

EMMA BENNETT: HOW TO PAINT IN FOUR DIMENSIONS

It's not easy being a painter these days. Not only do we expect some visual seduction, we also demand an original and recognizable style and want some ideas to be tackled. The state of painting itself is always worth a reference. And if a little technical flair could be thrown in, heavy-handedness avoided and continuing development demonstrated over the years, that would be all for the good. Not easy at all, but Emma Bennett navigates those challenging expectations with some assurance in 'Death and Co', her new series of large paintings. They show ships in dark waters, apparently sailing into the void-like space of the canvas, their cargoes of fruit and flowers spilling overboard.

The visual seduction comes in a quadruple dose. Each large canvas combines a glowering lamp black void, a series of realistic images sourced from seventeenth century Dutch painting, and an abstract expressionist intervention not unlike a passage of Morris Louis staining. The striking effect of combining those three apparently disparate elements makes up the fourth dose. What's not to fall for?

The result is also highly distinctive, both visually and in how so much is so seamlessly brought together. Those four elements, for example, can also be seen as four different timescales caught up in one image: the 17th century of the source paintings, the 20th century of the abstract gesture, the 21st century of their combination, the eternity of the void.

That concern with time already starts to suggest big themes. Bennett sees the ships as representing individual journeys through life, and reflecting 'on the isolated state of people as they make their journeys, whether through passages of calm waters or treacherous high seas'. The paintings are about time, our span of it as living things, the nature of the void we come from and to which we will – or will we? – return. As Bennett says, 'there is a clarity about the start of life, but an ambiguity about the end'. There are lots of oppositions to get our heads around: life / death; night / day; dark / light; stillness / movement; abstraction / representation; control / spontaneity.... They're all built in.

Many of those oppositions have been present in Bennett's previous work, but her newest paintings develop them further by adding ships to the range of Dutch Golden Age images appropriated. The sense of movement, and of the human journey through life becomes more explicit. The history of trade, struggles for power, imperialism, battles, cargo, shipwreck, slavery... there is a whole set of extra implications to think about. But Bennett raises questions rather than seeking to impose answers. Or as she says 'it's more about my personal exploration of things that I'm trying to get my head around'.

The question 'how can painting remain relevant?' is also addressed. Bennett is a miner of paintings past who picks her favourites from classical and modernist traditions, simply on the basis of what appeals to her and chimes with her own concerns. She then shows how those meanings and techniques can be made fresh for a 21st century context. The result isn't the more academic type of 'painting about painting', in which the main point of the work is to examine different means of representation. Rather, the history of painting and

the metaphorical ideas built into the traditions of still life and marine paintings are used to bring history into the work. That's one way forward with painting: to use its whole past not just as an influence, as every good painter must, but as a direct jumping-off point for doing something new.

Technically, too, Bennett has to operate in four modes. It isn't the point of the flowers, fruit, ships and smoke taken from classical masterpieces that they are accomplished imitations of the original, but we can admire the incidental fact that they are. The black void against which they appear requires a different discipline, as does the judgement of control and chance which goes into the abstract elements. And then the whole must cohere in a convincing manner.

Furthermore, the themes are built into how the work is made. The paintings are about time, and as well relying on four different periods of time for their content, they use a mixture of fast and slow processes, of precise representation and spontaneous abstract mark-making. The historic is overtaken, as in life, by the modern. The pouring process puts us in mind of the sea's swell and makes wave-like forms for the ships to sail in. The abstract ground acts as ocean by night, the void we come from and the death we move towards.

There's nothing wrong with serious topics – in Bennett's words 'they cover big subjects but – that's life!'. But it may sound as if such themes could come across as heavy-handed. However, there is a sense of play in the use of metaphors from still life and nautical painting being jammed together so there is almost too much going on. It's done with a wink, I think, and there is also, visually, an element of the absurd in the combinations she makes, in particular in the shifts of scale which pairs giant fruit with ships – or is it model ships with everyday fruit? That touch of humour is necessary to keep any portentousness at bay. We see it again in the replacement of flags with the bows taken from hanging festoons of flowers. It's there in her previous series, too: fruit which borrows the wings from birds, or deer wearing flowers, for example.

So that is how to paint in four dimensions. The beauty of it is that, although it may sound complicated, and though it certainly gives the viewer plenty to think about, it leads to paintings which are immediately and straightforwardly alluring.

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