

Emma Talbot: Step Inside Love
Domo Baal Gallery, London
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London

Entering the first floor landing of the Domo Baal Gallery in June this year to see the exhibition *Step Inside Love*, the first solo show at the gallery for British artist Emma Talbot, I encountered a small painting, dense with text:

Evening became night
Dawn to dusk. Ashes to ashes
Before the light fails. Before Inertia
Before Curtains are drawn
in Domestic settings
I would like to have
One last Kiss
with tongues touching and feeling. Eyes shut.
Dark pleasure.

Emma Talbot, text from painting 'Dawn to Dusk', 2015.

This small text-painting, an overture of longing and a tenacious act of recollection, sets the scene for an exhibition that cumulatively becomes a topology of intimacy, featuring meetings and partings between lovers, parents and children, scenes of grief, shopping, texting, cooking, kissing. And sex.

Talbot's figures are often in the midst of enigmatic encounters but as they do so they are surrounded by rooms densely packed with objects. She emphatically states the textures of things; Victorian brick work, clothing, hair, Persian carpets or 1970's lamps. Collectively this situates Talbot's narrative world in the domestic, the suburban and the everyday. Also notable is her use of exaggeration and stylisation; The bodies she paints are attenuated, weightless, often entwined. She uses bodily gesture rather than facial expression as markers of emotion and it is in this it is clear she strives for an approach to stylization that can become universal. Her figures have large featureless heads, often atop with hair draped like seaweed but each also has small delicate hands and legs that seem forever to be reaching and clasping, straining outwards towards the world her figures seem to be in a perpetual state of longing, for lost people and times. But it is important to say that the intense, sometimes tragic subject-matter Talbot presents is always contrasted by her use of colour and pattern, as well as her witty images of texting, kissing, shopping, or eating. This use of counterpoint is in some ways characteristic of Talbot's work.

The exhibition links Talbot's most recent body of work, which includes large paintings, a series of drawings, prints and two floor based three-dimensional works. The works inter-relate well. Her paintings and drawings echo across the spaces of the gallery while her two floor based works, '*Ghost sculpture*' and '*Intangible Things*' have an intriguing complicated physical presence; on my visit Domo Baal told me Talbot is clear these works are not

sculptures but are instead 'things' - she considers them more as 'drawing in three dimensions', and indeed they seem reluctant to claim the authority of sculpture. The sculptures repeat the stylized elongated textured forms evident within her painting and in doing so extend the frame of her paintings outwards so that the spectator becomes more immersed within her narrative world. This has also the effect of bringing us closer to the infernal longings evident in much of her work. But as is clearest with the work 'Intangible Things (Ghost)', positioned like a sentinel to the side of one of her paintings, her sculptures also seem to function as witnesses to the events of Talbot's paintings. There they are in the gallery - her sculptures - with their synthetic hair hung over large fabric heads and old socks draped like testicles, often configured into dreamlike totemic forms suggestive of sex games or children's play. In this they also remind me of Sarah Lucas, Dorothea Tanning, Hans Bellmer sculptures, also Constantin Brâncuși. But the strength of Talbot's sculptures is the way they both offer unavoidable sensory encounter as objects, as things made of textiles and hair, whilst their positioning and stylisation makes them both simultaneously bawdy and spectral. And in this they also mirror her paintings.

As well as the bearing of Surrealism the erotic nature of Talbot's work is evident and in this the influence of Japanese Shunga prints, a type of erotic Ukiyo-e imagery, convincingly places her work as a kind of 'picture of the floating world' that has as its locus in suburban north London. But her subject seems to also be intimacy, the centre of which is not just sex but also tenderness, and Motherhood. Even as this is achieved with some wry irony and wit. Much of Talbot's work seems structured by an event - getting dressed, a significant conversation, leaving, saying goodbye - the quasi metaphysical status of encountering moments of love, as well as the rupture of loss. In "In Praise of Love" Alain Badiou states that the many quotidian moments in which love is inscribed within daily life are also moments of what he calls 'convergence' marking the paradox of becoming of a couple; of being two together viewing the panorama of the world through the prism of difference. Badiou believes love is an existential project: constructing a world from a decentred point of view other than the mere impulse to survive or affirm individual identity. And it is in this yearning for two-ness, pictured literally in scenes of sex and tenderness but also mirrored in the way Talbot's paints bodies as oddly transparent or fragile, that the connection with Badiou's ideas of love seem most palpable. Indeed, the whole exhibition is titled 'Step Inside Love', imploring the viewer to do the same. But also evident are his ideas about the paradox of love in that even as her work seems to strain for twoness, porosity, and sentiment her use of first person titles such as *"Before I Loved you love nothing was my own"* suggest further framing device of a voice that is singular, plaintive, speaking in the past tense. The temporal qualities of Talbot's work are also supported by material choices she also makes. Offsetting the joyous interweaving of pattern, textiles and limbs, and the emotional heat of her subject matter, she uses tertiary colours and matte blacks that are less intense. This gives her work a more distanced tone, no doubt helped by her choice of raw sealed canvas as a support. Often each image-event is placed within a small cartouche, like Persian miniatures, or the single frame of a celluloid strip, then held within the patterns of Persian carpets or Paisley textiles. Taken as a whole the work has the recursive, embedded structure of a mise-en-abyme, the swirling undulating patterning, also mirroring the ebb and flow of emotion evident within her subject matter.

Her use of voice and temporality reminds me of the work of Charlotte Salomon, also known for its inter-medial qualities. Salomon is mainly known as the creator of an autobiographical series of paintings, a composite image-music-text work titled *Leben? oder Theater?— Life?*

or *Theater*?¹ Like Talbot this presents a semi-fictional account of family history and both seem to propose a configuration of femininity and vulnerability as they yield to the thematics of the everyday, the exceptional and mundane. Both also picture everyday life via cinematic structures such as lighting, celluloid, flash-backs, and voice. But it is the questions raised by Salomon's use of title I wish to conclude with: *Leben? oder Theater?* The two question marks of Salomon's title are enigmatic but her use of language is specific: The words are stated as nouns - Salomon's grammar suggests not 'the life' but 'to live'; not 'the theatre' but 'to theatre', as in to dramatize, act up². And indeed this is also what Talbot does. As Talbot tells her story of the life of the self, the complexities of working and living within the realm of the feminine, she dramatizes an encrypted psychic interior centred on experiences of loss, and of the alone, but in her recollecting there is also tenacity and a will to celebrate. Here, the very porosity of the stylised bodies she paints, embedded within rhythmic pattern, gives a sense of movement that despite her subject-matter of grief and loneliness also gives her work a hard won freedom.

Image(s) used:

- 1/. Emma Talbot, exhibition installation shot of "Step Inside Love", 2015 at the Domo Baal Gallery London.
- 2/. Emma Talbot, 'Sunset/Sunrise', 209x150cm, 2015, acrylic paint on canvas.

Photography by Andy Keate. All images are courtesy of Domo Baal and Petra Rinck Galerie, with Emma Talbot.

References:

1. Badiou, A, (2012), *In Praise of Love*, Serpents Tail, London
2. Salomon, C, (1998) *Leben? oder Theater? — Life? or Theater?* Royal Academy of Arts. ISBN-13: 978-0900946660
3. Pollock, P, (2014), *An Event Between History and the Everyday: The Secret of Charlotte Salomon's Life? or Theatre?* Journal of Visual Culture, 13 (2). 200 - 235. ISSN 1470-412.

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Anne-Marie Creamer is a British artist whose work experiments with cinematic forms using video, drawing, texts, and voice. She has exhibited at the Sogn og Fjordane Kunstmuseum, Norway, Kunstvereniging Diepenheim, Holland, and Galerie der Künstler, Munich and has featured in *The Drawing Book*, (Black Dog Publishing, 2006). She was at British School at Rome in 2012 and is currently developing a commissioned work for the Borough Road Gallery London about the work of Vorticist painter David Bomberg for solo exhibition in 2017. She is a Lecturer on the MFA course at Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts, London.

¹ Composed between 1941 and 1943 this is a series of over 700 colour gouaches, with musical and verbal accompaniment mostly inscribed on transparencies laid over the painted page, *Life? or Theater?* presents a semi-fictional account of Salomon's family history including tragic, repeated stories of female family suicide, all painted with increasing urgency in the time before Salomon was herself taken to French and German concentration camps.

² Pollock, G, (2014), *Crimes, Confession and the Everyday: Challenges in Reading Charlotte Salomon's Leben? oder Theater? 1941–1942*, Journal of Visual Culture, 13 (2). 200 - 235. ISSN 1470-412.