

We call them Trustafarians!

Ahhh! There was this guy, remember, during the riots in London, this historian who made this comment about how the youth now is speaking in patois ... The world is terrified of us. You know, they killed us, they enslaved us, and now they think we are gonna be the same and so they are terrified. But we are really nice people.

This conversation took place at the artist's studio, Cape Town, on 9 October 2015

3.

Deborah Poynton



Seeing is believing

Three Birds Painting (2015) is an oil on canvas by Deborah Poynton. The tilted pictorial plane is divided by two craggy embankments opening up to reveal flowing water collecting in a shallow pool and swirling into darker depths. In the centre of the picture a river bed of angular rocks, pebbles and pond moss is visible beneath the brown water. As the stream appears to flow north, its glassy surface with its reflections of grassy shadows is fractured; it glistens, opaque, and is impenetrable at the top edge of the canvas. Three small birds are interspersed in the foreground, middle and background. Beyond the confines of the river bank Poynton's realist painting style breaks up and the canvas is covered by expanses of white with accents of brown and green gestural mark-making. Green blades of grass shoot upwards, some rooted around the water's edge; others appear rootless, described by bold abstract lines in dark or light green.

Perhaps none of this matters. When looking at Poynton's paintings it is tempting to make all this into something, to imagine a story about what these marks on the canvas could represent. This is heightened when Poynton paints the human form, as she often does, yet this desire to read one's own reality on the canvas can consume and blind us. After this instinctive looking through the lenses of symbolism and narration, a sense of stillness follows, opening up the act of looking to the sensory experience of an object, of colour, form, texture and space. For Poynton's concern with painting is an act of creating ephemeral illusions, of inventing images that play with our comprehension of perceived reality.

[P]ainting is an alternate reality, and in fact it's not a reality, it's a mimicking of a reality; if it were real it would not serve the purpose I want it to serve.

The unsettling perspective of *Three Birds Painting* positions the viewer staring downwards at an image of earth and water that partially reflects what we perceive to be the sky. Somewhere between the elements one might, for a moment, expect to see one's own image

peering down towards the water. Instead, the sky remains empty and, as the surface of the canvas comes into focus, we are reminded of the illusory nature of all painting.

Hansi Momodu-Gordon:

Could you start by talking about what you're working on here in the studio?

Deborah Poynton:

I'm working for my next solo exhibition at Stevenson – it's going to be called *Picnic*. There are several large diptychs, and a whole range of different sizes ... I like the idea of a picnic as a piece of territory from which you can look at nature, but with the safety or containment of this little claimed piece of ground. I feel like a painting is the same thing – I like the analogy. I always feel like my subject is a bit of a red herring really. I play around with the idea of picnic and then people might get quite misled, but actually it's a really profound metaphor for painting and how we are able to look at the world and remain contained, or how we are unable to look out without a frame or a containment.

Going back to when you were beginning to paint, is there a particular series or painting where you feel like you found your language as a painter?

There's always been bits of it right from childhood, but I think the exhibition *Safety and Security*, which was four

huge paintings, diptychs and triptychs, probably was where it began.

What was it about those paintings that made you feel like you'd found your voice?

I always paint the same thing basically and this was the first time I expressed that idea of containment and safety and imagery. Even though it's very easy looking at my paintings to think that they are about a lot of other things, they are really just about that. The following exhibitions, *Everything Matters* and then *Arcadia*, are the same thing, *Land of Cockaigne* is the same thing and now *Picnic* is the same thing. It's always the same thing actually but I find as it goes along it comes out in different ways.

How do the notions of safety and security manifest in the work or your process of making?

It's quite hard to put into words but there's a containment in creating an image, there's a paring down, a filtering, and I find infinite relief in that, just in that very thing. If the image is loaded with symbolism and representation I don't find relief, I find that very wordy and sort of heady and so I look for this wordless relief and it's a containment, and that's the safety – illusory, of course, because a painting is an illusion.

You've previously talked about painting in relation to the ability to invent space and then you said, 'as

if it were for real'. I'm interested in that idea of 'as if', that kind of metaphor that allows something to be 'as if' it's real.

Well, painting is an alternate reality, and in fact it's not a reality, it's a mimicking of a reality; if it were real it would not serve the purpose I want it to serve. But yes, there's a beauty in shaping the form of a reality that I find redemptive or transcendent almost – without that I don't see the point.

Reading in your biography that you moved around quite a lot at a young age, I was wondering if you felt that that kind of movement into different contexts, and of always having to renegotiate your sense of self in relation to your surroundings, had in some way informed this sense of negotiating reality and what is real ...

Yes, I think it completely did. You know, as a child I started to use drawing as a way of – I've spoken about it before – creating a doll's house and inhabiting it as if the drawing or painting were the window of the doll's house looking out. And so I think I have always created this place which I can inhabit, in the imagination, as a way of staying secure or soothing myself.

I suppose it's also a distancing mechanism in a way.

It's a distancing and it's a control. I always feel like a conductor conducting onto the canvas and it's a controlled feeling that's really reassuring actually.

One of the things that's very emotive in the paintings is the way you control light. I know you've talked about the idea of half-light, and going back to the idea of allowing that space for imagination and invention, I wondered if you could talk about how light allows that space and the relationship between the two.

I think light is incredibly powerful. It can become a subject in itself and I suppose I have avoided it. I prefer to use a flat light that increases the sense of immediacy, of a mad degree of illusion. Some people hate the way I use light – it can be seen as deadening in a way. I don't mind; it's true, because that flat light increases the feeling of the painting being like an absolute end in itself, not a path to something else. I sort of hope that when I am an old woman perhaps all I can do is paint light but at the moment I cannot paint light at all. Ja, because light almost ... light is everything, it's really emotive and so it gets in the way. It starts making sense. Maybe light really is certainty or reason like the Stoics believed ... and I want to create uncertainty. But I also like the way colour emerges out of a darker or flatter light, I find that compelling, and I actually do like it when colour almost services light. It becomes, well ...

I hate the word kitsch, but it could interfere with what I'm really doing. But I am hoping that one day I will not give a shit. [Laughs]

A lot of these images have this sort of fantasy feeling, this setting up of a scene that feels very close, recognisable ... but it's slightly outside of known experiences. Does the idea of the fantasy realm, of creating fiction with your images, have any relationship to the work?

It's all just fakery; there's no narrative, there's no other realm. It's all just throwing up illusions. All I care about is that throwing up of an illusory view. I like to play with what painting is or what it's been because I love so much historical painting; I'm fascinated by it and I'm fascinated by how you can't return to it.

I think this question could have the same answer but I'm going to ask it anyway ... Maybe I'm not accepting that there is nothing more because it's so tempting when you're faced with the work to take a journey through it. And, you know, it's what each person brings to it, and I was interested by the dynamics that get set up between the individuals. I guess there's often this intergenerational element to the sitters. I don't know if that is a conscious thing or if it means anything, but for me I felt it linked to a sense of decay and death.

That is all red herring and it is a similar answer to before. All it does is represent that, when you look at it or when you look out there, you form meaning. That's all. So ja, all of that stuff you see but another person might not see and I don't see, unfortunately ... [Laughs]

Can you tell me a little bit about the relationship that you have with the sitters, the models, and how that process works?

Well, I paint my two sons, my partner and one or two other people. I like to paint them over and over again because I feel the more I paint them the more diffused and less portraiture it is and the more I can just use them. I feel like when you paint a person it's so laden, and I know these people so well ... I can't imagine going and finding someone else and putting them in my painting, it would seem like I was trying to say something I'm not trying to say.

Is it important to you that you have that kind of connection with the person you're painting, to know them?

Funnily enough, one of them I don't know really well, which is Peter. He's a German professor in Cologne and I've photographed him over the years and I paint him. The funny thing about him is that he completely lets go and I think that's part of it: all of these people let go, they don't care what I do with the image.

When photographing them, are there particular things you are looking for in gesture, in pose, do you have an idea of what you're looking for?

I completely pose them – there's absolutely nothing accidental about it. It's very controlled and often quite uncomfortable but I am looking for resonances of art historical poses. I'm looking for something that I can only recognise with a heart, as well. So what I was looking for five years ago will be completely different to what I'm looking for now.

I was wondering if this looking for something with a heart and finding it or exploring it through the poses is something that's changed with you over time because of course you're a changing person and the world is a changing place.

I think it has, you know, they used to be quite confrontational poses in a way and they are not any more ... What I think about the figures in this exhibition is that they are both consuming and being consumed on this picnic blanket; in a way you enter them, you become ... I think the person looking used to be more in conversation with them or having to engage with them and now there is a more open way in which, when you look, you can consume their beauty but also enter their position in the space.

The idea of intimacy is quite interesting ... I'm enticed into feeling this sense of intimacy either by the scene or its lushness, but it's also denied in a way.

I don't know about that, I think it's more profound than that. I just don't think it's possible. I think if you really think you're experiencing an intimacy when you look at a painting, you're not, it's just a reflection of yourself.

What I mean in terms of intimacy is what you set up in the painting, the intimacy between models, between figures, and so you feel as though you are looking onto this intimate world when actually even between the figures there's kind of an intimacy denied – the naked body which is naked but not sexual ... these kinds of moments between people where they are together but not necessarily engaged with each other or in that moment.

I suppose all of that was practice in avoiding a kind of obvious narrative, but of course you can't because we have to make a story, you know ... I feel like I just place and then whatever you see or I see doesn't really matter to me. I wouldn't be interested in painting a loving couple. I suppose it's a solitary experience being alive and that's why we need connection, it's that paradoxical thing again; in the same way we need freedom and containment, these things are linked. And again, to paint something and say it

doesn't mean anything and of course it does ... it's really frustrating and irritating in a way.

Well, it's very interesting in the way it makes me reflect on the fact that anything outside of that also has that quality because as human beings we project meaning onto the world or onto the things we come across ...

You know, I called one exhibition *Everything Matters*. I came very close to calling it *Nothing Matters*. It wouldn't have mattered which one I called it, I just thought *Nothing Matters* would have been too misleading, but to me those two things are the same.

What about this idea of connection – could you talk more about how that is important to the work or to you?

Somehow the word 'tethering' came to mind, especially with these paintings where some of the marks are completely untethered and some are tethered to a real kind of a realism. I think we seek the familiar or we find connection through the familiar, through the known, and we also feel hampered by it and so there's a tension in these works that is reflected in the actual way of painting.

I wanted to know if all these years have been an exploratory process of looking and thinking about human connection and the models that you are

working with, and if that has taught you anything about yourself in that process. Is it a way of looking at yourself through the process of looking and making and painting and inventing images and has that been reflected back through the paintings?

I actually feel repelled by that idea. It's a complete denial of self, it's an escape from self, and so if there's some insight that I gain 10 years later, it's like looking back at an old photograph, it has that much relevance. I'm not really interested in using painting to work out what's going on with me, I want to escape from what's going on with me through painting.

Going back to the works that you're working on now, there's a much looser approach to the painting and I wondered about that shift in your realisation of the images.

I suppose a completely closed image, where the skin is completely covering the canvas, for a long time this was all I wanted to do because I found that it highlighted the nothingness behind it, whereas with an abstract thing there's so much space for projection. And then I came to see that they're really the same thing, and I'm enjoying the tension between them, as I said before, because I feel like it doubly reflects the containment and the longing for freedom and it undermines itself or feeds itself, I don't know. The two sides inform but also undermine each other and I like that.

You have commented on our tendency to verbalise and I wondered about this relationship between words and images. Or the space that you feel pictures allow that words can't.

I think what I've noticed about now and art is that I don't think people look with their hearts; I don't know why but I think that they look with their heads and that makes it a very limited and dry experience. And ja, I think the verbal gets in the way and when I say verbal I mean trying to understand and looking and trying to go through a process of logic as opposed to having a visceral response as a human being. What on earth is art for if you don't have that response? I simply don't understand what the point would be.

This conversation took place at the artist's studio, Cape Town, on 28 October 2015

4.

Pieter Hugo