

# Being Human- and some dogs

PHILIPPA PATERSON

**Phillipa Paterson's** paintings are composed of the traditional elements, portrait and landscape, oil paint on canvas or linen and at first glance there is a seemingly traditional approach to her subject matter, 'people, pets and interiors, vases of flowers and sofas' set in scenes of domestic life that would have been very familiar to a C19th lady painter.

But as her current exhibition *Being Human . . . and some dogs* reveals, things in Paterson's painted world quickly and gloriously begin to slide. The familiar elements of domesticity are present but have become untethered from the pictorial frame, cosy domesticity is further pushed aside by unexpected imagery. We encounter an improbably curvaceous and scantily clad lady trapeze artist flying overhead, attended by a cast of suspicious looking men in scenes reminiscent of George Grosz in Weimar Berlin.

Next a 1920's barroom scene springs up, painted in a style reminiscent of Philip Guston and traditional elements are further disrupted as solid pictorial space seems to have been considered, then rejected as perspective goes merrily haywire. Paint dances across the canvases in brilliant colours, sometimes thick and clotted, almost abstract, then turned layered, and thin and convincing representational, creating an exciting surface texture.

Paterson's compositions invite us into a 'spacial' experience and throughout which, a strong sense of narrative pervades. There is a feeling of a story being told in almost every picture, but this story is never explained, rather the images unfold as a series of contemporary fantasies, charged with an unpredictable energy and full of the mystery of human life.

To create her characteristic painted worlds Paterson derives imagery from a variety of sources: family albums, fashion photography, comics and cartoons but the images are not literally translated instead the archive is re-interpreted imaginatively. Paterson's broad sources, unfettered figure-drawing, free composition and vibrant use of colour recalls the work of Rose Wylie and Ray Oxlade, and a series of 'celebs' or 'celebrity portraits' such as **Brigitte Bardot**, **The Rapper**, and **Dolly Parton** underline this connection. Here bold, spontaneous brushstrokes contrast with careful marks and lines that are sometimes sinuous, sometimes solid, but never predictable. Colours veer between brilliant, almost crude, and subtle, with graduated tones and tints and these elements are then skilfully incorporated in a series of funny, wildly unlikely and unruly celeb portraits that would horrify any PR agent.

But these transgressive images are still recognisable characters, sacred monsters from celebrity culture and in this way Paterson's portrait paintings raise a question over our fascination with fame and 'image' and like the work of Rose Wylie, they simultaneously celebrate and critique pop culture.

In Paterson's work we are compelled to enter a virtual world, but once we are there we find things 'curiouser and curiouser' full of strange distortions and bewildering space. Like Alice in Wonderland, we have entered-in – but, fascinated and puzzled we cannot leave until we have found the key, like Alice after she has drunk the potion.

The figures we encounter seem awkward, their elongated marshmallow limbs contrast with beautifully rendered clothes and interiors, it is as if the characters have been boxed into an ill-fitting frame and want to escape – but to escape what is not clear. Perhaps escape some kind of inner psychological boundary, or just their slightly uncomfortable looking clothes.

Or maybe they wish to break free of the societal restrictions of middle class life, particularly prevalent to a time that marked Paterson's youth.

Another dichotomy emerges in her work, some paintings seem both a critique of and a nostalgia for, an old fashioned bourgeois life, one of horses and dogs and country life and holidays in 'good' hotels with blue swimming pools, but these unruly bodies and fixed smiles raise another question - was the water shark infested? There is much humour here but also a slight sense of anxiety and dislocation and Paterson has said her childhood was spent between many countries, among them South Africa, America, France, Cyprus, and Switzerland, so she feels dislocated and belongs everywhere and nowhere at once.

However, as the exhibition shows, Paterson's work is overall, joyous and fiercely celebratory, her free spontaneous drawing and brushwork and vibrant sense of colour betray a love of the act of painting itself and also give the painted surfaces a sensual charge. She combines accomplished representational drawing, mingled with cartoon to create a powerfully individualistic style and this lends the work a deadpan humour, an approach that chimes strongly with the work of Paterson's brother, the cartoonist Oliver Duke.

Obviously, Paterson is well versed in how to make a 'conventional' painting but her skill in playfully subverting tradition gives a slight feeling that the paintings have a life of their own, even of the uncanny, as if we have met her characters before somewhere, or that the characters in the paintings have somehow manifested independently of the artist and may walk about the canvas when we are not looking.

This psychological element is found in the painting **Dobermans**. A man in blue jeans sinks into a brightly coloured sofa with plump and billowing upholstery, his rubbery limbs are too big and stretch and flail awkwardly, he is a picture of male anxiety, large and incongruous in the cosy interior scene. Strikingly he is attended by two finely drawn Doberman's, huge doggy familiars, as if echoing a renaissance painting where greyhounds traditionally lie elegantly at the masters feet.

However, these powerful beasts look neither dangerous or subservient, but oddly detached, more like manifestations of Anubis the Ancient Egyptian god. As Anubis is the weigher of the souls of the dead, perhaps death also stalks this cosy sofa and the brightly coloured room.

Dogs also serve as psychological symbols, guarding and watchful, maybe they are here as a defence against a modern crisis of masculinity? Or perhaps they are here to make sure he cannot escape domesticity as those powerful jaws could haul him back if he tried to disappear into the couch altogether.

These painted ambiguities and references to ancient myth in contemporary settings cleverly hold our attention and add rich layers to our visual experience.

Along with interiors and questionable celebrity portraits, Paterson also conjures another world in the show, perhaps scenes from the realms of female fantasy.

In **The 1920's: Dancer** and **The 1920's: Don't Let Go** we meet Weimar-esque glamour girls, dancing on the bar, heavily made up and bejewelled in sequins and feathers, a shimmering fantasy of pink tights and high heels. Nearby a near naked lady soars across the circus ring on a flying trapeze invoking giddy female freedoms. At first we are charmed by these dynamic girls, but then we notice that the women are watched, there is a darker crowd, including brutish men, besuited punters and this strikes a note of ambiguity and so the viewers ground shifts uncertainly and we are no longer sure whose fantasy this is.

Despite the seemingly youthful naivety and exuberance of Paterson's figures and compositions they are in fact complex works and have a contextual depth that arises from her extensive experience of the world, and love of history and philosophy and language.

All of her figures burst with life as they bloom across the large canvases and here the big bold pictures are attended by a flock of small familiars, little paintings of dogs and cats and owls, possibly visitors from the archaic past that invoke a more ancient world, forgotten today but refusing to absent themselves, still haunting the floral cushions and squishy sofas or the tasteful minimalism of contemporary homes.

In Paterson's canvases all of her human figures reflect a contemporary moment in the human condition, male, female or anywhere in between, but it is notable that woman proliferate.

Pepto- bismol pink women, brown women, orange women, white, yellow and green - and any sort of women at all, and they are often awkward but nevertheless determined and engaged.

These characters are slight outsiders, they do not really fit the frame, but they are also protagonists who refuse to conform to conventional standards or ghastly good taste.

This clever pictorial device invokes a particularly feminine psychological state, that of not feeling comfortable in the world, or in one's body, or of the difficulty women face in resisting the demands of convention and eternally coping with a pervasive feeling of not being quite acceptable.

Despite this, her figures triumph, painted in such a gloriously free way that the struggle becomes celebratory.

**Phillipa Paterson** shows us a world filtered through her rare personal lens and it is funny, thoughtful, surprising, sometimes sad, but always fascinating, as the accomplished paintings in this exciting exhibition reveal, **Being Human - and some dogs** is a rich mix indeed.