**Alison Watt: A Portrait Without Likeness**

Against dark blue gallery walls hang eighteen very calm, very still paintings. Outside, the July heat and light and Saturday crowds are intense and oppressive, making this low-lit, top floor room at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery feel even more like a sanctuary than it might on a dark, cool November. The exhibition, *A Portrait Without Likeness*, presents the work of two artists: two major works by the eighteenth-century, Edinburgh-born painter Allan Ramsay, and sixteen new paintings by contemporary artist Alison Watt, made in response to Ramsay’s portraits of women.

Over the last twenty-five years Alison Watt’s best-known works have been large-scale paintings of drapery and fabric in exhibitions such as *Fold* (Fruitmarket, 1997) and *Shift (*2000, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art), perhaps leading us to believe that the artist’s route to Ramsay was via his drapery painter, Joseph Van Aken. But Watt, like Ramsay, initially came to prominence for her portraiture and figurative works. Her interest in responding to work of the past has also been an enduring concern: the 2008 exhibition *Phantom* at the National Gallery, London, included her response to seventeenth-century Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán's *St. Francis in Meditation* (1635–9), and a number of her early works bear the influence of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, such as *Source III* of 1995 which references Ingres’s 1814 *Grande Odalisque*), or *Sleeper*, of 1996, which cites Ingres’s 1842 *Odalisque with Slave*. *Venus Frigida* (1611) by Peter Paul Rubens and the haunting 1970s photographs of Francesca Woodman have also fascinated Watt and generated works in response.

Far from a change of direction, then, *A Portrait Without Likeness* extends Watt’s commitment to exploring the history of painting and goes back to an interest in still life which was present all along. Early figurative works, such as the 1995 triptych *Anatomy*, make this clear. The new exhibition also continues Watt’s preoccupation with painting textiles: the handkerchiefs, collars and ribbons of *Keppel,* *Walpole*, *Bayne*, *Balcarres* and *Anne* (all 2019-20) make up almost one third of this series. Her palette has remained characteristically pale, muted and harmonious, as though the paintings were designed for the high ceilings and neo-classical hues of Edinburgh’s New Town, just outside the gallery (and the home of some of Ramsay’s Enlightenment sitters as well as Watt’s current studio). The exhibition follows a period of intensive research by Watt into the collection of paintings, drawings and sketchbooks by Ramsay held by the National Galleries of Scotland. Some of these works are included in *A Portrait Without Likeness*, others as part of the fantastic *Scots in Italy* display in the next room.

The sixteen works by Watt seem to isolate details from Ramsay’s portraits of women, presenting fragments in close-up: his two wives, Anne Bayne and Margaret Lindsay, are represented by a pink ribbon necklace (*Anne*, 2019) and a rose (*Lindsay*, 2019); a lace collar, *Balcarres* (2019-20), appears to be lifted from his painting of the Countess of Balcarres; a book, from his portrait of Caroline Fox, is shown in *Fox* (2019). But are these objects simply citations ‘after Ramsay’ or is it the viewer who makes this assumption? Looking closely, tiny inconsistencies appear: the scale of objects is adjusted, shadows fall in different places, other details (the hazelnuts in *Boscawen*) are omitted. With careful attention, then, the paintings reveal an artist in dialogue with Ramsay’s work, not one concerned with verbatim quotation. In this sense, the paintings might represent the results of an artist’s experiential, immersive absorption in historic works of art, a visual counterpart to the experiment in writing which occurs in T J Clark’s *The Sight of Death*, a prolonged meditation on Poussin’s *Landscape with a Calm* and *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*.

Scottish painting has often been characterised by its colourist and expressive tendencies, its gestural, bold use of the brush. But there is a parallel tradition to which both Ramsay and Watt belong. In Watt’s case, as a graduate of Glasgow School of Art, a painterly heritage can be traced through a trajectory which includes artists such as Maurice Greiffenhagen, James Cowie and Hugh Adam Crawford. It is a tradition of Scottish painting that favours precision, incisive line and a glacial, harmonious tonality and which looks to *quattrocento* painting in terms of colour, light, draughtsmanship and neoclassicism in its smooth surface and brushwork. These qualities, including a deep awareness of art historical precedent, are all present in *A Portrait Without Likeness*.

In considering Ramsay’s work, has Watt, in the words of Joshua Reynolds, regarded the older paintings ‘as models…to imitate, and at the same time as rivals with whom to contend’? In *Boscawen* (2019), the object depicted by Watt is a cabbage leaf, almost identical to the leaf held in the hand of Frances Boscawen, painted by Ramsay c. 1747-8. It is an eccentric, ambiguous attribute — does it refer to Boscawen’s fecundity or her love of gardening? How is narrative or biography elicited and evoked by this intriguing object? The leaf recalls a similar motif in an early work by Watt — *Pears*, of 1994 — in which five pears rest in the groin of a nude, reclining woman, generating similar narrative ambiguity. In a recent interview, Watt has spoken of her interest in the relationship between the genres of still life and portraiture, describing still life as an ‘incredibly intimate’ form of biography. Because we attach so much meaning and significance to certain objects, Watt has claimed, they can be seen as a reflection of us. If this is the case, the still life can become ‘a portrait without likeness'. These objects Watt depicts could also be regarded secular attributes, symbols infused by the aura of their sitter, painted to connote their simultaneous absence and presence. Or perhaps the objects are a kind of relic, ‘inhabited’ by their sitter? After all, most of the objects are named after the women they symbolise: a ribbon ‘becomes’ *Anne* (2019); a book ‘contains’ Caroline *Fox* (2019); a collar, *Balcarres* (2019) retains the trace of Anne, Countess of Balcarres. Do these works look at one another and engage in conversation, as Watt does with Ramsay? For all of their beauty, there is a sense of doubling, splitting and haunting in these paintings, bringing a ghostly, uncanny frisson to this cool, contemplative show.