

A COLD WIND FROM THE MOUNTAINS

Two summers ago I dreamt of a man in a felt mask. The mask was made of small patches of brown carpet under-felt, sewn together. It was a vivid and violent dream: the message from my unconscious was strong, but not clear. I was reminded of another vivid dream of nearly 40 years earlier, just as I left Exeter College of Art - of a boy in a green jumper, which had had a similarly powerful impact.

I have never been one to paint from dreams. My night dreams are not usually so vivid, although my daydreams can be. And there has always been the question of how to depict dreamtime and dream space. I have been a slow learner, only slowly releasing the stranglehold single-point perspective has had on me; very slowly unraveling the binds placed on me as a child to be reasonable, passionless and above all to be intelligent.

In the painting that came from the mask dream, I felt I had made a transition into something more resembling my unreasoned dream experiences. Elements of the dream are present but in a way that is restless and evasive.

In the dream I was also told to build a wall to protect me from the cold wind from the mountains.

In Dresden that same summer I saw a Symbolist painting that took my breath away. It was of a white woman in the arms of a black centaur. My Art History tutor in Birmingham once described centaurs as representing the union of the animal and spiritual aspects of human beings. This is, in some ways, how I've come to see painting – ideas take material form through an activity of the body. The Dresden painting, Franz Von Stuck's *Centaur and Nymph*, unites human and animal, black and white, object and shadow. According to Jung there is an unconscious desire for object and disowned shadow to be reunited. For me object and shadow; black and white, are constantly interchanging.

It was important to me in *Love On The Elbe* (taken from Von Stuck's painting) that the relationship between the characters and their space should be symbiotic. It isn't the case that the characters have mastery over their space; their space is as living and important as they are. One creates the other and vice versa. So the space is almost the subject and pushes right forward, refusing to become the background. The depiction of space in paintings I associate with a world view. Single point perspective suggests a single vision, the singularity of a unified theory. I connect it with the masculinity of Classicism. Multiple perspectives belong to plurality, femininity and the Gothic. Those contemporary painters who are reconstructing space in an unstable way are making room for the possibility of alternative meanings and many points of view.



In 2014 I travelled to Sarajevo. I went there to see where Franz Ferdinand had been assassinated, the event that precipitated the start of WW1 and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My relationship with Austria had started many years earlier, when my parents used to take off, with my brother and me in the back of their car, for long journeys across Europe. In 1970 they had borrowed a flat belonging to a distant relative in an Austrian village called Weissenkirchen. This was not the Austria of snowy mountains and lush meadows, but a wine-growing belt on the Danube, 50kms outside Vienna. There were apricot trees growing along the banks; vineyards on the low rolling hills behind. I had forgotten that idyllic holiday, but going through my mother's things many years later brought it back to me.

The Austrian paintings, sparked by this memory, were the beginnings of my visual exploration into the effects of family repression, and the eruption of its shadow in the form of neurosis. It is this way for me, that history is a metaphor for the personal. The Austrian patriarch, the Emperor Franz Josef, held the Empire together, whilst his estranged, anorexic wife, Sissi, roamed the world, finally to be murdered by the anarchist, Luigi Lucheni. From a society determinedly bourgeois and repressive, appeared the work of Breuer and Freud. Years later, long after the Austro-Hungarian Empire had been dissolved, Josef Fritzl, held his daughter captive in his basement for 24 years in the Austrian town of Amstetten, a literal familial repression.¹

En route to Sarajevo I stopped at Mostar, where the bridge, destroyed during the Balkan war, was now rebuilt. On the Austrian side there were mansions, huge and dilapidated, peppered with bullet holes. I'd never been anywhere that looked so war torn. Crossing the bridge I left the Austro-Hungarian Empire and entered the land of the Ottomans. Sarajevo itself was bullet ridden. I was told that during the Balkan war, snipers had sat in the surrounding hills and picked off residents if they tried to leave their homes. That summer it was cold and wet; the river ran manically, a weird yellow colour. I saw on television that parliament had approved air strikes against IS. That summer I recognised the link between Sarajevo, the Ottoman Empire and the airstrikes on Iraq.

¹ In later paintings I transported the mise en scene to Victorian England. In Mary Anne Waiting, Millais' Mariana, already redolent with eroticism, loses her skirt – the room itself begins to disintegrate. It's a revolution, with the body taking back ownership of itself.

I love to paint strong, non-conforming women. In painting a portrait, I feel I am spending time with someone, getting to know them. I offer the portraits as tributes to women who have stepped out of line. I don't know how I first heard of Gertrude Bell. Gertrude (who had taught herself Arabic, Persian and Turkish) was responsible for drawing the boundaries of Iraq in 1921. The Ottoman Empire had fallen after WW1 and the nations of Europe were picking over its corpse. Gertrude had spent many years exploring the Arabian desert on horseback and had come to know well its tribes and Sheiks. It was she who brokered the installation of King Faisal as Sharif. Gertrude Bell in Arabia, a white woman in a land far from her own, assumed colonial authority over people of a different colour. One hundred years on, I begin to see colonialism in terms of object and disowned shadow, shadow and disowned object.



In *Mission Church* a red-faced man in a pith helmet is lying in a churchyard. Beneath him is the shadow/figure of a black woman. It could be a picture of rape. He's watched by a man in uniform, an African in colonial pay. The world they inhabit is swirling and unsettled; all the fears the colonials have of Africa and the unknown are ready to erupt. There is a black sun and a white moon. Black and white, shadow and object are confused.

Huey Newton, the Black Panther, said "The European started to be sick when he denied his sexual nature".² The body and its workings is the exiled shadow.

In Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, the tribesman, Obierika, says

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer acts like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.

I am surprised at how recently Europeans moved in on Africa. At The Treaty of Berlin in 1885 seven European powers agreed to invade a whole continent. As a European, this is part of my history.

² This was essentially what Sigmund Freud was saying in Austria in the early twentieth century.

The murder of Sharon Tate by The Manson Family in August 1969 was one of the first truly frightening events I can recall. At night, going to sleep, I tried to erase from my mind's eye Charles Manson's face, looking madly out from the pages of my parents' *Daily Telegraph*.

Manson believed that there would be a race war and a revolution. At the end of it his Family would become the natural leaders of the new order, owing to their imagined racial superiority. After WW2 there was revolution all over the continents once occupied by colonial powers. There was civil unrest in America, as black Americans began to demand an equal share in the country they had helped to build and as young people protested against a colonial war in Vietnam. Manson was an outcast, the shadow of the Los Angeles music and film worlds he tried to infiltrate. He gathered around him fragile, damaged, people, unhappy children of American postwar families. I found a photo of The Family together at a creek on Spahn Ranch, those carefree young people, spellbound, helter-skeltering towards disaster. I used that photo in both *Faerie Folke*, and *The Murderers*, though in *Faerie Folke* the scale has been shifted to make them more like the faeries in Richard Dadd paintings. I believe they were enchanted, albeit with a destructive enchantment. Enchantment still happens all the time, although we call it something different now.

The California paintings revisit a particular period and site of my own history. Brought up in an uneventful Berkshire town, I was schooled in an ugly New Town down the road. There was a disused 1930s theme park called California nearby.

Whilst the historical facts and my personal memory suggest that the early 1970s was a dreary period, when I revisit it in my imagination it is otherwise. This paint allows the white of the ground to infuse the paintings, like the light and air of my imaginary California. I find it can become a fairyland, full of the hope of escape, accompanied by a soundtrack of music I didn't actually listen to.



My subjects are so diverse I sometimes feel overwhelmed by them. It's as though I'm hosting a party with many noisy and demanding guests. Intuition leads me through my subjects. I know why I paint them after I have done so, not before. In some ways painting shows me my own shadow, reflecting back to me things that I cannot otherwise see. Underlying this confusion I can see a knot of ideas. There is repression, there is the outcast, there is revolution. There is the object both desiring and rejecting its shadow.

How can we talk about these things in painting? Painting is a marginalized practice, unwilling to reveal its treasure. There is nothing I can change by painting. There is no message or meaning in my work. It is just a way of thinking, a way of processing and understanding. In the end the paintings are experiences in their own right and we bring to them whatever we have in us. The friction between their starting points and their making is what makes them what they are.

What can painting do with history that photography doesn't do better? Where once history was monolithic, it is now fractured and uncertain; a collection of stories, partial and often self-serving. It is this, the fictional, fractured and uncertain, that painting can do.

The past is my key to the present. Understanding my own past helps me negotiate the present; knowing something of history helps me understand the confusing world I live in.

Eleanor Moreton, 2017

Images:

i. *Dream of a Man in a Felt Mask* | ii *Mission Church* | iii *The Murderers* | iv *In The Presidents House*