

'When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*. The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I.'

(Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror", 1982)

Say hello to the non-thing. It sits in a corner, or in a painted depiction of a corner that is also, inevitably, just paint: a region of diagonal paintstrokes on the left, radiating outward and signifying depth, hitting a swatch of downward strokes on the right, suggesting verticality. We read it as a 90-degree angle even though it could be a 135-degree one, because we read instinctively through pictorial convention. And because nestled in this nook is the non-thing, which serves to orient and create space even though it, the non-thing, only speculatively exists. It's here, it's not here: let's agree, looking at *Fud* (2012), that there's an interpretational fork to be navigated, and let's take both roads in turn.

Road one: the non-thing is a textural amalgam, a rendering of surfaces that ostensibly correlate to things in the world, and just because we've never seen one of these doesn't mean they don't exist. There is honeycombing, marbling, and weird neat labyrinthine patterning. All of this agglutinates into a central, would-be three-dimensional mass, a rustic psychedelic lollipop that sensible folks couldn't be paid to lick. Because of the clustering, because the background is texturally so different and the foreground is mildly in relief, we naturally discern figure and ground within it. And then, and still a little lost, we go a step further and wax defensively anthropomorphic. We see a shape pop off the top of the figure and think it looks like a distended ear. We ask where in the world would you find one of these, and what you would call it if you did.

Road two: the whole is a record of processes. Paint got stroked on and maybe at one point there was just a neat, chocolate-toned, almost geometric abstraction here – the 'corner' – and also paint got *poured* on, a luscious wayward glop in the middle, with its own ideas about where its contours would come to rest. There's a temporal Möbius strip built into the painting, too. You'd assume that the background preceded the pours (and the prestidigitation on top of them), but the former also appears to have rolled over some earlier splattering so we're already a bit lost in terms of reconstructive chronology. Safe to say, at least, that paint got added to paint and left to dry, hence the crazy-paved patterning here of the type that experiment-minded painting students tend to discover after a while, though that is rarely put to such programmatic use or combined within such a rangy repertoire of techniques. Embossing tools came out, we can discern, making a little citadel of cells. Some of what's done here is closer to printmaking than painting.

Over time, as these different manners of applying paint fused together at the centre of the canvas, a painted mass took up residence, flipping between materiality and the non-thing, not securely a depiction but not nothing either: both, really, at once. And, as a reflection of the ontological slipperiness of the painted object and the painting-as-object, this manages to be analogous for something else that's equally unstable within the physical-conceptual structure of this art. For want of a better word we might call this 'content' (though this is to simplify things wildly), and it brings us back to the abject and to the famously big psychological knot of object relations as they pertain to the child and the mother. Since this, scooping up Kristeva and Freud at the very least, was a major part of GL Brierley's avowed impetus for these paintings.

So let's now map onto these paintings, onto the rough, handcrafted, careworn things that they 'depict' (see above for caveats), the specific idea of a transitional object – one used in the child's process of individuation and differentiation as it recognises what the mother *is*, recognises that she is outside of her/him and learns to deal, too, with two conflicting emotions: love and horror. The mother is both the loved and loving figure and this thing that is *so much older* than the child. And these feelings never go away. For we're not just talking about childhood here but the ongoing relationship of the adult to the parent, in which the parent

continues to age and the daughter or son, while unnerved and repulsed on some level by this, loves and needs them – yet also needs to exist in their own right and fears turning into their parent too, fears them as a walking advertisement for what they, one day, will become.

Mixed emotions, in short. And these can be seen to course through Brierley's paintings if we read them in the above light: if we decide that what she's painting is a panoply of substitutive 'love objects' imbued, in their hybridised unease and softness, with something of the child's perceived sense of what the parent is. And yet, again, these objects are so tenuously *there*, and the ever-possible reversion of the painted 'object' into 'just paint' might mirror the reversion of the posited love object into 'just thought'. Maybe the child needs the object and the adult doesn't. And maybe, the paintings posit, the adult builds an object like this merely in their mind, in the form of a gnarly, intractable attitude. And so these are at once pictures of what a feeling looks like, pictures of a thing that might be an embodiment of those feelings, and... just pictures.

If this gets at, and nuances, the question of *what* these objects/non-objects are, then the question of *where* they are – if we objectify them enough that we position them in space – opens the work out further. For Brierley, another spur for the work was the idea of a collector figure who is, on whatever grounds, accumulating these things for his or her own satisfaction. Within this reading, the ambiguous space in which they sit approximates a sector of the hoarder's interior. The sense that what's depicted is *arranged*, placed in space, is most explicit in *Helder Melder*, a diptych that positions two loosely figurine-like subjects as facing each other on a tabletop-like surface. For all that these have overtones of Murano glass clowns, bourgeois knickknacks, they're still somewhat impossible, still half-rooted in the world of painterly process: scintillas of colourful paint fly off them, hanging endlessly in space. And they are, once again, only *nearly* figures, forever on the cusp. That these things have been collected also imputes value: someone, it's suggested, sees this *jolie laide* thing and perceives beauty in it, or it speaks to them. This is an extensible idea. Does the collector see a reflection of her or his own familial love? Is s/he a voyeur? Someone else thinks this is beautiful, wants it, maybe even appreciates the abjection within it. That, perhaps, alters how it looks to us.

Let's stop short of what this might say about art and commerce, or how it speaks to the long arc of still life. The larger meta-subject, overarching all of this if we let the motivating narrative pretexts fall away, may be the energetic cathexis inherent in reception itself – the intangible neuronal firing that, for each of us, counts for so much. How someone looks at their mother, how a collector looks at an artwork: this is eye-of-the-beholder stuff, with the actual thing beheld having no measurable value, being only the sum of responses. The beholder, too, is not a fixed quantity but a biological speculation, the mechanical outcome of a genetic lineage, put in front of someone or something that's equally contingent.

And yet feelings arise and feelings are real – even though, when we're talking about these paintings, what's being observed began with an accident, a dribble or splat or pooling of paint that had to be reacted to. It's a way of starting a canvas, just like reading critical theory or thinking about your family or inventing a fictional collector figure. And whatever atmospheres arise from the result, and whatever limitless complex of thought gets laminated onto it, both spring from virtually nothing and chance. You sprang from nothing and chance, and so did your mother, and so by extension did the relationship between you, for all that it is, to you, huge. That's an unfathomable and in some ways lovely thing, touching on what it means to be human, to be alive and alone in our heads. Seen from outside, there's no value to our emotions. But when we feel them, nothing could matter more.

*Martin Herbert*