



A SLICE OF LIFE

As contemporary painter Rachel Jones' *A Sliced Tooth* (2020) joins our collection, Katy Hessel of @thegreatwomenartists celebrates the visceral work of this extraordinary artist.



Expressive, scratchy, textured and layered. The surfaces of Rachel Jones's (b.1991) kaleidoscopically coloured (or in this case, more muted and icy) paintings hit you as soon as you encounter them. Are they abstract? Figurative? Bodily, or earthy? To me, they are all, but mostly, they are internal. They feel heavy, flattened, compact and multi-layered, as if standing in for entire bodies. Looking at them more closely, it's as though lives have lived within (and beyond) the many layers of oil stick and oil pastel. They feel historic – ancient even. Then we get to the title, *A Sliced Tooth* (2020) (from Jones' larger series, *A Sliced Tooth*), which makes us immediately question and respond to that visceral, hard, strange, surreal and at times painful organ we have attached to our mouths. The entry point for so much into our body. Our tool for tasting, sensing, chewing and communicating. They are pressed up to the sides of the canvas, feeling both trapped and settled, creating friction and energy. Extracting the motif from the mouth and divorcing it from the context in which it is shown makes it something to question. Teeth can be beautiful, ugly, chipped, dissolved and synthetic. Teeth can be adorned with sparkling diamond-like grills, but they can also be filled with charged and brutal histories.

The power in Rachel Jones' paintings is that she makes us think about the body without showing us the body (which to me feels similar to the sculptures of Eva Hesse). Working on unstretched, torn-looking canvases, with

laboriously applied oils that pack out every section, she creates a language that is both loud and subtle, hard and soft, abstract and figurative, micro and macro, on small and large canvases (in this case a small-scale diptych). Reinventing a painterly vocabulary for the 21st century audience, she says: 'try to use colour to describe Black bodies. I want to translate all that lust for self-expression into a language that exists outside of words, and instead relates to seeing and feeling with your eyes.'

Since graduating with an MA from the Royal Academy Schools in 2019, Rachel Jones has gone on to become one of the leading young artists in Britain today. Exhibiting alongside Mandy El-Sayegh, Alvaro Barrington and Dona Nelson in 'A Focus on Painting', curated by Julia Peyton-Jones at Galerie Thaddeaus Ropac (where she is now represented), Jones has also completed residencies at the Chinati Foundation, Marfa, and the New Art Centre Salisbury, alongside British art icon, Gillian Ayres. This year, Pallant House Gallery have acquired *A Sliced Tooth* (2020) for their permanent collection, which no doubt will expand the conversation of what British art means today.

Rachel Jones, *A Sliced Tooth*, 2020, Oil pastel, oil stick on canvas, Presented by the Contemporary Art Society through the Rapid Response Fund, 2021