

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.

Paul Carey-Kent

EMMA BENNETT INTERVIEWED BY PAUL CAREY-KENT

Where did you grow up?

In Brecon in the National Park in Wales. People tend to say ‘oh how beautiful!’, but nature does have its tough side as well. Maybe that has fed into the combination of elements in my work. But I came to London as quickly as I could!

Was it always painting that appealed to you?

Yes, even in school I always liked it as a substance and enjoyed its ability to make an illusionary space.

How has your style changed over the years?

I was painting more physically during my MA, starting with a source image but with no figuration surviving to the end and lots of poured elements. I kept some of that but re-introduced more explicit figuration.

Obviously you have a strong interest in classical painting?

I do, and there is a particular pleasure in the lushness of those painters – though the abstract expressionist tradition and the void-like spaces are just as important to me. But I’m not an art historian at all! It’s more a matter of reacting to a random pool of art history which I’ve sort of found my way around. As it happens I find my interests are going backwards in time as time moves forwards...

So is it a bit like looking for love – it’s hard to be too deliberate about it?

I’m treasure hunting for imagery I can connect with in emotional way or which chimes with things I’m thinking about. Often it’s just elements, not whole paintings: I become attached to part of painting. You can’t be sure what will affect you till it does, but I keep my eyes open so I’m ready when it happens. I suppose it is a lot like love.

Why do you set those found elements against a black void?

That’s partly just because of the way that allows you to use light: I get a pleasure from the luminosity of the original paintings and can capture that best against a dark ground. It’s also a nod to the notion of a void in abstract painting. And I think of them as night paintings. I use Lamp Black, which felt like the blackest black I could get my hands on.

What is your process once you have laid down that black ground?

I start with an idea and allow myself to journey with it. The amount of void I leave just depends on what feels right, what lets me get into the work. I don't pre-collage the images, though I do scale them up to map out the picture until the composition feels right. Once I have combined elements from several different source paintings, I then add the poured element. That tends to be shellac rather than the oil paint used for the rest of the painting, so they don't mix. I have some control of the pour, but to some extent you do have to let go, and that creates an element of tension. Then I respond to what has happened. Sometimes I'll add more figuration in response to the poured element.

How does that pouring taking place?

I pour and move the canvas, tilting it on the floor. Then I prop it so it's at an angle and the paint can move over the next 24 hours. Sometimes I find the pour covers something I'd painted meticulously for hours and loved, but there is something exciting about taking those sort of risks. You can make really radical changes very quickly to something which took ages, which means you have fast and slow elements, and so the subjects of the painting and how they are made go hand in hand.. Sometimes I think I've ruined all that work with the pour, and I'm gutted when I leave the studio, but I don't hide the poured element. Somehow I always find a way around it in the end: I argue with the work until I reach an equilibrium. The shapes of the pour may suggest what needs to go next. So the abstract can drive the figurative.

How long does a painting take you to make?

Probably a month on average, during which I really enjoy seeking a balance between the elements in it.

Presumably much of that time is spent painting the detailed realistic elements?

Yes, and the time it takes to make them makes it more of a physical involvement and a life with the work. You're up close and intimate with it for hours. That is time-consuming but absorbing. I work my own way out, though, rather than trying to research and imitate the traditional techniques. As it's not about replicating the original, it's odd when people get the wrong idea and want to compare them with the original to see 'how well I've done'.

Do you stick strictly to the original elements you start from?

Not necessarily. I'll often change the scale and relationships, and anything else if I feel like it. I'll allow them to be inconsistent in perspective and absurd in how the scale works. There is a playfulness in that, and in how I use the different languages of painting. There's also a joyous and celebratory aspect, just as the original paintings of fruit and flowers celebrated life while presaging its end.

Your new paintings include ships. What excited you about them?

The paintings are very much about life and death, and so I want to include a sense of our movement through life. That is already present in the poured elements, and in how the fruit and flowers in earlier pictures could be falling or levitating. To take that further it was natural to think about travel, and ship paintings occurred to me. I've always liked the quality of the light in Dutch still lives, and that's present in the ship paintings too. So the ships are vessels on a journey towards the inevitable, and the fruit or flowers are the cargo spilling out, standing in for human life and its preciousness.

Are there references to particular issues in human life?

Those fragile forms from still-life painting take the place of the cargo and sailors. That could suggest the various ways in which people attempt to add value, meaning and longevity to their lives. For example, accumulating wealth gives some people security and confidence, whereas others are more motivated by developing relationships and seeking rare moments of compassion and understanding.

What is the movement towards?

I wanted to represent the movement through life and the certainty of an end, while recognising that there is a clarity about the start of life, but an ambiguity about the end. There is the potential for some energy remaining afterwards, like ghosts or an afterlife. But it's more to signal that I'm thinking about death, not to propose solutions or say what I believe. I don't want to be seen to see them as preaching. It's more about my personal exploration of things that I'm trying to get my head around. They cover big subjects but – that's life!

There is also smoke from battle scenes?

Yes, because these particular ships are from battle scenes. So that refers to the desire of imperial powers to conquer the seas and gain worth. And I've exploited how the ships allow the process of pouring and the look of the expressionist elements to remind you of the sea.

Is there also an economic dimension?

Yes, in that the work can be seen as questioning the mercantile value system that has become synonymous with the Dutch Golden Age, and is still prevalent in western society today. But the value of life is a more important to me in the paintings than the value of trade.

Why do some ships have a bow where one might expect a flag, and one ship flowers in place of the sails?

Because I was looking at paintings of festoons of fruit and flowers, where they are hung up on a peg with a bow on top. That was part of what led me to ships, as I saw a similarity of form between the festoon and the sails. I also felt slightly uncomfortable about waving the flag of a particular nation. And it's a fun way of tying in the still life.

Which artists have influenced you most?

The fruit and flowers use Dutch and Flemish painters such as Willem van Aelst, Abraham Mignon, Jan Davidsz de Heem, Rachel Ruysch and Johannes Bosschaert. The ships are mostly from William van de Velde. The light against a dark ground is influenced by Rembrandt and Carravagio. I am just as affected by 20th century abstractionists: De Kooning, Rothko, Pollock, Newman and especially Morris Louis: I love his veils of poured colour. Weirdly enough, given that I favour black paintings, I particularly like how Robert Ryman's white paintings take the act of painting to its logical conclusion.