



Sarah Cooney

Hearing from Artists

*Sarah Cooney develops multi-layered oil paintings over time. Memories and evocations come to life through her subtle use of colour, texture and painted gestures. Her work *Evelina* was acquired for the Middlesbrough Collection through the Tees Valley Response Collecting scheme. Here, she is in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator, in September 2020.*

HW: Your painting *Evelina* is now part of the Middlesbrough Collection through the Tees Valley Response Collecting Initiative. Can you describe the work?

SC: Through my work I am concerned with the expressive capabilities of paint and processes of making. *Evelina* was completed at the beginning of 2019 and is an oil on canvas painting. The painting combines abstract and figurative elements, colours, shapes and textures. Pale greens, blues, soft pinks, off whites, muted yellows, purples, reds and browns are subtly orchestrated and built up densely. Forms emerge organically and some areas of the canvas are left untouched. The painting's modest size encourages an intimate and close up way of looking.

During the course of making, works are frequently handled. They are carried and moved around the studio, propped up alongside other pieces, taken on and off the wall, laid flat on the table and rotated regularly to determine which way up they should go. As a result, blots of paint and stained finger



Sarah Cooney portrait, courtesy of the artist

marks accumulate around the edges of the canvas. There are some smudges and imperfections also visible. These by-products of the process are evidence that this is an object painted by hand and a record of time spent painting.

HW: Who and what inform the marks, motifs and colour choices across your paintings?

SC: I am motivated by the continued possibilities of painting and its capacity to mediate and translate an array of references from the visual world around me. The work reflects a personal set of preferences, sensibilities, colours and tastes and is responsive to the surroundings in which it is made. The works are often diaristic with hints and suggestions of things observed, experienced and remembered all feeding into and contributing to the progression of a painting. I fill myself up with 'inspiration' before beginning a new painting. Visiting exhibitions, reading, looking back at previous work and the work of others is all necessary to get started.



Evelina, 2019, oil on canvas. Photograph by Sarah Cooney, courtesy of the artist

With each new painting I extend an individual vocabulary of marks and motifs. I mark make through a process of painterly decision making and experimentation using brushes, fingertips and lots of turps. I am interested in the value and facture of the painted surface. Added flourishes, splotches and smears all reveal that there are varying levels of enjoyment, anticipation and frustration in playing with the possibilities of paint. Provisional marks are rubbed away to uncover hidden traces and latent vistas. There are frenetic revisions and reworkings, all the time willing for the elusive moment or passage of paint that will take the work in an unexpected direction.

I arrive at colour choices intuitively. I am receptive to colour in my everyday environment and this undoubtedly feeds into the work. I enjoy colour mixing and build up colours over time, shifting tonal gradations, mixed greys and soft pastels before adding a speck of juicy coral orange to add some vibrancy. I rarely clean my brushes so there is often a grubby residue

which is also incorporated into the mix. Sometimes colours will appear subconsciously in the work-perhaps the colour of something I am wearing that day.

HW: How do you arrive at titles for your artworks?

SC: For a number of years now I have used a system whereby I title my paintings based on the names given to varieties of apples. I can't remember exactly how or why I started to do this, but it remains my go-to method. There is a directory of apple varieties online which I refer to and is made up of names, descriptions and classifications of the different varieties. Giving the work a title is important to me. I actually prefer to say that I'm 'naming' my paintings. Although I would never want a title to 'explain' the work, it does offer an additional layer of meaning and sometimes another way into the work. Naming the work is the final thing to do and is often a last-minute task when work needs to be sent off to an exhibition or to be included in a proposal. It takes away the pressure knowing I can



Arlet, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas. Photograph by Sarah Cooney, courtesy of the artist

quickly refer to a chart and select a name for a painting. I like the idea that they tend to be named after people such as Ingrid, Arthur, Ariane or Sonya. I feel this gives them their own character and personality.

HW: You tend to work on a series of paintings simultaneously. How do your artworks relate to one another and do you work in series?

SC: I work on several paintings simultaneously. This is partially to prevent a tendency for things to become overworked. There are stops and starts and paintings in the studio are at different stages of completion. I have a stack of 'failed' paintings ready to pull out, sand down and rework if I happen to be on a roll. Bodies of work tend to come together at the same time sharing a similar colour palette and visual affinities between them. If I have a paint brush loaded with a particular colour, I will move across a number of paintings. Likewise, if something is successful it can be easily transferred to another piece. When the works are exhibited as a group, visual relationships can be seen to

echo across the works. Individual paintings have their own nuances and rhythm, but I hope that across all of the paintings in my practice there is a sense of continuation and a signature trace of the artist.

Despite all of my best intentions I can never predict how a painting will turn out nor could I ever repeat the same painting again. Ultimately the end result is always somewhat of a fluke. Painting is by nature indeterminate. Some paintings come together more easily than others. Some take weeks and some take years. They are never completed in a single sitting. The key is knowing when to stop.

HW: How do community and friendship figure within your practice?

SC: Community and friendship play an important role in my practice. Over the years I have been part of studio communities, collaborations and artist collectives. I have relied on friendship and peer networks to access opportunities and gain support needed to sustain my work. Like many painters I



Ingrid, 2019, oil on canvas. Photograph by Sarah Cooney, courtesy of the artist

spend a lot of time working alone in my studio so being part of a creative community is vital.

The Tees Valley has a friendly and welcoming artistic community which I am proud to be part of. There is lots of enthusiasm for artist led activity, a shared ethos and joined up working. When I moved back to the area after having lived away for a few years I wanted to advocate for painting practice in the Tees Valley and connect with other painters. *Conversations in Painting* is an artist led project which I initiated with fellow painter Phil Gatenby in 2017. The project was set up with the intention of opening up conversations between artists and the public around contemporary painting practice and creating conditions of support for artists. Improving connections between artists and the public and engaging with the wider community has also been an important consideration.

Conversations in Painting seeks to connect Tees Valley based painters to wider UK and international networks through exhibitions, talks, workshops and studio visits. The studio visits in particular create much needed space for practitioners to meet and discuss work, ideas, materials and processes with peers in a supportive environment.

Legacy: 50 Years of painting in the Tees Valley, an exhibition at The Auxiliary in November 2019, acknowledged the impact and importance of painters from our area who have taught, mentored and championed each other over the years. The show highlighted some of the many alliances and marked a continuum of knowledge sharing, generosity and trust across generations.