

Like the flap of a wave

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Does anyone know, really, what a life is? Where it ends and begins? Who it includes or doesn't? What it takes in or excludes, on purpose or by accident, this day or that, past or present? A slant of light; a particular smell; a bloom on the turn, petals about to turn fleshy; a slow afternoon long ago; how memories, sensations, emotions can rise, unbidden, at any moment and create a new world that hovers quiet and precious, almost but not quite real.

Paintings hold time and space, but they are not the time and space of this world, not entirely. It is summer (again), and the seasons have passed, all four of them (again), and Megan Rooney's paintings are fixed but in flux, finished but ongoing, now but eternal. As soon as we think we have identified something recognisable in them — a copse of trees? a flurry of lilacs? a sunrise? a chimney? a rain-soaked evening? — it disappears, reminding us that any form can be an abstraction and the question every work poses is as much about seeing as it is about looking: not only what do I see in these paintings, but how do they teach me to look — inside and outside each image — to find a world that I want to inhabit, since this world isn't always that.

Can we call them feelings rather than images, or both at once? I think so. *Colours exist for me as entities in themselves, as metaphysical beings, like the attributes of God exist as metaphysical identities*, said the poet and painter Etel Adnan. Van Gogh really liberated colour. Because he accepted it as true, she noted of the Dutchman who painted the world with such colour it is breathtaking, sometimes painful, like you're walking into that wheatfield with crows alongside him, like you might die from so much colour, because of its preternatural, almost inexpressible truth. *COLOUR EXPRESSES SOMETHING IN ITSELF*, the artist wrote exuberantly (ALL CAPS his) to his brother Theo in October of 1885, when he was still experimenting with realism, painting Flemish peasants and potato eaters, though their forms were becoming looser. A few years later, relocated to Arles, with its particular light and gardens teeming with life, starry skies and illuminated night rivers, he wrote to his sister Wilhelmina, *one can speak poetry just by arranging colours well*.

The idea of colour as a spiritual force, in painting and life both, possessed with autonomy and capable of great movement, breathes deep inside Rooney's canvases. *Yellow Yellow Blue* (all paintings 2025), which gives the show its title, lives wildly up to its name. (Van Gogh again, on one of his favourite colours: *There is a sun, a light that for want of another word I can only call yellow, pale sulphur yellow, pale golden citron. How lovely yellow is!*) A hot yellow — let's say it's bumblebee yellow, but it could also be banana yellow, canary yellow, cadmium yellow, because colours are infinite — streaks and flames at the upper left edge of the canvas, pressing hotly towards us, stained with soft clouds of crimson here and there, twilight blues and murky greens peeking through from behind the golden profusion. Beneath, a riot of indigo, blue, lilac, and lavender conjure a garden, a Post-Impressionist scene, perhaps an homage to water lilies or urban leisure landscapes — the modern project of freezing the fleeting, interrogating vision, light, colour.

But as soon as you grasp something solid in Rooney's canvases, it departs, skitters away, taking your heart with it, if only to throw it back to you (maybe it's that little vermillion smudge) with the reminder that this image is also, first and foremost, a painting: a made thing, worked and burnished, filled with the time and the life of the artist, which is written across its surfaces, squirrelled away in its depths, and coursing in the midground where luminous forms merge and fly like ghosts. In the lower third of the painting, above a thicket of black crosshatchings that give a dark energy to the canvas, four lines (though *lines* seems insufficient, they are flying, moving, dancing currents) of bright yellow travel across the image in a loose parallelogram. They are very much on the top surface of the work, eschewing depth for immediacy, they can't get much closer to you, make the painting, though replete with depths, suddenly flat — a canvas, remember, is two-dimensional, though its job is to dissemble.

Are these the same lines (strokes, sighs, thoughts, strides) that travel across the monumental *You came down (earth) I*, which — I almost wrote *who*: the paintings are like people, a cast of characters, a busy street on any given day — teems with a similar palette of yellows and blues, greens and purples, surprising striations of black that wriggle like some urgent calligraphy. Three, four, more yellow smears step across the very front of the image like a skip-hop down a floating ladder in which the spaces between the rungs are just as important for stepping. Behind these yellow travellers, the canvas is worked back and back, almost bare in places (this is Rooney's most stripped-down series to date) from the industrial sander she uses to remove paint already applied — though the memory of it lingers deep in the image like a palimpsest of spectral hues.

Yellow yellow pushes us around blue blue sucks us into green green like the sky and the earth have collapsed into one another, like it is the eye and the body both coming down (earth), and everything is happening all at once. Hung nearby, like a kissing cousin, *You came down (earth) II* shimmers like a time lapse with a familiar palette (yellow, yellow, blue), but once again reconstituted as if to say that colours, like us, have full lives, are relational beings, will act unpredictably given the choice. *I wanted them to feel almost like a mirror*, Rooney says of the two works that face each other, echoing back and forth like a mise en abyme of continuous space. *So when you look at one, you feel the reflection of the one behind pressing against your back*. In Rooney's universe this is possible because the paintings, like us, can see, look back, know the world continues beyond their edges.

The artist hypothesises that seeing the frescoes at the Villa of Livia, just north of Rome, seeped into the logic of these large works. The walls of the ancient villa were painted c. 30-20 BCE, and the "painted garden," which covers all four walls of a room suspected to be the home's formal dining room, is the oldest extant example of a continuous garden painting. Squint at Rooney's vast canvases and you can imagine them, like Livia's luscious trompe l'oeil gardens, abounding with life — endless varieties of flowers, birds, trees heavy with fruit. Squint again and you might see Fragonard, Claude Monet, Van Gogh, Joan Mitchell, Clyfford Still. Squint again and you might think, like I did, of Virginia Woolf's London as described by her heroine, Clarissa Dalloway, on a fresh morning in spring after the war when everything seems, once again, to be happening all at once, the past and the present kaleidoscoping in a work of art, which is just any given day, the cool air *like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave*.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, as in other Woolf works, a stream of thoughts, memories, observations, experiences, here and now, then and gone, happen for lines at a time — a huge oblong paragraph, not unlike a canvas, might have just two or three sentences, sometimes only even one, with semicolons — that cheeky, lilting punctuation — instead of full stops, as if prose, like velocity, like a rush of life (*like the flap of a wave*) cannot be stopped. A few pages before Clarissa famously buys the flowers for herself, noticing at the florist's how every *flower seems to burn by itself*, she is overcome by a sense of immediacy, a love of the moment that cannot be paralleled.

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards BondStreet, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.

We cease completely, but the paintings continue, will outlive us, if we're lucky. *Eyeless Sky*, with its moody palette and downward strokes like drips or the stems of quickly growing things or both. *On Your Back*, with its golden puff like a cotton candy sunset, mired in sweet pinks and purples, oddly luminescent, as if the painting itself gives off light. *Insomnia of the Rider* and *The Architecture of Smoke*, with their tangled tones of turquoise and black, fleshy orange and lapis, more dark verticals like chimneys or tree trunks or ideas or feelings that wish to stand separately. Rooney often speaks of her works as "families," related by some subterranean logic or simply by their maker, who spends huge amounts of time in the studio trying to figure out what the canvases, most of them the width of her "wingspan" so she can work alone, want from her. Can paintings want? If you love a painting, will it love you back? *Everything that has punctured me — that has flown in and out and around me has been put into these paintings*, says Rooney. *And then sanded off and rubbed off and washed off and scraped and worn down. Only to start over again and again and again. I pushed them so far some even went to places where I could not follow. And that's where the truth is for me, and that's why I've come to think this can only be about love.*

In her book about pleasure and pain, *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson writes that *all lovers believe they are inventing love*. Perhaps the same is true of artists. The ebb and flow of things, the flap of a wave, the kiss of a wave. In the end, a life is a life in art, speaking poetry with colour. What could be better?

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