

Aisling (Blue)

For a long time Fergal Styles made quite abstract work, and it's only recently, in the last two years or so, that he has been stepping into figuration. The painting *Aisling (Blue)* was a departure from previous works in that Styles began painting people he knew, and the woman in this painting is his partner.

This work conveys the simplicity of yearning and desire, positing art-making as a language of love. Painted with rabbit-skin glue and pigment, overlaid with soft pastel to create a matt texture, pictorial details are kept to a minimum to emphasise an expansive atmosphere. In this work, Styles meditates on the profundity of being in close proximity to another. These people who have arrived into Styles' canvases are close friends and, much like in the American painter Alice Neel's portraits, Styles imbues their depiction with personal affection. Even using the word 'subject' feels too cold in this context. Styles has welcomed figuration into his work in a spirit of revelry for those he shares his life with. It's sunset or sunrise, the witching hour, and there is a feeling of that urge – to reach out and brush the cheek with your hand, rest a moment on their shoulder and to share the landscape of internal worlds. For many people, art-making incorporates vicissitudes of personal experience combined with the intensity of emotion – to want to convey, to express desire in this way. This work embodies the urge to use painterly prowess to demonstrate depth and worthiness.

In *Untitled (Warm Night)* too, there is a sense that time with this person in the painting is a kind of dream. The disorientation of falling in love is evoked, the heart-bursting desire to embrace the lover, to open a button; a state of happiness and sadness commingled with wondering whether the feeling will last. The silhouette of the two kissing conjures the feeling of falling for a person, that stage when thoughts are with them on the verge of sleep and upon waking. Styles explores this in his work as figures meander in an illusory world, shifting between subject and object.

The works in *Fools & Dreamers* appear to beckon the subject and viewer to see the gesture of making, as an act of appreciation in itself. (*Look at how I spend my time, but see also my vulnerabilities*). The characters inhabit a world of art-making as a manifestation of friendship. They elicit the personal growth that is inspired by admiration – to learn a language, play an instrument, make something in the hope of wooing someone. (*Now I've overshared and might look foolish. But what else could I have done, because I could easily fall in love with this person*). In another cobalt and ultramarine blue painting, *Self Portrait in a Room by the Ocean*, he leans in a hallway, naked and kept up by the full moon maybe. The title tentatively suggests a correlation with Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, where solitude and the vast expanse of a body of water act as an allegory for the internal world of a person, where blue represents the ebb and flow of feelings in the unconscious and connects internal meanderings with the landscape, tying a thought to a place in order to capture a vignette of emotion. In this way, Styles' works move away from portraiture. He is interested in interiority and this manifests in expressive musings that play out in the exploration of all that surrounds the figure. The motif of an interior aperture is also there – a window in a room, a space that refers to another space, Styles is seeking ways to infer both vastness and intimacy.

For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that colour of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The colour of that distance is the colour of an emotion, the colour of solitude and of desire, the colour of there seen from here, the colour of where you are

not. And the colour of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains.

- Rebecca Solnit, from her essay, 'The Blue of Distance'

Details within the scene create atmosphere, and embodied painterly flourishes might allude to the semblance of a smile, illuminating the figure's character and their relationship with the artist. Painting is utilised as a way to take time and celebrate the way a person's face looks when you are falling for them, to want to make an indelible impression of that moment in the creation of images. Styles merges these yearnings with an astute understanding of tropes in the history of art, but instead of adopting a cynical or even formal review of these tropes, he remains optimistic and empathetic – holding to the intimate, universal phenomenon and allowing the dreamy disorientation of romantic and platonic chemistry to flow into the work.

The work is also about curiosity and discovery, perhaps using the time of painting to think more about a person, or about people in general – what images are drifting past their inward eye when they are daydreaming? Society values linear narrative because we mostly communicate verbally. In the retelling of a dream we might impose linearity in its wake, but for many people dreams are nonverbal. Sensations, visions and colours form constellations. In these compositions, image-making in itself becomes a transcendental dream object, where the painting can accommodate different people's projections. Though it can be weighed down by its histories, painting as a medium lends itself well to the exploration of interiority, as the creation of a painting is usually a solitary pursuit. It can also be democratic in the sense that the viewer can decide how much time they'd like to give to looking. Styles articulates these qualities in his responsive but pensive depictions of quiet moments. And with this he celebrates the strength of painting as his chosen form of expression. Affinity and admiration for artists who have chosen this path before him are also expressed in the paintings.

Alanna Blake Spring Lake 1969 refers to a still life painting by Alice Neel which Styles identified as an anomaly in the context of Neel's repertoire (usually portrait paintings of loved ones). In his own retelling of Neel's composition, Styles considers what it means to move between the worlds of objects and subjects. In his painting, *Alanna*, a friend of Styles' looks assuredly towards the viewer, with palms down on the table, suggesting a frank and kind camaraderie. Signs and signifiers surrounding *Alanna* allude to other facets of the friendship that may be in-jokes or references to shared experiences. The appearance of allegorical objects within the composition occurs again in *Nap Before the Night Shift* evoking a half-waking chimera and again alluding to personal fictions. There is a correlation between struggle and persuasion in art, and here Styles intimates that there are no shortcuts. He represents this experience of striving to create in opposition to the fatigue of sustaining that decision through paid labour. We can recognise a sense of affinity in these works as we know about this rule in life and we feel it intuitively, especially in the newfound strengths we are bestowed with after tough times.

There is the sense that Styles converses with his friends about the struggles of making. 'Frustration is one of the great things in art; satisfaction is nothing', said Philip Guston, and in this branch of the history of art, Styles' *Portrait of Luke Casserly* pictures the Dublin playwright as he turns the leaf of an art book. In this painting we might consider the importance of good company in reaching resolutions, in both creative pursuits and personal experiences. *Queens of a Hot New Star* depicts a night-time encounter, Christian or pseudo mystical imagery, and a candle awkwardly pasted there like a cut-out collage. The two women in the composition appear again

in *Room with Yellow Green Curtains*, in a *mise en abyme* within the exhibition that suggests patterns of shared concerns and preoccupations among friends.

Such patterns and allusion also suggest that Fergal Styles' work eschews the idea of imperious or hierarchical authorship over the images he is inspired by, and instead remembers shared epiphanies with confidence that ideas themselves are sovereign. In sincerity, the ideas grow stronger and gather momentum for all.