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Amnesia

In his essay on Miho Sato, Jonathan Miles says: "Miho doesn't speak very much. The country of her birth is far away and she rarely returns. Living here appears to be in accord with the way she chooses to be, for no one really bothers her. She no longer feels fully Japanese, but being English is even more remote. I think that she lives a zone that excludes the considerations that emerge from integrating or accepting boundaries. Not to be too bothered is the place she makes her own." [1] Sato's paintings take up this position too. They are pared down to the point of self-effacement (all her people are faceless) but their indifference, their neutral attitude, is not directed towards themselves. In their construction and execution they are exquisitely poised towards the viewer, but they expect nothing of the viewer.

Sato's exhibition is titled *Amnesia*. Although it is impossible to disentangle your own associations from her imagery, Sato's dislocation from the cultural specificity of her found imagery seems to operate in the same way as her painterly technique, ultimately undermining your anecdotal or personal reference points and leaving you stranded. In fact, the longer I spend with these paintings the more uneasy they start to make me feel.

Having recently read the Moomintroll stories to my children I was reminded how easily a relationship of reflexive sympathy gets built up between the character and the reader/listener. It works like this: I love Moomin therefore Moomin must love me. But In Sato's painting, Moomin quite patently doesn't care. Moomin is indifferent to his readers/lovers. This is a very dirty bomb that Sato has set off. Where does this anti-love stop? How does this affect my own childhood memories? As an image, Moomin suits Sato and she has painted him several times before. In Moomin she has found one of those lucky instances that figurative painters come across from time to time - when the image and its execution and its meaning fit together perfectly.

Moomin in Miho Sato's painting is instantly recognisable to anyone who has read the Moomintroll books, and more particularly looked at the illustrations. I think Sato started this painting with a light blue background and then washed a white layer across it before painting the figure in umber. The dark bit at the top of the sky was washed on before the figure was drawn in, so the background was done first in its entirety and then the figure was drawn in with charcoal (you can see bits of charcoal at the edge of the figure), and lastly the figure was brushed across in brown. It looks like she might have masked the figure off with masking tape before she brushed in the dark, which would account for the angularity of the outline. She seems to have used a single brush size throughout, judging from the size of the brush marks. Maybe two brushes, but no more.

Sato has painted *Moomin* much bigger than I imagined him to be. He looks like he is pressed up against the window from outside, looking in, with his nose flattened, and the light outside has made him a dark shape so that his features are hidden. He has no eyes or mouth, and the whole painting depends on his squashed nose, or muzzle, because if you take that away, Moomin ceases to be Moomin and becomes something else, a cipher, a flat shape with two spikes at the top that could be a cut-out horse, or like Batman seen from the back in silhouette, or the facade of a building with two towers. It is just the wobbly oval muzzle that makes the figure so obviously and so immediately Moomin. If you look at how the outline of the body is drawn you see that it is in fact a series of short straightish lines linked at angles. The top of Moomin's head is quite flat and only the muzzle is drawn with a fluid curved line. The body, the muzzle, and the background are brushed across in pretty much the same, apparently, casual way. There is a small darker tone at the top of the picture which suggests space or night, but that's about it in terms of painterly elements. Sato has painted Moomin slightly from the side with a single arm ending in a point, just above the bottom edge of the canvas.

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There is a little blob of paint below the end of the arm where the artist's brush has leaned over accidentally, but most of this mark is actually on the underside of the bottom bar of the canvas which makes it not really part of the picture, except it is somehow an important clue at the same time. On the whole, each phase of the painting looks to have been done in a single go or act. The paint itself is very thin and doesn't appear to have been absorbed by the ground, and yet it doesn't quite sit on the surface. If anything, there is an indifferent attitude to the canvas, a sort of shrugging-off. The painting takes up a neutral position.

I recognise where some of the other images in the exhibition come from, and some are pointed out to me. I'm not sure I want or need to know the sources, but the *Moomin* painting is perhaps an exception because it is so specific, and because I know the stories, but not everyone has read Moomintroll. I don't know how Sato selects her sources. Her gallery tells me they emerge for her and are often picked out from the sea of images that surrounds us every day. Sato had, for instance, wanted to paint a nun for some time and then a photo cropped up in the Evening Standard that she felt she could use. She made several versions - her working method does not really allow for too many changes on the canvas or board - and she ended up with *Sister*. Knowing nothing specific about the nun does not stop this being a compelling and frightening image for me, with a blank faced sister of mercy looming towards me like a mad singing nun from a zombie version of The Sound of Music. In *Encounter,* Sato's figure has her hair swept back by a violent indoor wind. There is a feeling in this image of sensory deprivation, as though the ghostly wind has blanketed the figure's senses. The light casts no light, her features are erased, her ears residual.

By way of contrast the most charming painting in the exhibition is taken from a Reynolds painting of a girl with a dog. The girl is faceless in this tiny picture, but the dog's face is articulated just with a blobby dark mark for a nose. This doggy nose rests on the top of the girl's forearm like a little ball ready to roll away, and the lighter tone of the dog's head is like an inverted keyhole to the little girl's heart. It is a droll picture and playful in a painterly way. The dog's bent leg is quite undog like and the punning suggests the girl's bent knee, although her legs are hidden under her dress. And the dress has been painted very loosely, up to the dog's leg and against a dark background that acts as a ring between two elements. Each section is seen separately, but also makes up a rhythmical and delightful composition that constantly collapses and reforms itself as an image. The whole thing is beautifully painted in a modulated range of sympathetic low-key colours. This painting is a world away from the bleak horror of some of the other paintings, but makes you aware of how adroitly Sato finds her language in each individual picture. It also makes you aware of the very precise decisions that inform her more unsettling works.

Some of the paintings in the exhibition are on canvas and others are on wood or card. The wood and card look pretty battered as though they have had previous lives before ending up as surfaces to be painted on, but conversely the painted surface in these images is slightly richer, though not generally so rich as to dispel that neutrality, that lack of affect, which is the defining quality of Sato's work.

Ansel Krut, London
Ansel Krut's review of Miho Sato's solo show 'Amnesia' at domobaal in 2005
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Notes: [1] 'Another Country' by Jonathan Miles, written for this exhibition.