

CELIA HEMPTON

T R A N S P L A N T

5 October - 30 November 2024

Phillida Reid, 10 - 16 Grape Street, London

Can the weary and eerie sense of things—the uncanny, also be sublime? Blanketing one with feelings of simultaneously being cradled, stationed somewhere between the realm of the real and the imagined?¹

Celia Hempton's exhibition, *Transplant* at Phillida Reid exists in the space of this question, offering a possibility, an aspirational desire to suture wounds lived, parsed, cracked, which at first, may appear seemingly unsalvageable. Through an ascendant visual vocabulary of efflorescing forms that sweep across a multitude of topographies, Hempton bridges a chasm between the mutant, the errant and embodied aspects of selfhood.

Hempton fashions lush flush surfaces beaming with light. Elsewhere, overripe canvases thick with oil transpire as hyperreal landscapes. Salvage, human waste, and the concept of detritus are interrogated in abundant abstract expressionist cartographies. They each look as if they were unspooled from within the crevices of multiple human psyches. Rigorous disciplinary practice enables the artist to eschew generic typologies of representation. Here, each canvas ranges in scope. Their dimension and proportion, scaled to a sense of necessary life. Hempton's paintings in *Transplant* range from what has become her signature 'handheld-size' to larger-than-life panoramas. In the enclosure of looking, what binds these scenes is the signification of what is experienced and what is felt. Painted from life, from various proximities and distances, spectators are invited to relieve the affective possibilities of emotion through colour and complex geometry. Beneath each seam, ensconced within the skin of flax, wood and bone, within the pore of the cross-stitch, is another myth, one worthy of being disentangled.

In this regard, audiences are invited to bear witness to one of Britain's most significant painters mature into a sphere entirely of her own making. The indices, the vocabulary, the compass has been confidently positioned. Developed, and reflecting interior, private, and public events that have materialised over the course of the last five years of her life, the exhibition presents the body itself as witness, as a vessel (as transplant), a receptacle that both emits and imbibes "the score", the sediment, the ruin, the narrative, the legacies of violence, sexism, imperialism, colonialism, as well as their unfolding. Backwards, rummage, the clamour, the anterior desire to reclaim space, body, sexuality, land, and legacy.

Upon first encounter, one can argue that this body of work owes a great deal to the likes of German Expressionists and their pursuit of encoded metaphor and feeling as it does to Philip Guston's 1950s period as a member of the "New York School", which abounded after a period of personal trauma. At the same time, there are semblances to the body actionist movement of Austrian painter, Maria Lassnig, as there is to the abstract sensuality of Lebanese artist Huguette Caland. Still, to look at an artist's work through the viewfinder of another history is to elide that which makes it distinctly its own, and it is entirely, the product, in this case, of one person's uniquely located experience, which has fashioned an ontology all her own. Celia's detailed autobiography shall be left for another day.

In the corridors of Phillida Reid on Grape Street, with its exposed brick, one is tunnelled by the blue stain of melancholy—the most acutely present colour in the exhibition's palette. Look at Hempton's SURVEILLANCE series—the bright lights of cars abound akin to open mouths; they are abounded, becoming shrouds, disassembling. An intimate bird's-eye-view scene of a person texting on their phone on a bench in Anand, India resembles a prison, the blue lines pulsing at either side, hemming him in. This perfect picture simultaneously evokes Paul Klee's postcard-sized paintings, as it does Henri Matisse's cut-outs.

In KIDNEYS, the trauma of the inconceivable assumes life in an animism of its own configuration. An operating table scene transmutes from one of danger into a scene of arresting schadenfreude. As the wayward kidney, with all the innocence of a child is given its own characterful set of features, the mind wanders. Is the troublesome kidney rejoicing in its failure to assume its function? The perspectives in Hempton's scene are both perplexing and engrossing: Could this be a scene from a near-future Elon Musk induced science fiction experiment, an inter-species landing on Mars? Or is this a version of a reality that has occupied the artist's life, body and mind for the last five years, bifurcating, rupturing, any chance of her constructing a composite image ever again? The truth is for her and her body only to narrate. I have no right, for the time being.

The artist's interest in the built environment resounds and brims, time and again in BUILDING SITES and her epic DEMOLITION works. Architecture as metaphorical flesh became a resounding interest for Hempton early in her career. The spaces and sites of power and protest—how they are visioned and mediated, codified and distanced through visual modes of communication has served as ongoing obsession. Here, thickets of life ascend in abundant boxes of grey, floating beds, imbued with hues of pink and yellow, almost floating to an alterscape, an endless endlessness. Hempton does not flinch to scale the manifestations of her experience—the result of harrowing moments experienced surrounded by collapse, surrounded in rubble.

Her pictorial field does not drown us in death but exhumes the spectres from behind the shadows. Peering from the inside of bricks, metal, foliage, the scenes progressively mushroom, decay transmutes and sprouts as abundant life, blanketed fields, and tubular constructions realised through visceral action. A scene for the living, from the trenchant water back to the safety of land.

— Prof. Dr Omar Kholeif, director of collections and senior curator,
Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE; Visiting Professor, MIMA Research Unit,
Teesside University, UK

¹These words came to me amidst a fever dream. I, or rather, perhaps I should say that a version of me, a parcel of me that I have now excised had laid in the nude staring, glaring at the thick painted kidneys on Celia's studio walls as I attempted to strike a pose that was filled with enough "natural" sex and ease so that Celia could, or would never tell the difference—the difference between confidence and melancholy, that is. The deepest form of sadness clutched a hold of me afterwards. I desperately needed rest. I had to disappear from Earth as I knew it. For I had not slept in months. Now all protective sheaths were had been uncovered and I took well to the solitary act of endless darkness. Still, on this morning, my adrenal glands were pulsing. They had something to say. The thin sheet that covered this semi-nude body had imbibed more than a fair splash—my human flesh expunged, to drain. I, we, as in I, we were on the edge of Europe: A place some call Portugal. For me, it is little more than the splintering edge between my body and the blustering ocean. My California—staring, glaring from this edge onwards, holding me within its embrace, away from the inevitability of hell. I woke and these words fell out. Out of the mouth, as if out of one of Ariel's kidneys. Or was it, one of his? It is Ariel's now. To the sun, we go now.