

The 1980s: My History in Oil Painting

Hi Art Class, today I am going to diverge from the 20th C history of Oil Painting until the next session, and give you a quick history of my painting. Even though I do mostly photography and drawing, I think of myself as a painter. This is going to be a tale of ways to depict domestic spaces, as well as one of theft (see last week's lesson!). It also about the different types of processes I have used in oils.

Apologies for the quality of some of the photos!

I studied Fine Art at Leeds Polytechnic in the 1980s, and was introduced to the Ceramics department in my first year. I really enjoyed the tactility of ceramics and its proximity to painting. If you've done ceramics you'll know what I mean! It is usually an additive process and the way I did it, it has a gestural quality, as you leave the imprints of your hands and fingers. There's also a little bit of alchemy going on in there.!

Our Ceramics tutor Mick Shone created life size painterly ceramics of horse heads. They were like spittle-flecked portraits of horses in motion on the last lap, similar in some ways to the works of Medardo Rosso an Italian Impressionist sculptor, who made the sculptural equivalent of Impressionist painting. Unlike Rosso's work, Mick's were very exciting to look at. Our tutor's enthusiasm for his subject was exhilarating - he used to gamble on the races, and he told us that the horse's portraits were of the ones that won. We used stoneware clay, which was gritty and had the plasticity and malleability of thick paint.



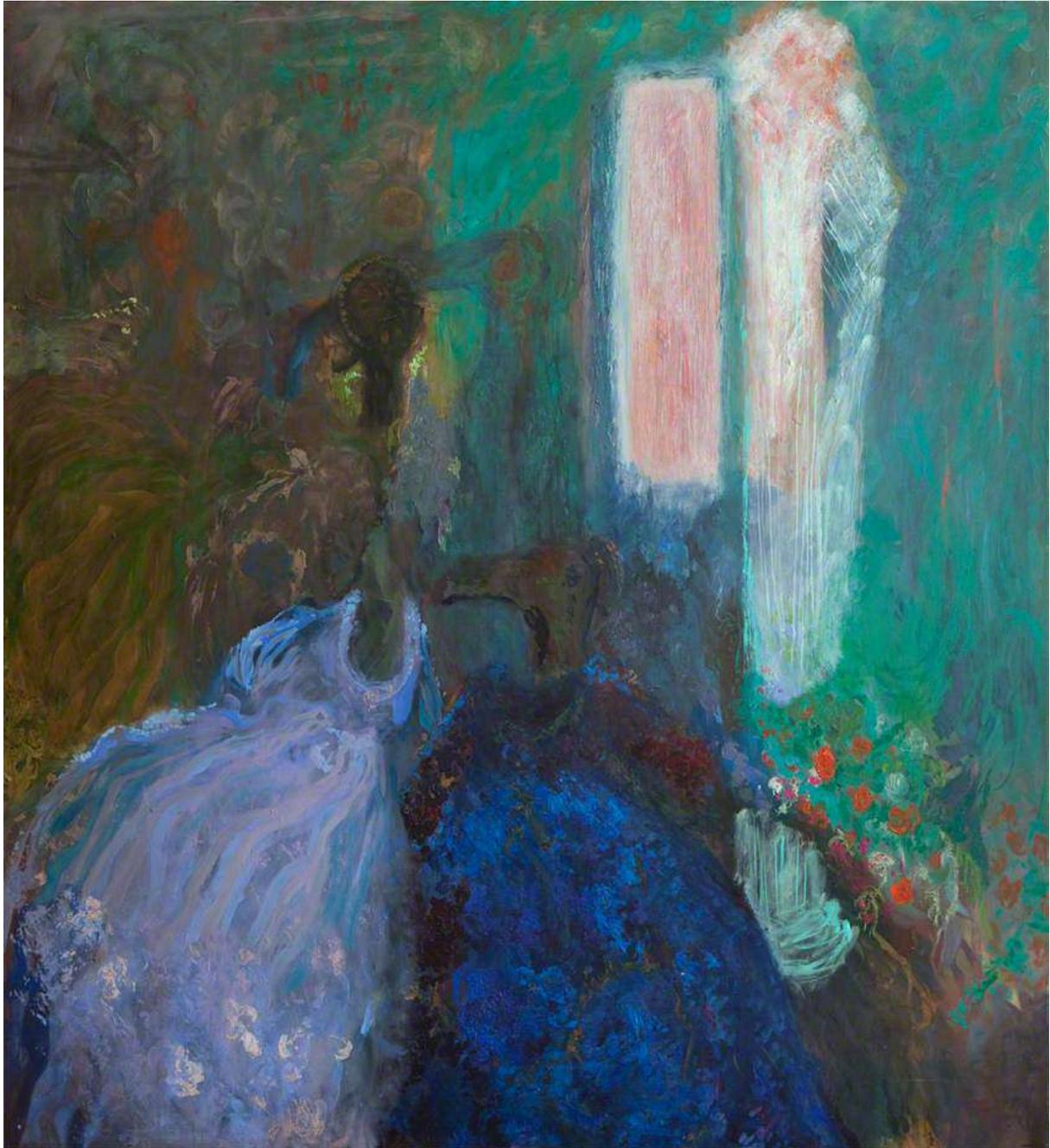
Sadie Murdoch, Degree Show installation, 1987

My final exhibition consisted of large scale ceramics and enormous paintings, around two meters square, or bigger. The paintings were influenced by historical artists like Gwen John, Antoine Watteau and Claude Monet, and contemporary artists like John Walker and Thérèse



A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris, Gwen John, 1907

Oulton. In those days (the 1980s) it was sort of expected that serious painters produced big paintings. Something to do with 'museum scale' etc. Now looking back on it that seems a bit ridiculous. Some of the most amazing paintings are quite small, from Persian miniatures to the abstract paintings of Tomma Abts. I painted images and objects that conjured domestic spaces and notions of the female body, without depicting the female figure.



Sadie Murdoch, 1987

I wanted the surface of the paintings to be like a type of shimmering haze, and conjure up something that appeared to be a romantic spectacle, but because of its references to other art works, was more 'strategic'.

It was like I was trying to make the language of painting 'speak' the idea of the feminine, to show that 'femininity' was a type of construct. I used to stain the canvas with a dark tone and then work on top with dabs and smears of brighter coloured paint. Sometimes I would add wax to the paint in a process called encaustic. This made paint thicker and a bit more transparent, like some kind of translucent clay. Microcrystalline wax is best for this - you melt it down in an old saucepan and add linseed oil and turpentine. Old candle stubs would do. This is quite a flammable process, so if you're trying this at home, be careful!!

I loved colour and the process of painting itself; I used to get in to quite a transcendental state! The oil paintings I liked had a shallow pictorial space, and were sometimes decorative.



Therése Oulton, Viscous Circle, 1989

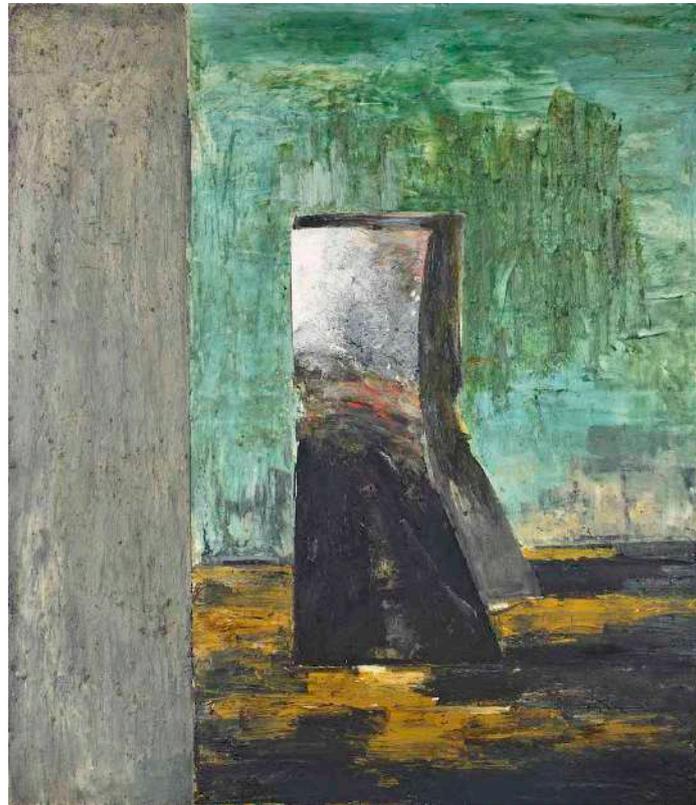
Therése Oulton was an interesting case – her work evoked and sometimes quoted directly from historical paintings by Turner, Fragonard, and Rembrandt for instance, yet the marks did not add up to a conventional pictorial space. Sometimes, it was as if the painting had



Therése Oulton, Fool's Gold, 1984

been 'scrambled'; out of the mayhem appeared traces of what could be surface of rocks, fragments of sublime sunsets or passages of the 'ruff' collar on a portrait by Rembrandt. It was as if Oulton had 'chewed up' the representational language of historical oil painting and spat it out across the surface of the canvas. Looking back on it I feel that these paintings were totally radical for their time. They were also fantastically beautiful. But her process was not violent or expressive really; she used to paint very close up to the surface of the

painting, in a way that was like 'stitching' the marks together across the surface. John Walker who I also loved, did these endless variations of Goya's "Duchess of Alba" paintings.



John Walker, Alba in Green, 1980

Walker simplified the figure of Goya's lover to a kind of truncated 'K' shape, and worked with thick layers of oil paint (impasto) and encaustic.



I was also thinking about the shallow pictorial depths in Watteau's paintings, where everything is 'on display' in the foreground, even when there is a view of something in the distance. As if all the important elements are squished up against the surface of the canvas. One of my paintings is based on a particular work by Watteau - Harlequin and Columbine - where the drapery of a woman's dress is gathered up and appears to be lifting away from the edge of the frame.



Sadie Murdoch, Degree Show, 1987



Harlequin and Columbine, Antoine Watteau 1716-17



The Pleasures of Love, Antoine Watteau, 1718-19

The ceramic sculptures in my degree show were made in sections, and were like ghostly 'echoes' of some of the images in the oil paintings. Some of the forms were made by dipping lace in ceramic slip and firing it, so the fabric of the lace burnt away leaving a fragile surface.



Sadie Murdoch, Degree show installation, 1987



Sadie Murdoch, Degree show installation, 1987



Sadie Murdoch, Degree show installation, 1987

After I left College, I carried on painting in a collective studio in Leeds. I started to develop a new type of structure in my oil paintings that was flatter, and where decorative passages, like swatches of fabric took over the whole painting. Unlike conventional drapery, which is

normally relegated to the back or the sides of traditional paintings, the fabric 'takes over'. I loved the paintings of Velasquez and Vermeer, because of the attention those painters gave to the clothing of the portrait sitters. In my work, layers of encaustic were scraped and stippled onto the canvas surface, building up layers that became increasingly dense.



Sadie Murdoch, Untitled, 1988



Sadie Murdoch, Ornament as Crime, 1989

Sometimes it was applied with a roller used for decorating walls, into which I cut patterns. Or I applied it using a 'template' cut out of cardboard or plastic. I was also thinking about

how the decorative in painting was generally seen as a 'bad' thing. It was used as a negative term – something superficial and not serious. I was, like many painters, sort of trying to reclaim that. Like the way negative terms can be repurposed, eg that's wicked' (ie great) or 'sick' (great again) or 'queer', a term reclaimed by the LGBT community, and now an academic subject of study in its own right.



Sadie Murdoch, Mother, Pearl, Ornament Crime, 1989

When I was at Leeds Polytechnic and afterwards, there was a lot of discussion about postmodernism, borrowing this, quoting that. This was given the more respectable title of "Appropriation". In the next episode, I will talk about the black and white paintings I made and which took me down the road to photography!