

Fiona Rae: Full Swing

Gilda Williams

When the time comes to look back on Fiona Rae's extraordinary lifetime of paintings, the years 2014-18 will assume special resonance. In her recent sweeping, stirring, heavenly compositions of light and colour (2017-18), as well as her smouldering black-and-white canvases (2014-15), Rae has hit new levels of spaciousness, clarity and technical proficiency. Fiona Rae's dynamic abstract paintings have been widely admired since her participation in the landmark exhibition *Freeze* in London, 1988, which first introduced the world to the revolutionary Young British Artists. Nominated for the prestigious Turner Prize a few years later, in 2011 Rae was the first woman painter ever appointed Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy Schools, having been elected (in 2002) to the Royal Academy of Arts, the centuries-old guild which invites only the country's most distinguished artists into its ranks.

A 'painter's painter', admired by her peers for her exceptional manual skills and seemingly limitless imagination, for thirty years now Rae has been committed to pushing the limits of what 'serious' painting can be. She takes enormous risks by deliberately inserting into her canvases elements of dubious artistic pedigree, adding over the years floral motifs, Day-Glo colours, sunbursts, cartoon characters, stars. Rae calls into question the expected dead-seriousness of abstract painters – morose Jackson Pollock; colourless Christopher Wool – by asking: what is, or isn't, permissible in a 'great' painting? If a Disney-inspired palette or powder-puff brushstrokes (both evident in Rae's exuberant works) seem out of bounds, why? Who writes the rules, and what happens when a painter breaks them, mixing hallmarks of mature painting – such as Rae's magnificently controlled brushstrokes, composed into impossibly balanced compositions – with gate-crashers such as calligraphic swirls, neon colours, finger-painting, or dotted lines? Fiona Rae only gets away with such impertinence owing to her exceptional abilities and longtime commitment to painting. Included in important collections from the Tate, UK, to the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C., and with major retrospectives at Leeds Art Gallery, UK, and elsewhere, Rae's uproarious painting style has dazzled countless curators and collectors who recognize that her journeys to the limits of painting — where does doodling end, and museum-worthiness begin? — confirm Fiona Rae among the most accomplished painters in Britain today.

After decades of intensely complex paintings – piling countless layers of spidery lines, scribbles, and patterns across the canvas, with interjections of tweeny cartoon images, glitter, graphics, and much more – Rae has now expanded the canvas’s breathing space, permitting great stretches of airy colour to flow. Piet Mondrian and Caspar David Friedrich come to mind as other notable painters who, as their work reached a peak, cleared the canvas of the inessential. Fiona Rae’s latest works express similar newfound levels of certainty and daring.

The two large recent paintings *Sleeping Beauty will hum about mine ears* and *Snow White lifts the moon out of her sphere* (both 2017) share a lightness evidenced in both the use of pastel colour – shades completely devoid of black – and their sinewy mark-making: looping strokes of bright magenta; thin, arrow-like streaks of orange; hazes of pale yellow and aqua. The whole of the large horizontal canvas *Once upon a time bears the sea-maid’s music* (2018) seems to rest on a large billowing grey-blue cloud, blowing through Tiepolo-like skies bathed in lilac, pink and rainy greys. In the more boldly colourful *Figure 2e* (2016), feathery interludes and bursts of coral float over seas of grey. This seems a kind of transitional work, introducing the bold colours of 2017 to the earlier blurred, greyscale of *Figure 1b* (2014). This latter work displays another kind of painterly discipline, testing whether Rae’s leaps of imagination can translate purely into black, white and an infinity of greys. The results include chalk-like stabs, blinding white bursts, and rushes of smoke – complete with fiery sparks leaping in every direction. In all these, Rae has streamlined her media by working exclusively in oil, hand-applying every mark with a brush – no extraneous elements now, such as her earlier stencils, painted stickers, or drips. And her command of oil paint, as witnessed here, is mind-blowing.

Oil Painting 101

Before exploring what Fiona Rae’s feats of painting might mean, we’ll pause here briefly for a short lesson in oil paint. As anyone who’s ever attempted oil can attest, this unforgiving medium tends constantly towards impenetrable solids of hopelessly flat colour – the very opposite of Rae’s weightless, layered luminosities. When inexpertly mixed, contrasting shades of oil paint threaten always to lapse into sludgy, undefinable browns – colours best described as ‘Pond Scum’ or ‘Swamp’ – the antithesis of Rae’s ethereal blues, radiant fields of rose pink, or long crisp blades of bright green, stretching upwards like fresh spring stalks. Rae’s canvases almost resemble giant watercolours, with overlapping tints of transparent stains; we almost forget that this is actually *oil painting*. Dewy expanses are punctuated by decisive mark-making that can resemble coloured ink; for example the zig-zag of blue-green lines forming a brief ‘fence’ near the centre of *Sleeping Beauty*... that seems applied more with a pen than a brush. In the greyscale works like *Figure 1b* one could swear that some marks are made of chalk or pastel, while elsewhere there seem to be airbrushed spotlights or spray-painted blasts of white. With regard to *Figure 1b*, Rae has spoken admiringly of seeing 13th-century artist Chen Rong’s handscroll *Nine Dragons* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, with their “dragons and clouds appearing and disappearing,” (as she describes them) impossibly achieved solely with black ink and occasional touches of red. “I wanted to see whether I too could conjure up dynamic images using only black, white and

several tones of grey," she says, and in this Rae has abundantly succeeded, conjuring in *Figure 1b* a firefly night populated by mysterious spirals and sparkling firecrackers, exploding across a full-moon sky.

Our temptation is to lavish attention on the singular, elaborate flourishes of paint on each canvas – the main event, so to speak. Attention-grabbing examples include the cluster of brushstrokes that crown the top of *Figure 2e*, a complicated nest of multi-hued loops and plumes, like birds swirling into existence alongside feathery strokes of green and bright red. Or, crashing at the centre of *Sleeping Beauty*..., a large, brushy, curling sea-blue wave hovering over a bizarre giant star pattern only achievable thanks to Rae's virtuoso dexterity in handling a very wide brush, loaded with varying shades of lilac.

Just as miraculous as these highlights, however, are the subtle transitions of colour swimming across the surface. Brushstrokes transform smoothly from figure into ground – for example, the prominent green road we might follow, sliding down the centre of *Snow White*.... Starting life towards the top as a kind of garden snake, it drops and widens only to disappear behind an unexpected red ladder-like structure, eventually fading towards the lower left into fine green hairs disappearing into pink. At the same time, lightning-streaked storm clouds seem to gather towards the bottom, shifting effortlessly from yellow to blue, each colour retaining its distinct identity. Rae has described her desire to produce paintings that are "fluid and fluent" ... constructed by "adding and merging ... where all the edges are contiguous and glide from one area to another." Her desired seamlessness is everywhere apparent. Towards the centre of *Figure 2e*, orgiastic sweeps of magenta and yellow – carefully loaded, and kept separate, on a single brush – explode into life, riding a brushy crest of opulent aqua blue. In *Sleeping Beauty*..., a haze of lilac disappears into blues, then impossibly shifts into pink, then yellow, then vivid coral. These acrobatic transitions never collapse into the murky pools of chromatic confusion where any lesser painter would inevitably drown.

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So, why does this matter? What has Fiona Rae achieved in whipping into existence these bright, gorgeous surfaces? With their luminosity and floating multi-layered movement, we might say that Rae's canvases almost begin to behave like screens: with their free-floating, semi-transparent elements co-existing immaterially, sometimes in soft-focus, sometimes shifting imperceptibly into the adjacent shape. Critics have already explored 21st-century painters' propensity to manipulate light as much as colour – as if mimicking our endlessly scrolling, flickering screens. In this sense painters in the digital age contrast vividly with the Abstract Expressionists' obsession with the thick, opaque materiality of paint.

Art historian Helen Molesworth has discussed Luc Tuymans' adoption of spectral and internally illuminated imagery, for example in the work *Turtle* (2007), based on an online image of a lightbulb-clad, Disneyland parade float. Fiona Rae's paintings can also seem, inexplicably, to be lit from within. They are as if plugged in, awake with bursts of fluorescence – such as the golden haze at the bottom

right of *Sleeping Beauty*... that verges on the divine. Brushstrokes scatter in every direction, or dart off like sparks, suggesting a kind of white-hot heat glowing in the background. In 'Pigment vs. Pixel: Painting in an Era of Light-Based Images' (2012), art historian Luke Smythe further proposed that today's painters celebrate the lush materiality of paint to counter the lack of tactile sensations in the virtual landscape that threatens to dominate our every visual experience. Rae's canvases may perhaps mimic a screen but they are emphatically created from a very different, almost life-like substance: the history-laden, richly pigmented, fertile materiality of oil paint.

Twisted Sister

Of the long-distant 1950s generation of grandfather abstract painters, it is de Kooning whose spirit is most alive in Rae's art. Fiona Rae has expressed her admiration of de Kooning's *Women* in particular, which offered her "a lesson in direct painting, in the energy and aggression of putting on a brush mark and removing all or part of it again and again, in order to create a complex picture surface" – also an evocative self-description of Rae's own process. Like de Kooning's *Women*, each of Rae's tall canvases seem constructed down the centre following a kind of imaginary spine: a vague 'figure' at once twisted and immolated, monumental and all-pervasive. Rae's barely-there, evaporating 'figures' become what the artist has called "my own fairytale characters ... who exist only in paint but who might be wearing crowns, clouds, arrows, dresses, shoes, hats, feathers, stars."

If we search carefully for such a fantasy character in Rae's paintings, we can just about make out Sleeping Beauty in *Sleeping Beauty will hum about mine ears*: crowned by a halo of fluttering blue wings flapping about her head; her arms to the right and left of centre taper into green vines and a blue/purple stalk; and she wears a magnificent swirling skirt with a jagged lilac hem and trailing a thin, weightless pink train. "The figure is nothing unless you twist it around like a strange miracle," de Kooning claimed, and Rae's tall, windswept beings (and if the large paintings are standing portraits, the smaller paintings are like portrait heads) similarly acquire an impossible, magical, 'miraculous' presence. De Kooning's brushy ladies are hybridized here with the curves of Dr Seuss's Cat in the Hat; the shapely outline of a Disney princess ballgown; the swirls embroidered on a silk Prada skirt; or the boot-trimmings embellishing the lace-up boot of Picasso's overdressed musketeer. Another art-historical precedent who unexpectedly comes to mind is Jean-Honoré Fragonard and his fantasy *The Swing* (1767), with its gravity-less secret garden overflowing with seductive billowing pinks and unearthly greens and blues, all bathed in heavenly light. I am reminded of Rae in Fragonard's palette and the open swathes of illuminated colour, as well as the picturing of an unbound woman literally 'coming undone' as her shoe flies from her foot, into the air.

Freefall

But Fragonard is a dangerous distant relative. His flirtatious paintings – however skillfully rendered

– have long occupied a no-go area: vapid, ‘girlish’ pictures of frolicking aristocrats, destined for the guillotine. Such artworks have been attacked since the days of Diderot, who recommended that 18th-century artists abandon such frivolity and “paint as the Spartans spoke”: in other words, painters should display unmistakably ‘manly’ qualities such as discipline, decisiveness, and severity. Diderot’s fear of the ‘effeminate’ persisted for centuries – the Abstract Expressionists were positively drowning in testosterone. Clement Greenberg praised Pollock for his ‘non-castrated’ on-canvas emotions, while critic Manny Farber admired Dripping Jack’s ‘virile’ action. It takes considerable courage, then, for Rae to grant herself license to play with such unreconstructed signals of the ‘feminine’ as pinks and other pastels; wispy lines and frail layers of thin colour; floating and twirling compositions. And is that thin glowing star in the top corner of *Figure 2e* a ... wand? To say nothing of her titles, which combine Disney princesses with Shakespearean lines, or her stated fascination with the colours of Candy Crush Saga, the paragon of ‘women’s gaming’. (Rae does not herself play video games, but she “loves the look of them.”) Sadly, the association of good, ‘ballsy’ painting with the male sex is hardly a remnant of the past; Smythe’s aforementioned article on contemporary light-based painters considers solely male artists Tuymans, Albert Oehlen, Fabian Marcaccio, Christopher Wool and Wade Guyton – where are Fiona Rae, Julie Mehretu, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, Bracha L. Ettinger? (The only two women who appear in that article are a pair of headless, topless, large-breasted virtual fantasies in a 2004 painting by Oehlen and Jonathan Meese. Honestly.) Rae’s refusal to behave like ‘one of the boys’, and her not-entirely-ironic embrace of extreme and even hackneyed signifiers of the female gender are among her boldest moves to explore what’s been excluded from ‘serious’ painting, and what these biases reveal.

In his late essay on Cy Twombly, Roland Barthes writes of the artist’s ‘shaky maculations, tenuous blemishes on a vague background’, which could equally describe Rae’s surfaces. Barthes compared Twombly’s painterly tenuousness with Socrates’ intellectual fear of “falling into some abyss of nonsense, and perishing.” Abstract painting is forever caught in a similar conundrum: swinging between meaninglessness – a literal void that the artist has failed to fill – and the most sublime of visual experiences. “Painting is a ridiculous activity,” Rae has said, “but deeply serious at the same time ... a reflection of what it’s like to be alive: a constant coming apart, a constant undoing.” Fiona Rae’s expansive, vibrant canvases seem literally to test how wide she can stretch this “coming apart,” to open a place where vision, meaning and pleasure can simultaneously take flight.

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