

⁷⁶ *Mary Theresa Keown*



(opposite above)
Mary Theresa Keown
Fra Angelico
diptych
oil on canvas
100 x 200cm
courtesy Mullan Gallery

(opposite below)
Mary Theresa Keown
Anna
diptych
oil on canvas
100 x 160cm
courtesy Mullan Gallery

This exhibition has no title. All twenty-two paintings are in diptych format. Keown paints a copy either of a photograph or of a painting and hinges it to an abstract field.¹ Fields aver themselves to be gray, blue, black, red etc. On closer observation murmuring layers of tones both do and do not submit to the dominant hue. The abstract field in turn issues out of the figurative part of the diptych, eg the field attached to Fra Angelico's *Massacre of the innocents (1451 – 53)* is the colour of the dresses of two mothers whose gestures are highly evocative. In *Constable* the grey is that of a small cloud, in *Victoria* the grey on her shoes transfers to the abstract painting, etc. Those are subtle and sophisticated acts of reverence to the power of a detail, destined to be easily overlooked by a viewer in a hurry. Indeed, these are communicative paintings: they silently greet you, invite you to stay, to look, to gaze, some hold their breath before they scream.

As I write, I read an e-mail from a friend about the death of Grace Hartigan² (1922–2008). She also re-visited older paintings. Her *Grand Street brides* (1954) depicts a bridal shop window with mannequins in a composition copied from Goya's *Royal family*. In her later work she incorporated images taken from colouring books, films, advertising and older paintings, eg the Pre-Raphaelites.

Keown meets a similar challenge. An inspired catalogue essay by Ciarán Bennett embraces most of the points her paintings raise, including the “emotional longing.” For it, Bennett invented an aesthetic category of ‘langour’ and connected it in some oblique way to Frederic Matys Thursz (1930-2002). I looked at Thursz's *Vermilion Diary no 4* (1983-84). Thursz distributed light over each hue so that it lost its power to modify depth. Keown places hues and tones that way too, but in several abstractions she layers them like a cake under see-through icing; the eye cannot be sure how deep. She reminds me of Rembrandt's late period, his red, clearly visible, appears as being under miles of brown. As shown above, the hue for the Keown's abstraction is chosen with care from the range in the adjacent figurative part, eg Osborne is paired with velvety blue, Pissarro with wintry blue, de Kooning with blue of a sunny day. The tonality assists the meaning of the narrative part, sometimes entering a paradox: *Hermes* is paired with earth warm grey whereas *Little Ireland* is hinged to grey mixed with evening-sky blue. The myth is thus earth-bound, whereas the snapshot of real life connects to reverie.

In a denial of the expected, Keown turns the figurative images 90 degrees. Subversion of ‘normal’ viewing aids the foregrounding of painted surface and not the painted appearance and/ or story. If Magritte can have stones flying, Keown has a hairdo (in *Victoria*) that defies gravity. Moreover, one of the diptyches slips her rule completely: *Anna* is also not the right way up, yet appears to be so. In a disobedient illusion, the stretched leg suggests that the model is sitting up, and not lying down.

Contemporary painting faces the challenge of making both light and profound connections, and has to keep them spontaneous without

pretending that art is simple. Discussions led by Jan Verwoert in Berlin in November focused on painting, and specifically on “how the act of making references to art history in a work could be conceptualised – contrary to common opinion – as being more than just a strategic move destined to situate, position and hence legitimise the work.”³ Verwoert proposes that for any inspiration by the older art the paradigm of pan-demonium (opposite of pan-theon) is more fit for the purpose. Keown presents older art not as a citation, quote or coded suggestion. Rather she makes a temporary assembly and tests its values. In homology with the spiritual secrets of abstract space and narrative stories, the diptyches forge a socio-political context framed by iconophile and iconoclast attitudes (eg Catholic and Protestant cultures). Her nineteenth-century examples connect nature and the narrative power of significant detail. A group of diptyches touches upon the melodrama of the ‘end of painting’ when challenged by photography, while Hockney stands for adoption and adaptation of lens-based media.

Keown's inspiration grows deep in the investigation of painterly force and its connectivity to the world obsessed with ideologies and celebrities.

¹ All paintings reproduced on www.mullangallery.com

² For more see Sharon L Hirsch, Grace Hartigan, *Painting art history* (n.d) and Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *Grace Hartigan, a painter's world*, 1990.

³ E-mail from edu-news@mailier.e-flux.com

Slavka Sverakova is a
writer on art.