

Hannah and her Sisters: loss of face in the paintings of Emma Roche

Do you know that episode in series 2 of *Girls*, where Hannah is in a nightclub off her face and 'trades' her top with the man next to her, who happens to be wearing a neon yellow string vest (and she isn't wearing a bra)? It's pretty toe curling when they are in the dark club, but when they make it into the stark, bright lights of a supermarket during the course of the long evening, it becomes the stuff of recurring nightmares. But because its Lena Dunham, Hannah somehow works through this abjection, acquiring real clarity and arrives oddly at the ethical high-ground. By fully occupying her humiliation, and with her close attention to life's banal amoralties, Hannah ends up earning the right to make some pretty swingeing observations about human nature and societal mores. What she notices about human interaction is both hilarious and heart wrenching, or rather outrageously funny precisely because the experiences are so excruciating.

For me, Emma Roche's paintings occupy this 'contemporary wince', their awkwardness a key component in their success as artefacts that speak to the most sublime forms of pain. Roche's paintings alert us to the fact that embarrassment is one of the most compelling of human emotions to unpick. When we recognise, with a wry smile, the discomfiting situations that form the subjects of Roche's paintings, are we feeling her burning shame or our own? Like Dunham, Roche pushes through personal mortification with sheer chutzpah and the kind of droll self effacing/self aggrandising female sensibility that has lain unexpressed for centuries, but is now emerging in popular culture by actor-writers such as Dunham's contemporaries Coel, Haggard, Waller-Bridge, and in contemporary painting by artists as different as Nicola Tyson, Christina Forrer and Rose Wylie.

I'm going to hazard that these paintings speak first and foremost to the experience of being a woman, in whatever capacity – lowly and precarious employee, best (but conflicted) friend, harassed 'good enough' mother. Her scenes materialise from an auto-fictive place, that I imagine most women will recognise as the internal monologue nurtured through the drudgery of domestic and caring labour (as Simone de Beauvoir helpfully clarified, 'few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework') but of course can be present in all forms of work. What makes Roche's situations permissibly comic is that her acute observational eye elevates their valiant protagonists, even in their own pedestrian lives. Like the writers I have mentioned, Roche is in charge, the author of her own stories. Her blurry female figures take on a heroic aspect as they grapple with the multiple roles and desires their sex thrusts upon them.

But it isn't just the boredom of the home that Roche alludes to, she goes further, tackling a world that very rarely makes its way into art - the sufferings and indignities of the slave to the (meager) wage. Already cast with a gender disadvantage, Roche's women undermine their artistic credibility even more by admitting to a life in the thrall of something other than art. Of course, a fact widely known but rarely made public, is that most artists earn their living doing something with very little relation to art. Roche bravely inhabits that experience for us all. Her bosses loom large, amorphous blobs making unreasonable demands, her indistinct workers falter and fail, yet manage to retain enough of their wits to store their experiences for later subversive depictions.

Any reader paying attention to Roche's work will have realised that I have not only evoked the yellow string vest for its role in Hannah's chagrin. Like her subject matter, Roche's painting methods are also a gamble. Brightly coloured 'threads' of acrylic paint are 'knitted' together to form these crudely powerful images and their fabrication brings an extraordinary sensory dimension to the work that is fundamental to their affect. As with the scenes they depict, the process of making these works is rooted in the female domestic. Low-fi, hand crafted yet through a mechanically repetitive process not usually associated with creative expression, the artist's old-fashioned tools allow these base images to emerge, articulate in their clumsy form. The prosaic quality of the making displaces the rarified and expensive painter's brushes and supports, but beyond any politics of process, the materiality of the 'facture' is crucial. To return to the compelling 'jiggling' of Dunham's nipples behind the coarse bright nylon garment, the viewer experiences a troublingly synaesthetic response. The imagined physical discomfort of the wearer echoes and amplifies the emotional distress in play. Equally Roche's works' lumps and bumps, their tight weave and loose ends, their inability to perform uniformly across surfaces, creates a dispersed image with a psychic intensity. They are at once extraordinary and prosaic, the Turin shroud on a misshapen old dishcloth. The works' 'poor' imagery speaks of the difficulties of trying to bring the highly emotional issues of complex identity into focus.

Roche's use of oil paint, where the surface is made from squeezed trails of paint, rather than woven from the acrylic skeins, allows a less humourous, more debased, even scatological aspect to emerge. The paintings introduce smears and gestural marks that not only reference childlike or bodily scrawls, but also methods of erasure and destruction. The raw emotion of these paintings' processes and materials resonate with the melancholy psychological energy of the scenes portrayed. The comedy slightly recedes, allowing the sorrows of everyday life to come to the fore.

In all her paintings Roche tells it like it is and owns the difficulties of mothering, of working, of painting. She surveilles her own life with a steady eye, and requires the same commitment from her viewer - like her we must find the laughs where we can, even in the midst of the distress we absorb from daily living. By acknowledging and sharing her absurdities, sadness, even degradation, Roche changes the power dynamic - now things are no longer being done to her, she is the active party. This is crucial because these paintings are not just observational, they establish a refusal to internalise damaging stereotypes, as so often happens when the political becomes personal. In this Roche is a necessary painter for our time, and, I suggest, a painter at the top of her game.

Rebecca Fortnum
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¹ *Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (1949) pt. 5, ch. 1*

² *Sophia Money-Coutts, Girls: Depravity in a string vest, Tatler, 29/1/2013*