

mother's annual 2017

Maria Farrar straits

May – July

In a short textⁱ, unpublished in his lifetime, Walter Benjamin wrote that for children, 'colour is fluid, the medium of all changes, and not a symptom'.ⁱⁱ What he meant by this, as far as I understand it, is that children approach colour on its own terms; they do not understand it as a secondary addendum to form, but as something valuable and life-giving. Look at any child's drawing and you will likely infer this: a flat wash of magenta or hasty welter of jade appears, at least to their eyes, as something much more worthwhile than line, modelling or any concerted fidelity to realism. For them, colour is an end in itself, something joyous and unmediated. As Benjamin beautifully signs off: 'Children are not ashamed, since they do not reflect but only see'.ⁱⁱⁱ Colour, to them, is *always* new.

There is something of this optical purity or self-sufficiency in the recent paintings of Maria Farrar, but – crucially – this sense far precedes the subject matter, which is mostly centred on the domestic sphere. Instead, this sense derives from her approach to paint, and colour in particular. At mother's tankstation, Farrar's exhibition 'straits' features fourteen new works, predominately oils on linen, but with a smattering of luminous and exacting watercolours. All of these paintings, though, are for the most part roughly figurative, varying along a scale from forthrightly representational – for example, *Shoes too big to fill* (2017)^{iv} – to much more indebted to abstraction, as with *Saving my parents from drowning in the Shimonoseki Straits*. Each work, however, seems to inhabit a delicate rapprochement between figuration and abstraction, between east and west, fact and fiction, with colour playing the central mediatory role. Farrar's application of paint is deft, rich and economical, marked by a gestural thoughtfulness that works to disarm these binaries. Because paint is material, of course, before it is anything at all – a procession of ants, a suspension bridge or even a woman's eye, cast in a two-pronged flick of the wrist – it is colour. These are works that seem to present this fact in their painting: colour, at least to our eyes, is always-already abstract, but in Farrar's paintings, as with the child's eyes, this is not symptomatic of anything other than itself. Paint, in other words, is characterised by its luminous sufficiency, its ability to transmit emotion and meaning *by itself*.

This understanding is inseparable from Farrar's diverse heritage: born in the Philippines, before being raised in Japan, and then completing her studies in England, means that her work presents a style and approach to painting that is neither western, nor wholly eastern; instead, it is a melange of reference points from both spheres – from Abstract-Expressionism to manga – and the domestic that Farrar conjures forth in these paintings appears cast through this multitudinous and capacious understanding of medium. Perhaps as a result of this, the scenarios she presents appear more like fragments or memories recalled from an overexposed snapshot. Edges are hazy, entire sections are only sketchily delimited and in a good portion of the paintings, the backgrounds are flat and ethereal, a wash of dusky pink or acidic yellow. For unknown reasons, as with memory, certain, seemingly trivial details figure forth in eidetic vitality; in *Dishwasher*, for example, a stack of dishes seems to levitate against the mauve background, itself speckled from the linen support; elsewhere, a gorgeous plume of steam from a freshly brewed cup of tea unfurls into a beautiful and languid 's' (*Sunday*). Such is the way we remember: through colour, through specific adamant details or a more general ambiance. Consequently, it might seem that remembrance always tends towards abstraction. We invent as much as we retrieve.

At certain junctures, Farrar's paintings are less about remembrance than about holding onto something and keeping it still. This is, after all, a young artist still trying to ascertain her place in the world, her place within a wider canon of contemporary art. What do these efforts look like? In 'straits', this work remains outside of the frame, with the paintings instead presenting the points of possibility, the quotidian gaps in which inspiration takes hold; however, they are also, of course, the material outcomes of these efforts. Minor tableaux, they depict the minutiae of artistic life. This is often visibly dull and repetitive: something vital, as it must, gets lost in its translation, and the goal or end result – for the sake of argument, *inspiration* – remains noticeable in its absence, incommunicable. This sense is common to a good

portion of Farrar's paintings here, in which a female figure acts as protagonist. Youthful, she resembles the artist. In *Shoes too big to fill*, we see her captured in the classic aspirational gesture of childhood, trying on what looks like her mother's shoes; more broadly, this might speak to an experience of being "not yet ready," either as a young artist or simply young. She appears again in *Leaking*, hands clasped behind her back in a look of good-natured fatigue as she registers a leak tumbling down from the ceiling; in *Ants* she appears once more, similarly posed but now with a look more curious than weary. We could certainly wager that those are her legs that luxuriate out from the armchair in *Throne*; likewise with the orange spaghetti-like legs that poke out from the dishwasher (*Dishwasher*). The tendency might be to read these paintings as straightforward autobiography: that the girl is a representation of the artist, and the individual tableaux as still moments from humdrum life, now thawed in the medium of paint. Another way of reading Farrar's recent works, though, is through the imagination that painting stakes as its own, the gaps and inconsistencies and leaps of fancy that it holds in magical balance. Because if this character is Farrar, she would have been unable to observe *herself*; instead, she revisits these scenes with the freedom childhood once granted — through the medium of paint. Each brushstroke seems loaded with this sense of possibility, now redoubled by the endless possibilities of her medium. Paint, as it were, allows her to observe herself, to see herself seeing, and becoming the artist.

Other paintings stem from more speculative points of departure. The magisterial *Saving my parents from drowning in the Shimonoseki Straits*, to take one example, is much different from the aforementioned casual tableaux of the everyday — not least in its scale which seems only further heightened by Farrar's generous use of primary colours. The linen canvas is sized as opposed to primed, and its warm grey weave provides the ground of the painting. To the top of the painting, a suspension bridge is marked out in confident inky strokes, more calligraphic than painterly; a red border of paint, at the canvas' lower extremity, encloses a tumultuous wash of petrol blue, brush marks cast upwards to catch the sea's disquiet. A swathe of buttery yellow (a dress?) stalks the right hand side of the painting, and a woman's lower leg and white high-heel pushes out and up from it — much like the oversized shoe of *Shoes too big to fill*. A donut-shaped danger-orange buoy levitates above the waves, with a figure reaching out towards it. To the left hand side, safety awaits in the form of a crescent-shaped boat. Here, there is little of the quiet and meditative brushwork of many of Farrar's smaller works; instead, paint has become a substance that activates the emotional heft of this speculative scene.

Farrar's watercolours demonstrate a similar dexterity, and are represented here in three separate works: the stand-alone portrait *Lady*, which hangs in the gallery's entrance space, and a pair of more casual works, depicting what looks like the artist's lunch; one is called *Hellmann's and tomato*, the other, *Pickle and cheddar*. The former, *Lady*, is a framed paper work; in fact, it is enclosed three times: the first, by the actual wooden frame, and twice more within the portrait's surface by two separate trails of red and gold paint which act as internal framing devices. This lends the portrait the curious semblance of a memento or even an oversized stamp; and this appears reiterated in the deep washes of pinks and reds that seem to figure its subject forth. The lady, whoever she is, faces out, head slightly askew; when I face her, she seems to look over my shoulder, out and past me. Her hair is a flat wash of pink, clasped around her face like a bonnet; curls in darker, twisting brushstrokes are overlaid on top. At various points — around her right ear, at the inner corners of her aquamarine eyes — Farrar's brushstrokes are allowed to crumble and smudge, brimming with water. Most striking about *Lady* and the two other watercolours, however, is the sheer deliberateness of each brushstroke.

In Rosalind Krauss' short book *Under Blue Cup* (2011), the formidable critic endeavours to do two things: the first is to remember *how to remember*, in the wake of an aneurism that briefly washed away her memories and sense of self; the second, stemming from the first, deals specifically with art — she is trying to ascertain the intrinsic "who you are" of art, post-medium.^v For example representation, she claims, is hinged to a particular binary of figure/ground: we know what something is through recourse to this binary. In lieu of post-medium practices in contemporary art, and installation art in particular, Krauss attempts to articulate what binary might demonstrate the continued specificity of art. In the end, she wagers on a binary of memory/forgetting. The best new artists, she claims, have not exhausted or done away with medium, but have instead found new 'technical supports,' and so 'resisting contemporary art's forgetting of how the medium undergirds the very possibilities of art'.^{vi} For Krauss, despite being integral to the very architecture of this post-medium condition, 'only the word *medium*...conjures the recursive nature of the successful work of art'.^{vii} Important art now, she claims, is sited at a peculiar junction of

non-forgetting and non-remembrance: neither nihilistic nor nostalgic, it founds new technical supports, forgetting, as it remembers the recursive vitality of medium-specificity. Painting, thus, becomes a question of neither remembering nor forgetting, and Farrar's a delicate negotiation of both: the utmost fidelity to medium – in this case, paint – as a means of communicating and transmuting emotion. Between memory and forgetting, Farrar's paintings invent new possibilities for the medium of paint, 'a winged creature that flits from one form to the next'.^{viii}

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ⁱ Walter Benjamin, 'A Child's View of Colour' in *The Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass & London, 2004) pp. 50-52

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 50

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 51

^{iv} All works henceforth dated 2017

^v Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass, 2011) p. 2

^{vi} Ibid, p. 19

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Ibid