

INHABITING A RUIN

A room. A hundred dummy body parts hang from the ceiling and walls. Hands and arms reach at any person who enters, a grotto of phantom limbs. Every body part corresponds to a photograph on the wall, every photo on the wall to a prayer, every prayer to a sickness, and every sickness to a body part hanging above. This chamber, found in a Brazilian church, was the Miracle Room that fascinated Lara Viana in her youth: there is an old image of the room's interior on the wall in her studio. Any sense of whose legs belong to who is lost in a flood, a cascading wave of need thrown up by undertows of faith, fear and desperation. In the image many of the decayed, unclaimed arms, legs, heads and hands are faded into tobacco browns, jaundice yellows and pallid whites – their sorry degradation echoing the misfortune of those sick bodies to which they refer. For Viana, the link between the prosthesis and the lost body, each decaying apart from one another, has a sense of material tragedy that the artist now transplants to painting, based on other images and objects now lost to their owners.

This slow creep, of something that might be called the mortality of images, is given full reign in Viana's paintings. Images found in postcards, books and photographs – featuring possessions, landscapes, architectural spaces, or empty chairs – now find themselves slowly atrophying on the artist's canvas. A series of Untitled paintings from 2010 are based on images of domestic ornaments, which are treated in the same way as those based on landscapes. These bucolic items – small sculptures for the home – functioning in those images, like those hanging limbs in Viana's photograph, as an extension of a lost body. The details of the scenes cannot be made out: the shape is putty, or clay like, detail gently eddied away, and any previously optimistic colours now pool into brown and grey sweeps.

In one painting, a single element is left more discernable than the rest; one of the figurines retains a little relic of romance in the rendering of a lifted feminine foot, raised in pleasure, that has managed to keep its colours – parma violets and sweet mints – together.

However, any fragments of tangible imagery such as these appear rarely, and when they do, they are slippery as memory and impossible to hold onto. Though one can often discern images within the oils, many of them are fugitive running from view. Shape and structure often exist on a plane that seems watery – as though the painting's subject has been found by wiping paint away rather than putting it on. In this way, the location of Viana's exhibition Ruins at the Townhouse, itself a restorative project of a Regency Townhouse, creates an analogy based on archaeology, of creating by peeling layers away rather than adding new ones, but also of fully inhabiting a state of decay.

Indeed, surprisingly, for all their instability, it is possible to explore many of Viana's abstract spaces as though they were slippery landscapes: rocky outcrops, caverns by the sea, or decaying buildings. As one explores these spaces, the different layers of paint also give the sense that one is exploring different layers of time. Flatter, stiller areas of colour seem to advance in the space of the canvas, whilst flutters and trails in the background recede, further into a different temporal space. One always senses, however, something in the background, a missing presence. It comes from the fact that one is temporarily inhabiting a degrading image: a terrain that is either lost or imaginary, and one that can only be discovered in the liquidity of paint, imagination and memory.

Laura McLean-Ferris

RUINS

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