its own momentum. "It becomes about movement and what the marks are trying to say" he explains. "I try to suggest a form but not describe it... I don't think of my paintings as portraits, even though that's how people often talk about them. I like the idea that they're images of an energy or an experience rather than a particular person."

As one walks closer to Trolove's paintings, their vigorously sculpted surfaces of faceted plains have the physicality of a raw expressionist landscape. Only when you step back, sometimes way back, do the features of the underlying face emerge.

From a distance, Trolove's fractured use of bold colour gives his paintings a rather Post-Impressionist feel. They appear reminiscent of early Fauvist works by Matisse or the late Tahitian portraits by Gauguin, but he explains this simply a coincidence of technique rather than conscious influence. Instead, Trolove draws his inspiration from much earlier Mannerist painters like Michelangelo and the late works of Goya, artists obsessed with struggle of the human condition and the hope for deliverance from the trials and torments of physical existence.

One of Trolove's most resonant visual memories is his first experience of seeing the archetypal Guido Reni painting of Saint Sebastian at Auckland Art Gallery 'in the flesh'. As an impressionable teenager, he remembers being totally transfixed by it. This life sized high-baroque painting of a writhing, near naked youth seemed to encapsulate the very meaning of life as he saw it; strength, vitality, vulnerability and transience.

Trolove grew up in a big Irish catholic family in rural Canterbury so strength, vulnerability and the hope of a better life through hard work are in his genes. He remembers a childhood immersed in story-telling. "My mother was one of seven sisters. Most of them and their kids are involved in story-telling one way or another through theatre, film, writing or teaching." The local church was another rich source of stories in his formative years. He remembers the atmosphere in the local church where he sometimes served as an altar boy as being other-worldly. Reproductions of famous paintings of the Stations of the Cross hung around the walls documenting Christ's torturous journey, overlooked by the eerily compelling faces of statues of the Holy Mother and various saints. He later lost connection with the church when he found its doctrines too prohibitive but its holy mysteries of transformation, both physical and spiritual continued to fascinate him.

More recently, ancient Irish stories of shape-shifters learnt from his grandmother have taken on greater significance. Various references to the 'Selkie', a shape-shifter of Celtic tradition who can slip in and out of its human or seal bodies, have appeared in his work and it might be considered to be a personal totem. Ambiguity of identity and form continue to permeate his current paintings but their titles suggest he no longer feels the need to retreat into mythic realms and now feels more comfortable in the here and now.

In an interview about the wet on wet paintings in his *Medicinal Skins* exhibition at Whitespace last year, Trolove referred to his practice of sculpting thickly applied oil paint with blades as metaphorically "wrapping a protective *skin* over the body's emotional and spiritual experiences... By cutting and spreading paint with knives, I've been able to explore the tactile relationship of human skins and paint skins, charging the marks with my own sensations of changing skins and living between worlds".

When talking about this new body of work, Trolove continues to refer to "skin as a boundary or container", drawing parallels with the physical covering of skin over human flesh with the narrative abilities of paint skin to tell the body's inner story. The simplification of the facial features to essential forms that occurs in his painting process gives his works a palpable three dimensionality, not only in its thick peaks and broad planes of heavily knifed paint but in the roughly hewn sculptural quality of the heads he portrays. Like the questioning religious statues that looked down on him as a child from the church walls or Guido Rene's heroic Saint Sebastian, the faces Trolove paints inspire us to struggle to discover what life is really about and, in so doing, discover and celebrate our true selves.

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