

Lara Viana

One can imagine that even the most carefully constructed communication might easily drown out the subtle register of Lara Viana's paintings. Yet, words, in the context of her practice, occupy an equally temporal position between image and meaning – like ants tracing the surface of a familiar site, not really altering but alerting one to some facet of the terrain or the view. This is partly because these vestiges of events, things and places – pictorial odes to the vague resurrection of stored imagery through the mind's eye – instantly echo with literary inconclusiveness around the halls of the collective memory. Partly also because they appear steeped in the history of image making, the genre-specific dynamics of photography, film and painting itself. Essentially, though, it's not words that spring to mind when looking at these works, one is delivered, first and foremost, into the sensory fabric of an experience as opposed to the theoretical hemlines that define it.

Viana was born in Salvador, Brazil but has spent the past 25 years living in London. While one wouldn't necessarily guess this from the images she creates, certain recurring themes and motifs – the stately home interiors and the religiosity of particular sites and 'offerings' described – lead one on migratory trails across cultures and through art history. There may be a presiding sense of old world architectural and painterly romance about Viana's compositions, but her carefully controlled palette and smeary scenographic direction pitch one between places and states: heat and cold, light and dark, figuration and abstraction, making and thinking and the different narrative perspectives of subject, witness and voyeur; then and now.

When we meet at Viana's studio I am intrigued by the personal details that emerge – the hidden connective tissue between the artist and the work. A memory she recalls of encountering wax models of the limbs of the sick suddenly appears to correlate exactly with a morgue-cold painting of a leg, its anatomical awkwardness testament, perhaps, to the moulding process over the effects of death. But one does not need autobiographical specifics to experience the senses of dislocation she creates. Of course one wonders how much of her personal story Viana has written into these scenes, but it's her means of fusing appropriated imagery, techniques and data pulled from memory that keeps one shuffling back and forth between the many layers of these ghostly simulacra. For, despite the familiarity of particular contexts and stylistics, one is never given the sense of having arrived somewhere, rather, fading in and out of thought or consciousness.

Viana often works from found photographs and many of the characters – shadow people and partial human presences – witnessed here have been borrowed for her purposes. Like *momento mori*, or *imago* they appear to symbolise rather than accurately portray human forms and experiences: distillations of hopes and fears over time, as mediated by technology. Viana seems to be questioning the ways in which certain images of people and events come to represent a perceived period or deputise for a collective social 'truth'. The past, or the idea of remembered time, becomes substance in Viana's hand – the evocative whiff of yesteryear a tool for engaging the viewer with and distancing one from the painted subject. While it is impossible not to identify on a basic human level with the mothers, mourners and dog walkers she conveys, one is acutely aware not only that this is someone else's history, but encountering worldly evidence of it – via newspapers and family albums, photorealist paintings and damp junkshop boxes.

A line of women, possibly WWII wives, holding babies obfuscated by paint as if an atmospheric condition or emotional force field, or a bleached-out silhouette of a female head, day-glo iconic against grey foliage. When taking in these works one can't help but think about how the photographic object has been

previously handled in paint, by the likes of Gerhard Richter or Luc Tuymans. They radiate a peculiar energy that sits somewhere between the fuzzy warmth of recollection and the alchemical mystery of the re-dimensionalised subject. Viana appears at home within the representational hall of mirrors that connects the world of painting with that of imaging, drawing one's attention to the innate human desire to render things realistically and the ways that new technologies fracture our understanding of reality. Where Richter's and Tuymans' blurry re-contextualisation of familiar and mass-medic imagery are associated with particular political themes, Viana hovers between the time-based evidence of an unspecified event and its fictional (mis)reading as if stage-managing fragments of a baroque drama. Her paintings may be more about the workings of the mind than the media machine but, like her predecessors, she appears alive to the difficulties of extrapolating one from the other.

It is no surprise, then, that Viana cites Velazquez as an influence, particularly when it comes to her chromatically complex interiors out of which social situations, or the aftermath of them, seem to have grown like soft-tissue attachments. So, too, her reductive approach to technique - Viana applies, moves and erases oily umbers, ochres and blues around and from the ground as if hesitant to pin the image down. Ever since her Royal College days, Viana has been making works in which the potential elements of a story appear to emerge, low-relief, from matter. The lurid gaseous compositional quality of her earlier paintings has given way to a more sophisticated set of mid-tonal propositions, the slippery smears of organic hues reminiscent at points of bodily fluids on glass - biopsy slide evidence of the painter's uncanny ability to describe space and the passage of time.

The most recent series of table paintings, still lifes of table tops literally writhing with dinner party detritus and rudely cropped like outtakes from a film reprographic project, push the subject/context dissolution further still. Despite the chaotic melding of objects and interiors, one is never allowed to get lost in each frame on account of areas of sharp linearity - the crisp edging of laundered linen and the encroaching presence of brushstroke walls - but directed as if to experience the shift that occurs as the familiar yields something unexpected. As with other of Viana's series, one is left to situate oneself between the layers of the representational onion, the metaphorical distance from the table. As a group, they make visible the subjective discrepancies between different human accounts on a single event, the treacle slide of time between one perfunctory moment and one of significance.

Viana's delectable, yet disquieting studies for a mental picnic open up many byways between personal and public territories: the influence of cultural production on the content and stylistics of memory, at every level. But back in the studio, and drawn into a Viana Rorschach-image conundrum, one remembers that these works are as much about the nature of living as the removed technical recording of it. Her curious handling of the half-remembered comes as a result of serious real-time observation, an acute sensitivity to the manner in which light alters objects and situations. And as one watches an eggy ovaloid visage melt into a mirror holding a secret interior, it's hard to care about the chicken.

*Rebecca Geldard, Zürich, June 2009.*