

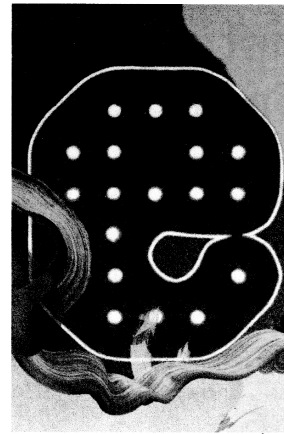
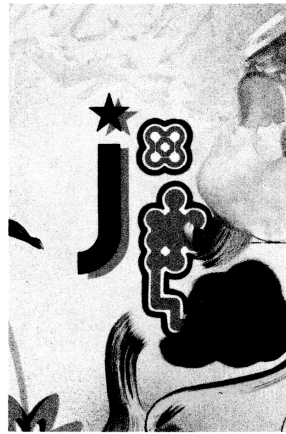
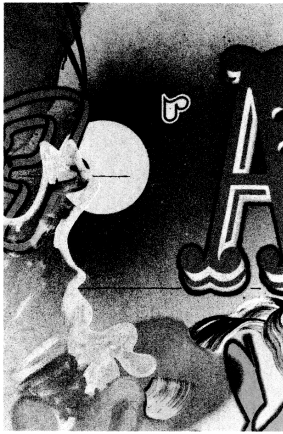
# You balance the picture in my head: On Fiona Rae's paintings

Gilda Williams

It can be a strain to remember a whole painting by Fiona Rae. This is curious, given that her practice, taken as a whole, is uniquely memorable. Her name instantly conjures over two decades' worth of richly painted, astoundingly varied, riotously colourful canvases. We should not underestimate how rare it is for an artist to produce a painting that looks nothing like anything that came before it. Fiona Rae is such a painter.

Yet recollecting a single Fiona Rae painting in detail can be a struggle. Taken together, Rae's paintings offer a dazzling inventory of the possibilities of paint: every colour and shade, every density and mode of application: brushed, dripped, drawn, stencilled, straight-ruled. Thick and chalky, or thinned to a point of evanescence. In her art Rae pays homage to the history of abstraction, from Miró to Kandinsky, to Jackson Pollock and Morris Louis – although none of these painters ever displayed quite Rae's on-canvas exuberance and eccentricity. In *Moonlite Bunny Ranch*, 2003 (p.30), the artist invites yellow Dr Seuss-like illustrations to coexist alongside smoky flickers of grey-blue, a random collection of letters from the alphabet ('A', 'j', 'e') and a blue-green miniature Ferris wheel – or is it a tinted snowflake? In *The woman who can do self-expression will shine through all eternity*, 2010 (p.53), the artist strings a tiny daisy chain of bunny heads alongside the verbose title itself, spelled out letter by letter. In *Maybe you can live on the moon in the next century*, 2009 (p.45), deep aquamarine twigs grow beneath cartoon-like blue shapes heavily outlined in black, while clusters of pale blue brushstrokes suggest either three-dimensional daisies or miniature balloon sculptures. We are forever stunned by this artist's bottomless imagination, her nerve and skill in vibrant painting after painting.

The staggering catalogue of surface effects on display begs the viewer to spend time with the artworks, examining each up close, almost forensically. Yet even so, the paintings are hard to remember one by one. Each gathers the results of so many traces of decisions and experiments, bravely replying to her essential, immense question – *what is a painting, and how can it be made?* – that we struggle to summarise in our mind's eye just one, even after repeated viewings. On the plus side, this renders our encounter with Rae's work perennially fresh. Still, I ask myself why it proves so arduous to picture in my mind a Fiona Rae canvas singly, especially given that she renders each so individually seductive and engrossing to the eye. This persistent conundrum may serve to open a path into Rae's complex art, unravelling its literal and symbolic 'density'.



'...a random collection of letters from the alphabet...' in *Moonlite Bunny Ranch*, 2003 (p.30)

We might blame the inadequacy of our visual memory on the sheer abundance of material that Rae makes available. The limitless means with which she has oil or acrylic adhere to the surface – sloppily poured; cracked and congealed; drawn like calligraphy; dabbled; monochromatically flat or effortlessly brushed in multi-colour splendour – overwhelm us with their excess and variety. Our minds fail to remember all the shapes, forms, tones and lines that Rae has choreographed onto a single canvas. This may be true, but it is also true that she enables each painting to offer its own specific reply to her question – *what is a painting, and how can it be made?* – rather than just offering the occasion for a mindless collection of painterly idioms, repeated indifferently for their own sake. In Rae's hands, each painting distinguishes itself by generating a specific emotion: torpor in *As I run and run, happiness comes closer*, 2008 (p.41); foreboding in *Side by side, I'll be yours forever*, 2011 (p.57); ecstasy in *Lovesexy*, 2000 (p.21). So why my ongoing difficulty to hold one of Rae's uniquely mesmerising paintings fully in mind?

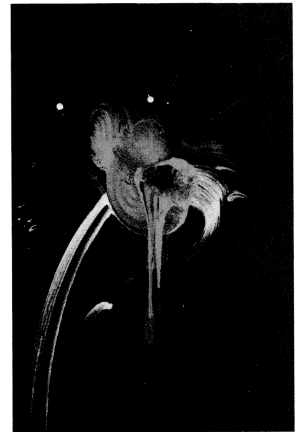
Perhaps her works are difficult for us to remember singly because the artist seems able to compose them solely of interjections, interruptions and detours. The paintings do not plainly direct our attention to a heightened focal point, a climax, but produce a strange drama comprised solely of digressions, supporting roles, pauses and non-sequiturs. She permits even her most astonishing painterly experiments to slide into the margins, or even take cover beneath a haze of vaporous paint, rather than occupy centre stage, unforgettably. In some paintings she demonstrates her immense skills as a drafts-person, but allows the results to blossom briefly, then fade away. For example, towards the bottom of *Press my buttons to give me food and love!*, 2006 (p.31), we see Rae embark on an exquisite, florid, ladder-shaped drawing. As this coherent rhythm of lines gains steam and begins to establish a kind of memorable subplot, she promptly ceases to let it flourish any further. This promising episode of draftsmanship ends as abruptly as it started, partially smothered in a cloud of drippy, grey-violet paint. She never forcibly directs our viewing decisions as to what is 'most important' in the picture, or where our eyes are finally meant to rest, take the picture in, and commit its uniqueness to memory. Helping us gain a steady, unambiguous grip on her paintings is evidently not Rae's chosen primary task as a painter, which remains to reply – as exhaustively as possible – to the query: *what is a painting, and how can it be made?*



'...an exquisite, florid, ladder-shaped drawing.' and



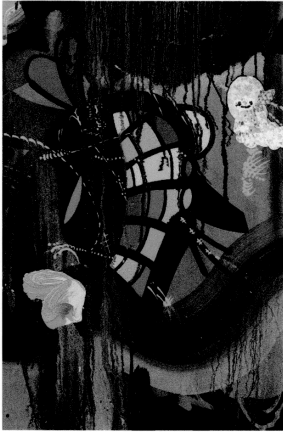
'...the dramatic splash of solid white that drips in the lower half.' in *Press my buttons to give me food and love*, 2006 (p.31)



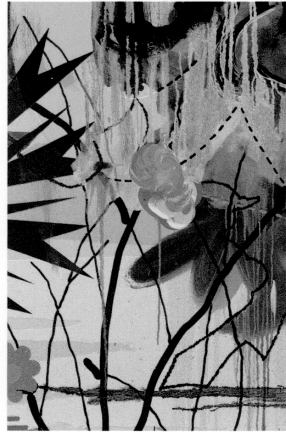
'...the bright orangey-yellow, poisonous bloom that explodes into life...' in *Grotto*, 2005 (p.25)

As we approach each new canvas, we tend to settle our eyes first on a few especially striking painterly episodes that she has devised. For example, in *Press my buttons...*, our gaze may fall first on the intriguing grid of daisies roughly forming a fat 'e' in the top left corner, or the dramatic splash of solid white that drips in the lower half. In other paintings too, a few powerful marks press for our initial attention, such as the large, repeated, psychedelic spider legs that dance across the centre of *I really longed for this*, 2010 (p.49), or the bright orangey-yellow, poisonous bloom that explodes into life in *Grotto*, 2005 (p.25). From there we drift into fainter moments, lesser gestures dimmed to the status of background noise, like the garden-variety repeated drips forming a kind of tracery in pink and green seeping behind *The woman who can do self-expression...* A scattering of preeminent painterly events seems to occupy a kind of foreground, but their authority is routinely undermined by minor notes blithely overshadowing them. Casual drips of paint might heedlessly steal the show, appearing as if poured on top as a final and supreme layer, then drifting to ground level elsewhere, as with the crop of seaweed-like, ochre drippings that dominate and then trail off in *Bold as a wild strawberry, sweet as a naughty girl*, 2009 (p.43). Our sense of hierarchy is forever destabilised. Rae does not protect even her most sublime and painstakingly wrought feat of painting against the onslaught of a faster, lesser, more mischievous mark.

The age-old painterly questions of *what is figure? what is ground?* are also asked, but answered in multiple, contradictory ways on the same canvas, sometimes even in a single mark. A beautifully rendered, paint-heavy brushstroke may start its path with the confidence of an independent object, worthy of our full attention, and then shift to behaving like background fodder by its end. In *Trees and Flowers await your Love*, 2007 (p.35), a stained glass-like chequered pattern seems boldly to rise from the canvas only to meet a sloppy demise, merging with an undulating snake of olive-green wash and blood-like crimson drips. While it melts into the left-hand corner, at its other end the pattern gains momentum and swells to describe grand, Miró-esque floating petals and bold rainbow waves. Her paintings ask: when is a line promoted to the status of an autonomous object, and when does it return to its day job of outlining another, fuller, fleshier form? Is a poured drip a line? Does a wall of drips constitute its own freestanding event? Rae's lines seem to enjoy their permanent identity crisis; they can be precise and assured, or spiked and smudged. Hard edges drift and collapse. Forms might be held together by a weaving line, and elsewhere determined by the unpredictable charge of thrown paint. Every stroke is stupendously unique



'...a stained glass-like chequered pattern seems boldly to rise from the canvas only to meet a sloppy demise...' in *Trees and Flowers await your Love*, 2007 (p.35)



'...some half-visible painterly form moves from the outside inwards, like the large spiky pink puffs...' in *We go in search of our Dream.....*, 2007 (p.37)



'An irresistible, sexy push of unearthly liquid fuchsia...' in *My favorite puppy's Life*, 2004 (p.27)

and indispensable to holding up its portion of the canvas, yet often treated as if it were ordinary – forgettable even. Perhaps in every good work of painting each perfect brushstroke contributes its own significant (if understated) accomplishment, indispensable to the success of the whole. Rae's paintings, however, announce this ideal as their very premise.

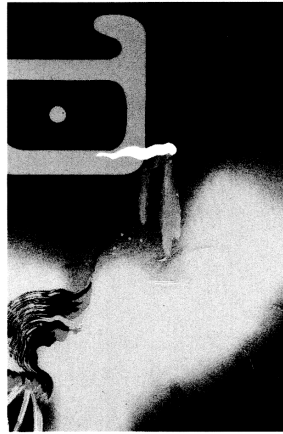
Usually, the geometric centre of Fiona Rae's paintings is made to carry little weight, and the artwork feels composed of all edge. The pictures are never framed, and each suggests a kind of slice of some imagined vast painting, a fraction rather than a whole. Often some half-visible painterly form moves from the outside inwards, like the large spiky pink puffs in *We go in search of our Dream.....*, 2007 (p.37). We imagine the remainder of the object existing phantom-like on some missing adjacent canvas. Take the darkly sensual work, *My favorite puppy's Life*, 2004 (p.27). An irresistible, sexy push of unearthly liquid fuchsia enters in full force from the right, like a storm cloud. Following this dramatic foray into *My favorite...* we explore the rest of Rae's fantasy: a bizarre, gear-like construction of black, yellow, and blue, oddly meticulous in contrast to the rest; heart-shaped, rainbow-hued brush marks; halos of purple-blue; and – what's this? – a cluster of baby-pink Bambis forming a stylised spiral of freak animal triplets, floating bottom stage right? Here Rae seems to be pushing boundaries even more daringly than usual. The Bambis seem to have blown in not just off another painting but from another cosmos altogether, a parallel world of children's décor or hyper-infantilised Japanese cartoon. Who invited them?, we're tempted to ask, but even the gate-crashing Bambis find their rightful place on the canvas. The extreme irreverence of these borrowed, schematised animal figures plainly announces that Rae is willing to expose her canvases to authentic sources of kitsch; on one hand the Bambis seem partially redeemed, rendered almost noble as unexpectedly sophisticated abstract shapes. On the other hand, she pushes her art-loving viewers to expand what they can admit as acceptable on-canvas imagery, questioning why some forms gain regular admittance to the theatre of painting (the fanciful brushstroke, the languorous drip), while others (cartoon characters, illustration) are habitually barred at the door.

Towards the top and thrown over it all is a sizeable splatter of black paint, like a shock of witch's hair, hung sideways. The impact is violent, dripping from right to left with no deference to gravity, much less to the rest of *My favorite...* It must have taken some guts for the artist, having nearly completed this enticing, smouldering work, to toss a can of paint at it in

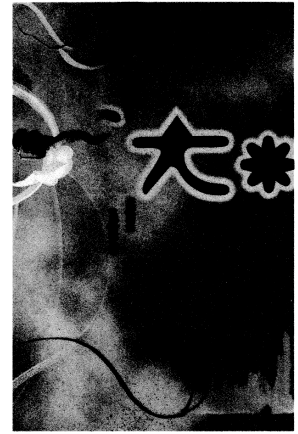




'...little stars, pandas, and flowers;  
or the casual lapses into caricature...'  
in *Tokyo Popeyes*, 2004 (p.33)



'...an urban night scene with its  
suggestions of street signs, puffs of  
smoke...' in *Angel*, 2000 (p.19)

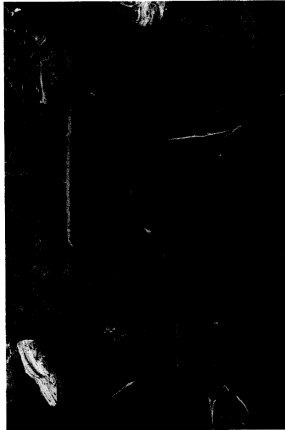


'...computer graphics and Chinese  
ideograms seem to haunt...' in  
*Lovesexy*, 2000 (p.21)

the blessed hope that the contents would fall and smear according to the unforeseeable laws of good fortune. Is it a gesture of frustration – *To hell with this. I'm outta here!*, as Rae storms out of the studio, slamming the door? Or supreme confidence – *This painting's so good, I can even throw paint at it, straight out of the can, and it still stands up* (which it does). Pulling all these disparate moments of *My favorite puppy's Life* together is a micro-climate of smaller painterly flourishes: hazy blue lines; streaks of yellow; a dreamy, thin, black meandering line; an attentively constructed ensemble of pale blue dots. By painting's end, the whole thing – the Bambi clones; the thrown black stain; the swirls; the storm cloud; the smoky pinks; the Rothko-esque blues clustering like clouds top right – hovers in serene balance as if by magic, its singular pieces swimming together contentedly in a deep midnight blue.

The temptation is to claim that Rae's paintings have no rules or boundaries at all, left to run amok wherever chance will take them. But there are rules – or, better, a self-imposed if expandable vocabulary from which the artist works. Across the oeuvre, there is no portraiture, nor horizon line, no hyperrealism. However, to claim they are solely abstract is to ignore the contradictory moments of recognisability: the little stars, pandas, and flowers; or the casual lapses into caricature or bathroom graffiti as in *Tokyo Popeyes*, 2004 (p.33). *Angel*, 2000 (p.19), resembles an urban night scene with its suggestions of street signs, puffs of smoke, stringy birds and flattened clouds cluttering an evenly polluted, slate-blue sky. Rae will never respond to her essential question – *what is a painting, and how can it be made?* – with a pat answer or a formula. Perhaps our struggle with memory results from our inability to remember her multiple, unpredictable replies.

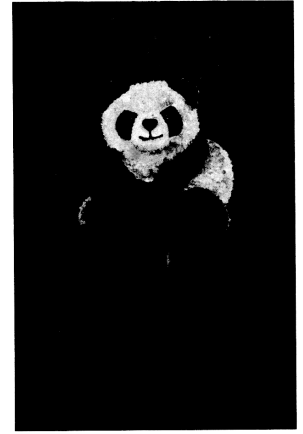
A Rae painting is recognisable if only for its astounding array of oddball shades and decorator colours. Complex colour schemes enhance the logic and mood of an individual painting: the empty calm of cream-lilac-yellow in *Minty Panna*, 2004 (p.29); the bold cartoonish glare of black-pink-yellow-purple in *I really longed for this*. Almost always there is at least one garish interjection – a lurid green; unearthly orange; bright turquoise; a scalding hot pink – tempered by muted and indefinable shades: dull greys, institutional greeny-yellows, turgid blues, and swampy brown-oranges. The most strident interruptions are often made in black and white. A dark line might form an independent episode of drawing, as if it were ink, mimicking a vine, a loopy ladder, a bloom of firework streaks or curving branches. Rarely do we find a straight edge –



'...with its intensely overworked surface, functions in panicky fits and starts, at times collapsing into mud.' in *As I run and run, happiness comes closer*, 2008 (p.41)



'...a 1970s-style, hyper-graphic 'b' logo, lodged in the corner...' in *Minty Panna*, 2004 (p.29)



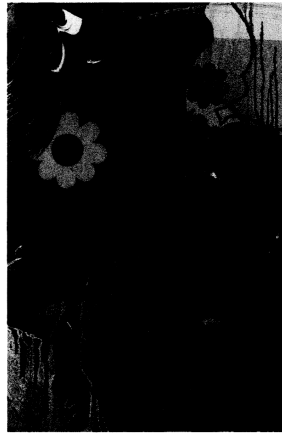
'...insert a grotesquely detailed panda into the grandly gestural abstract painting...' in *Maybe you can live on the moon in the next century*, 2009 (p.45)

although this too is a rule to be broken, as with the machine-like moments of *Lovesexy*, or the tall red reeds, bedecked in glitter, stretching in *Grotto*. Perfect circles embellish much of *Tokyo Popeyes*, and computer graphics and Chinese ideograms seem to haunt *Lovesexy*, overturning any claim that Rae adheres strictly to the brushy and the 'spontaneous'.

As Rae builds section by section, gesture by gesture, the painting seems mercilessly to demand more of her: *Now what? What will you do to me next?* It is unclear who is in charge: the paint, the painter, or the painting itself, relentlessly demanding more of its maker. *As I run and run...*, with its intensely overworked surface, functions in panicky fits and starts, at times collapsing into mud. The artist seems to have really wrestled with this canvas, barely crawling out alive. *Minty Panna* is more like a dance, ethereal and inventive, with its light sprays of lilac, its red-orange floating coralline structures and tiny fairytale mushrooms. Each canvas poses its own questions, and the artist responds by raising the stakes. Can I insert a signage-sized serifed letter 'A' in *Tokyo Popeyes*? Can I get away with Art Nouveau-like swirls of black in *Shifting sands dusts its cheek in powdered beauty*, 2010 (p.51)? What about a 1970s-style, hyper-graphic 'b' logo, lodged in the corner of *Minty Panna*?

Rae's picture-making process seems to press unremittingly upon the artist's imagination. In pushing herself towards more unexplored feats of invention in her work, she simultaneously pushes the boundaries of painting itself: single-handedly expanding the universe of paint-on-canvas both in terms of what can be accommodated there, and how its broad language of styles and strokes can cohabit a single painted plane. Her technical bravura is offset by a deliberate recklessness to respond in the most audacious, barely acceptable manner conceivable. Can I insert a grotesquely detailed panda into the grandly gestural abstract painting *Maybe you can live on the moon...*? Do you mind my resorting to crafts-project glitter? Is it OK to display my fondness for preteen stickers and stencils in a substantial painting?

One senses that Rae declares a painting finished only when the questions raised within it are all answered and held in tenuous equilibrium. Obviously, she is no quitter. The artist calls it a day on a painting only when she has probed every square inch of its surface. Yet Rae never lapses into a practice of routine, working mechanically and filling in expanses of canvas in bulk while, say, casually listening to the radio. Her technique is far more active and inquisitive, striking out in unexplored



'Stencilled shapes bear the traces of paint...' in *We go in search of our Dream.....*, 2007 (p.37)



'...no illusion is conjured: the massive black scrawl ... maintains its literal preeminence...', in *I really longed for this*, 2010 (p.49)

directions over and over in a single work. We are impressed not just by her virtuosity but by her concentrated attention to the demands of the canvas, and her inexhaustible ability to generate new ideas, teasing the canvas with yet another dare. Each gesture represents another fresh source of potential failure for the painting, forever salvaged from wreckage and anchored to the rest of the picture thanks to the next painterly concoction, which in turn finds its own inexplicable place on the surface.

The more we look at them, the more each painting seems to function primarily as the idiosyncratic record of its own making, like a kind of layered visual history of the demanding questions raised and the complicated trajectories pursued in that work. By extension, the unique complexity of each painting becomes like an allegory of the limitless decisions behind art-making itself. Some motifs repeat and are exploited further in subsequent paintings, the artist following their logic to the bitter end. The sense however is of Rae possessing an infinite reserve of painterly responses to the demands of the canvas. We are astounded by the breadth and courage of her painterly imagination: the stroke, the wash, the drip. The stencil, the curve, the pour. The haze, the blot, the stripe. Even hearts, stars, decals and cartoons. Each singular painted possibility, once laid down on the canvas, seems to prompt its own new set of questions – sometimes locally, sometimes threatening the whole picture – and beckons another gesture.

We might be tempted to retrace the order in which the layers were added, but this exercise only enhances our bewilderment as to how each is materially constructed. In attempting to 'rebuild' the painting from the base up, we discover the contradictions and impossibilities therein. Stencilled shapes bear the traces of paint that seem to drip impossibly both 'above' and 'beneath' it (such paradoxes abound in *We go in search of our Dream.....*). Intense black lines which seem the final 'top' gesture are incomprehensibly able to disappear behind much 'earlier' moments. This is painting, after all – not collage; the canvases can also borrow from painting's potential for illusionistic space. Sometimes however, no illusion is conjured: the massive black scrawl of *I really longed for this* maintains its literal preeminence (despite disappearing into the dark background of a densely purple lower half). Rather than marvel at Rae's technical prowess in applying, removing, and finalising brushwork – impressive as it may be – we observe how the contradictions add to the overall sense that she permits nothing to fully lay



'The solid ground acts like a foothold into the originating moment before the perplexing experiment of each painting blasted into existence...' in *Shifting sands dusts its cheek in powdered beauty*, 2010 (p.51)



'...its clear-sighted beginning seems lost forever - like a painting with a migraine...' in *As I run and run, happiness comes closer*, 2008 (p.41)

claim to the painting. Nothing completely occupies the 'last' layer to offer a final resolved image for us to clutch at when we try summarily to recall a specific canvas.

Rae begins with an underlying layer of paint – usually a single flat colour, though not necessarily – which sets the tone of the painting. (Her Goldsmiths' college tutor, Michael Craig-Martin, once advised Rae to begin a canvas by painting the surface a solid colour – to avoid the daunting prospect of confronting a gaping, raw white canvas.) Rae maintains the constant, reassuring presence of the predominant initial colour, and this might be what saves the whole from collapsing into chaos. Despite all the action the canvas endures, there is usually the steady hum of quiet lying beneath, of flat monochromatic resolution which is forever allowed to confess its presence, its original state of innocence, like a country boy who never loses sight of where he's from, even when immersed in the roar of the big city. The solid ground acts like a foothold into the originating moment before the perplexing experiment of each painting blasted into existence – but even this steady constant is not sacrosanct. *As I run and run...* seems so densely impastoed with runaway paint that its clear-sighted beginning seems lost forever – like a painting with a migraine, unable to escape the fog and pounding of relentless, throbbing forces. Our visual memory of each work is distracted by the proliferation of many-coloured watery drips often seemingly poured against gravity, sliding upwards, or sideways (though never diagonally; the drip always upholds the axis of the rectangular canvas grid). The works resist logic as they resist memory perhaps because they are never about racing to completion, but insistently about the dynamic enquiry of their making.

In attempting to describe Rae's works we discover how painting easily lends itself to clichéd metaphors from nature. Lines are vine-like; brushstrokes snake-like; paint pours down like rain. Patterned shapes verge on mutating into recognisable organic forms; is that a pink butterfly wing taking flight in *Minty Panna*? We find ourselves compelled to speak in terms of metaphor, comparing painted forms to stems, stalks, and shooting stars. Often these are literalised with Rae's addition of recognisable petals, leaves, and roots. *We go in search of our Dream.....* hints at a pond surface or water's edge. *Side by side...* suggests a jungle floor, overgrown with shadowy vines tangling close to the earth while lilac sunlight floods in from overhead. *The woman who can do self-expression...* speaks of icicles and crystal structures – although these are fully contradicted by



'...is that a pink butterfly wing taking flight...?' in *Minty Panna*, 2004 (p.29)



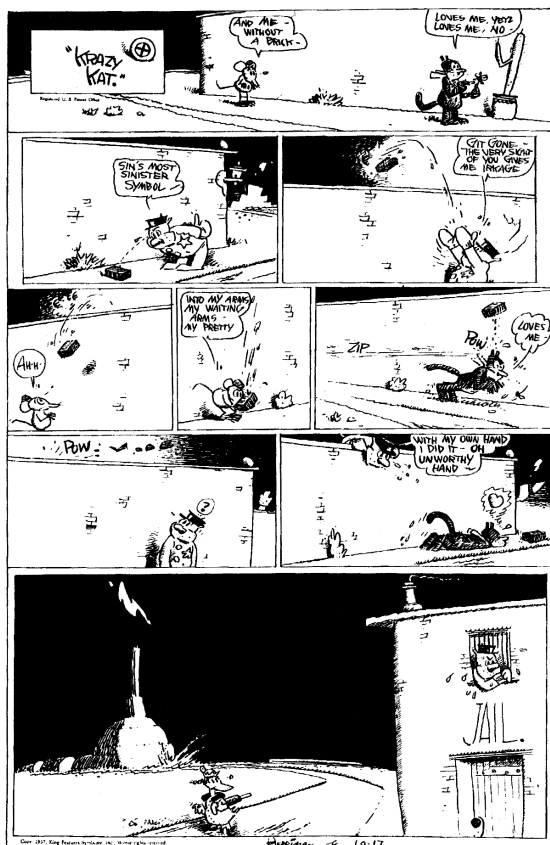
'...a jungle floor, overgrown with shadowy vines tangling close to the earth while lilac sunlight floods in from overhead.' in *Side by side, I'll be yours forever*, 2011 (p.57)



'...icicles and crystal structures ... as if blissfully dancing to the beat of their own drummer.' in *The woman who can do self-expression will shine through all eternity*, 2010 (p.53)

undulating lines floating psychedelically across it, as if blissfully dancing to the beat of their own drummer. Organic mutations and unhealthy creepers are prevented from overgrowth by the firm border of the rectangular canvas, which keeps each riotous canvas fenced in by the rigours of the stretcher. In *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination*, Peter Ackroyd suggests the essential nature of English art as the paradoxical intertwining of the organic and inorganic. The English imagination is forever marked, for Ackroyd, by the contrast between the geometric and the labyrinthine as evidenced in, say, a coiled snake weaving round a cylindrical column in an ancient church, or an intricate Anglo-Saxon knotted pattern held forcibly in place by the rectangular stone. Perhaps similarly, the straight edge of the canvas seems the only constant boundary keeping Rae's circuitous paintings in check.

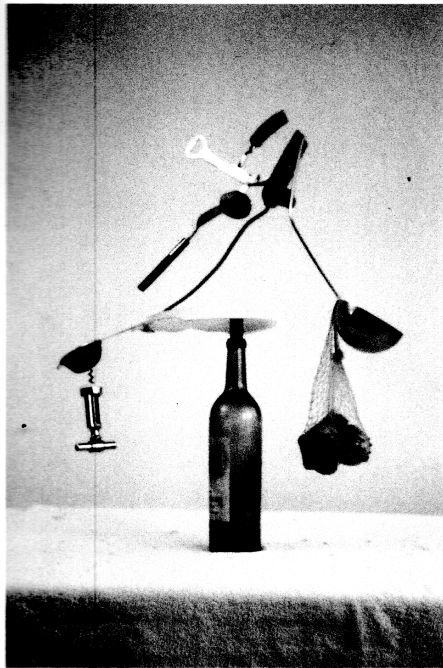
Fiona Rae's art, however, is too liberated, too unselfconscious to feel typically English; in fact she spent much of her childhood abroad, and was born in Hong Kong. Some have situated Rae's art squarely within the tradition of Modernist painting, and locate her perpetual experimentation with the surface as replaying Greenberg's dictum that the painted medium stick to its specific bounds of canvas and pigment. We suspect that Rae pushes this to limits that Greenberg could hardly have imagined, perhaps even forgiven. Greenberg's despised kitsch is here courted and embraced, happily flirting with the avant-garde. Do Pollock's drips lose stature when rendered in *boudoir* shades of pale turquoise and lilac? Will you think less of me if I insert daisies, petunias and love-hearts in my abstract art? Do you do pink? Abstract Expressionist artists each perfected a recognisable painterly language: Pollock's drips, Newman's zips. Rae is more like a promiscuous polyglot, fluent in multiple dialects. In painting terms, it's as if she stammers out a stream of broken phrases only to suddenly veer off into a florid soliloquy. Her brushstrokes seem to speak in tongues. But suspicions exist because of our senseless expectation that painting sticks to one voice at a time; *says who?* The nerve-wracking absence of a reassuring, coherent maker behind Rae's multi-lingual paintings is reinforced by the extremes of speed at which parts are painted. The mark-making shifts wildly in pace from the instantaneity of thrown paint; to the lucky flourish of a quickly gliding brush; to wide, wavy strokes, administered in carefully orchestrated bands of colour; to a painstakingly traced dotted line; to the meticulously stencilled Bambi shape. In cacophonous combination the painting turns self-contradictory, as if shouting and whispering at once.



George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*,  
first published 17 October 1937

This coexistence of extremes – the scream and the whisper, control and chance, rapidity and concentration – may finally describe the nature of the paintings’ presence, and what finally renders them resistant to fixation in memory. Rae enables her canvases to support a host of opposing forces which finally coalesce into a stunning, suspended balance, both literally and conceptually. Her works literally depict visual balance: heavy marks offset by light, casual insertions and delicate details. Her colours achieve a balanced variety of shade and tone, from the deepest dark of the blacks, browns and blues to the palest white. She engineers equilibrated contrasts between fat angry brushes and timid skinny lines, or the careless flinging of paint and the paradoxical perfect aim and exquisite drips formed from these acts of reckless indifference. Occasional bursts of violence are tempered by fashion colours, or by vapid petals and daisies.

The balance Rae achieves is not just one of form and colour but on conceptual terms: the balance between care and chaos; logic and illogic; the recognisable and the unfamiliar; lofty painterliness and mass-cultural hubris. Her paintings balance wet and dry. They balance an indebtedness to the history of painting with a rampant disregard for the expectations of painterly convention. She balances the dead seriousness of Abstract Expressionist painting with the sheer wit of an overworked, startled panda riding a brushstroke, like a surfer catching a wave. The humour in Rae’s work cannot be overlooked; among her influences Rae cites George Herriman’s extraordinary comic strip *Krazy Kat* (1913–44). With its implausible leaps in time and space, mad minuscule details and willfully inconsistent backgrounds, *Krazy Kat* balanced pathos and hilarity across the unholy triangle of Krazy Kat, Ignatz Mouse and Offissa Pupp. To me, her art is less reminiscent of other paintings than artworks such as Fischli and Weiss’s comic ‘Equilibrium’ series, where vegetables, cooking utensils, and bottles are photographed poised in an improbable acrobatic balance. The pair’s photographs such as *Im ersten Morgenlicht* (1984–85), capture a singular, gravity-defying miracle; yet our recollections of the individual feats in this series similarly tend to blur



Peter Fischli / David Weiss  
*Im ersten Morgenlicht*, 1984–85  
 Colour photograph  
 40 x 30 cm  
 Edition of 3

together. Like Rae's paintings, no object in the Swiss duo's kitchen sculpture takes centre stage over the rest. Their Sisyphean efforts required to produce each absurd construction speak not only to the precariousness of a moment – perhaps analogous, in Rae's work, to the magical instant that all the elements of a painting are suddenly suspended in perfect equilibrium, and the work is finished – but to the potential for an artist's giddy delirium in the isolation of the studio.

We cannot escape the awareness that even Rae's most offbeat painting requires enormous discipline and commitment from her. She must summon immense stores of energy and curiosity to discover within her, each time, the impulse to tackle a new canvas, or later to rework the occasional misfortune into a new idea. The wordy titles (themselves balanced between irony and poetry, heartfelt revelation and pop-star record title – perhaps the name for a new shade of MAC lipstick) reinforce the sensation that these paintings represent an inner state made manifest. Emotions are drummed up – though not necessarily the alleged angst of Pollock's explosive drips. Sometimes emotions in Rae's paintings are evoked in an amused and knowing way, but they can also feel awfully authentic: jubilation, uncertainty, surprise. Always Fiona Rae's paintings seem to be searching for their own skewed and unique balance – materially, historically, emotionally. The viewer too must strike a balance between lavishing close attention upon the intensely worked surface and enjoying the painting from a comfortable distance, keeping its lightness and instant pleasure intact. It's hard to summarise a Fiona Rae painting in our minds because we cannot hold all its fragile equilibriums in our mind's eye without overcompensating in one direction, causing the whole delicate miracle to topple hopelessly in our heads.