

Volcano Lovers

by Frances Woodley

Emma Bennett's exhibition, *Volcano Lovers*, marks a departure from her previous flaming leitmotifs such as domestic hearths, blazing bonfires and combusting fruit. This exhibition introduces the theme of the volcano in Bennett's practice.

This new body of work follows paintings concerned with memory. These, the artist says, focussed on 'intimate interior scenes which were more about a mood or atmosphere than a specific place. With the interior elements appropriated from film-stills I was thinking about still and moving images - painting and film and their relation to time, memory, intimacy.'

Infusing these recent paintings is *The Volcano Lover*, a work of fiction by Susan Sontag with a tenuous relation to historical truth. It is a tale that hangs precariously between love and lust, possession and abandonment, the sublime and the quotidian. The volcano emerges here, as it has done so often in literature, as backdrop, portent and metaphor. What appears to be held together by power-play and convention proceeds to explode along with the volcano itself. The mountain's subterranean workings are unleashed, its lava bleeds out, and its head of steam blooms—powerful metaphors for forces of nature and human passions.



Emma Bennett 'The Skirmish', 2019 Oil on canvas 50x40cm

Emma Bennett's paintings, like Sontag's fictions, 'dip into myth, ideas of form and formlessness, alchemy, science—parts of the paradoxical existence of the volcano both in its own world and within the human psyche'. The past ten years has seen Emma Bennett's painting quite literally warm to its theme. Volcanoes, those big beasts of nature, have floated into sight. They are almost as ghostly as their emissions, spewings and vapours. The space in which she suspends them provides no light, no dimension or location. These volcanoes and the things that accompany them exist in limbo, a dreamy in-between state of blackness of which the artist writes:

'I start with the black. It provides an empty space that I can get into. ('Why enter?!') It's as if the black space suspends time . . . slows things down. The blackness creates tension

and maintains the ambiguity of the space. Edges aren't easy to make out, like when you're walking at night and things are hidden in the shadows. Your imagination plays tricks. As soon as I place anything into the blackness the space becomes energised. It's not an empty void anymore. It has the potential to be lots of different blacknesses—the night, the universe, the stage, the screen etc. Objects are suspended, but my job is to get some sort of balance in the composition. Everything I paint after the black intrudes the space. The more ambiguous these intrusions are, the more unsettling they feel.'

Certain motifs reoccur in these paintings. They come from the wellspring of the artist's memory, a heartfelt empathy for certain subjects and her familiarity with art of the past: Caravaggio's dark and dangerous beauty, Jusepe de Ribera's image reversals and doublings, the Neapolitan painters of still life and those European painters, notably Pierre-Jacques Volaire and Pietro Fabris, who recognised in Vesuvius the potential for picturing the cataclysmic sublime.



Emma Bennett 'Wait Until Winter', 2018 Oil on canvas 110x140cm

In Bennett's paintings the volcano is seduced, but not entirely tamed by the presence of still life. The natural finds itself in a precarious balance with the cultivated, the raw with the cultured. Still life, or rather a compilation of fragments of still life painting, continue to make an appearance in Bennett's work: fruit, flowers, hung hares and game birds, drapery and mirrored objects. Such leitmotifs drape, curl and float as can be seen in *Wait Until Winter* (2018), a painting that immediately precedes her current work. They are motifs with which she knows we feel at home.



Emma Bennett 'Four Years', 2019 Oil on canvas 91.5x122cm

In *Four Years* (2019) Bennett puts interior and exterior into play with one another by means of a looking glass in which is reflected a domestic curtained space and a glimpse of a sunlit world outside. A hare hangs akimbo, floating or falling behind a small inverted festoon of roses and bindweed. It is a painting that explores the feelings of helplessness in the face of what cannot be looked at directly. It is through the representation of various states of vaporescence, flow, formlessness, weightlessness and the absence of gravity that she makes these feelings felt here.

In 2017 Bennett painted *Something Stirs* (2017), a domestic arrangement on the point of combustion. Breaking out at its centre is a concocted fire. White heat threatens to scorch the fruit that encircles it. The pleated tablecloth below suggests a staging reminiscent of the Neapolitan delight in fabricating models of Vesuvius for festivals and made from chocolate, cake, bread or sausages. Has Bennett unconsciously constructed herself a volcano long before she ever painted one?

Now Bennett is in love with real volcanoes. Volcanoes erupt, smoulder and liquify, they go into meltdown. Vesuvius, Sontag tells her readers, is 'a central, ever visible metaphor for uncontrollable



Emma Bennett 'Something Stirs', 2017 Oil on canvas 122x91.5cm

forces - of love, of violence, of
burgeoning revolution'. Bennett's
paintings have long focused on these themes but do so now more forcibly.

Susan Sontag's novel *The Volcano Lover*, the catalyst for Bennett's *Volcano Lovers*, is a tale of the interwoven passions of eighteenth-century characters played out in the shadow of Vesuvius: the Cavaliere (Lord William Hamilton, Viceroy of Naples and eminent collector of antiquaries, 'crystalline vitrifications', pumice, 'marbles and flowered alabasters' . . . 'a superfluity of objects, to ensure that the senses will never be unoccupied'), 'the hero' (Admiral Lord Nelson), and Emma (Lady Hamilton, wife and mistress, indulged enchantress). Vesuvius is a passion for the collector, as inflamed as his wife's passion for 'the hero'. Bennett identifies with the conflicting forces that such passions unleash, how they drive, constrain, and destroy people. Her birds and animals, fruits and flowers, are their personifications.

'Vesuvius was once a man, who once saw a nymph lovely as a diamond.' Sontag tells us, 'scorched by his attentions, [she] jumped into the sea and became the island today called Capri. Seeing this, Vesuvius went mad. . . . And now, as immobilized as his beloved, forever beyond his reach, he continues to throw fire and makes the city of Naples tremble'.



Emma Bennett 'Forcella', 2019 Oil on oak panel 20x25cm

Naples, survivor of centuries of attrition, corruption and urban sprawl, is a place of beauty and anxiety. However, Vesuvius is now not its only volcanic threat with the awakening of Campi Flegrei—the 'fields of fire'. The precarious and passionate Naples conjured up by writers Norman Lewis, Elena Ferrante and Roberto Saviano clings on. A volcano's eruptions and outpourings are akin to humours, or human temperaments, and thus provide ready metaphors, emotional and alchemical, in Bennett 's recent paintings. For Bennett 'it is the perpetual movement and random nature of volcanoes' to which she is drawn. 'I feel very tuned in to these tensions that somehow heighten all emotions—the good and bad. Perhaps it's our sensitivity to, or awareness of, our proximity to the volcano (real or

metaphorical) that makes us feel more excited, more afraid, more in love, more angry, more serene, more tempestuous’.

A volcanic eruption is a spectacle of nature that has to be seen to be believed. William Hamilton knew this so had his artist protégé, Pietro Fabris, depict Vesuvius in this way. Though Bennett’s volcanoes erupt, they do so by puffing, expressing and bleeding in a pitch-dark void, witnessed only by the painting’s viewers.



Emma Bennett 'Our Nature', 2019 Oil on oak panel 28x34cm

Prior to William Hamilton’s *Observations on Mount Vesuvius* (1774), descriptions of the volcano tended towards the allegorical and poetic. Athanasius Kircher, in *Mundus Subterraneus* (1665), described Vesuvius’ emissions as coming out of ‘the breath-pipes of Nature’. Hamilton climbed the mountain daily, observed obsessively and recorded scrupulously ‘the operations of nature, of which I was myself an eye- witness’. It is worth noting, therefore, that for Sontag, the feminist, and Bennett the painter, Vesuvius’ ‘energies are precisely those which cannot be collected, organised or tamed by intellect’. They are felt.

Athanasius Kircher’s early engravings of Vesuvius show the volcano’s inner workings and connections to all the wellsprings in the earth. Water, the antithesis of fire, is the element in nature that tames the volcano. Bennett’s volcano is tamed too, by being dwarfed by the black void in which it floats in limbo, a garland of fruit placed around its foot to hold it in check.

‘I have fun with the scale’, Bennett says, ‘I enjoy nestling plums and oranges within the rocky foreground, playing with the overflow of sulphuric-green bubbling grapes, the spill of ribbon, the outcrops of lemons and I like there to be some ambiguity . . . are those cherries or red-hot rocks?’



Emma Bennett 'Pure Possibility', 2019 Oil on oak panel 20x25cm

Sontag's is a story of passions but also of viewpoints, those not always steady positions from which we presume to view our world, our past and ourselves. It is the women characters in Sontag's tale who are given the last word, but it is Eleanor Pimentel, the revolutionary, who spins round their viewpoint, and ours. Bennett knows that a change in viewpoint divests us of our usual coordinates; a foothold is sought when there is none, we are left suspended, without gravity, lost in space. 'Assigned orders dissolve and the balance of power is suspended' is how she expresses this. The volcano exists here not only as a physical phenomenon but also as a poignant idea that changes our point of view.

For Bennett, 'the volcano is at a distance, but its presence is always felt. In *Torrents* (2019) it's hovering over me and is at the heart of my imagination. It is quite calm, this volcano, but it still confronts me. The portrait format of the canvas stands tall, facing me. It asks me how I relate to it. It asks me if I'm strong enough. It asks me about my composure, my desires, fears and anger. It's not a major blast, but the blooms of white clouds hint at what's possible. I've tried to paint it as if I love it!'

Hamilton, having descended into the volcano prior to its eruption, recorded its interior as a place of calm in which 'cattle grazed . . . and boars frequently harboured'. He



describes passageways that lead to pools: hot, corrosive, bitter, salty, and pure. Bennett explains that 'the fruits of the land that feed us and quench our thirst are used more explicitly in these paintings—Vesuvius' mineral-rich soil made its vineyards and lemon groves famous'.

Nature as 'harbinger[s] of catastrophe' and still life as symbolic allusion, familiar tropes to the Neapolitan painter, are subverted here by Bennett. Garlands of fruit, removed from her filmic interiors to the volcano's edge, are not derived from nature in the raw but appropriated from other paintings, postcards and the internet. Like Sontag's revolutionary, Bennett spins things round.

Foreshadowing the consequences of our actions on this earth, while reminding us of our own inconsequence, is the Cavaliere's wish to possess the mountain. He 'wanted to see fire. What he saw was the blackened, levelled summit . . . The mountain entombed, lying in its rubbish. He saw for a moment . . . the terrible future. The bay without fish, without the swimming children; the mountain's plumeless top a desolate cinder heap. What has happened to the beautiful world, [he] cried.'

In the end, whether in Sontag's work of fiction or Bennett's paintings, it is perhaps the humility and constancy of the Cavaliere's bloodhound that pulls at the heartstrings. In *Stray* (2019), Bennett has the dog perched in thin air, head lowered in subjugation, caught in eternal expectation of solid ground. But we are stopped from getting too close; the ghostly swag keeps him at a distance. The blackness, however alluring in the theatre or cinema, is here unwelcoming and unsettling. Familiar things, the stuff of nostalgia, go up in smoke, hang in limbo, dribble away. What then can we cling to?



'The operations of Nature are slow: great eruptions do not frequently happen; each flatters himself it will not happen in his time, or, if it should, that his tutelar saint will turn away the destructive lava from his grounds'. So writes the real Lord Hamilton in his *Observations*.

FINAL WEEK

Emma Bennett

Volcano Lovers

Through Saturday 12 October 2019

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