

Aimée Parrott - Pippy Houldsworth, Viewing Room, Insight: Week 8, 5 – 11 August 2020  
Reviewed by Sarah Kate Wilson, University of the Arts London.

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**"[T]he museum of the future will be mechanized: the visitors will sit still in little viewing boxes and the canvases will appear before them on a kind of vertical escalator. In this way [the curator wrote], in one hour and a half, a thousand visitors will be able to see a thousand paintings without leaving their seats."<sup>1</sup> (Berger, John, 1966)**

John Berger recounted this statement, made by an unnamed French curator in his 1966 essay, *The Historical Function of the Museum*. Now, here we are, experiencing the Covid19 lockdown of 2020. We do not sit in little viewing boxes, we hold them. The predicted vertical escalator is instead a roaming finger; endlessly, obsessively, often mindlessly twitching upon a glassy surface. Art galleries across the globe are closed, they are now located in a holding pen, in virtual space. Physical encounters have been replaced with online viewing rooms, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, Mixed Reality, Extended Reality apps and devices, are being employed to make the digital mediated experience of art, appear 'real'. Given the circumstances, it feels appropriate to review an online presentation of paintings.

In this cultural milieu, I had myriad virtual exhibitions to choose from. However, my fingertips kept stroking the glowing portal in my palm in search of work by Aimée Parrott. During lockdown, she has been particularly productive in making and 'gramming' work. As serendipity would have it, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery announced a solo presentation of new works via 'Insight', the gallery's online viewing room. Here in this digital space, float eight identically sized, small paintings made on calico, framed in sapele wood.

When first meeting these paintings online, I questioned my vision. Had I been crying, was there an eyelash in my eye, were my glasses smudged? I rubbed, cleaned and blinked again, and willed the works to appear. Slowly, they came into a fuzzy focus. Coaxing these paintings to reveal themselves, reminded me of the magical experience of developing a print in a photography dark room. Develop, Stop, Fix. Viewed both #irl and online, these works produce a fascinating optical confusion, created through the artist's version of mono-printing, one that ironically seems to function, plurally.

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<sup>1</sup> Berger, J., (1966), *The Historical Function of the Museum*. In *The Moment of Cubism, and Other Essays* / John Berger. (1969) London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. pp. 35-39

Parrott was introduced to mono-printing almost a decade ago, whilst studying at the Royal Academy Schools, London. An inked-up monotype remains unfixed up until the copper plate is put through the press. This sustained period of malleability is appealing to her. Furthermore, it is not necessarily the initial print that excites her, she is often more interested in a plate that has just been squeezed through the press. As the rollers impregnate the un-primed calico with ink, the plate is simultaneously stripped of ink, but not completely. A trace remains.



Fig. 1 *Mouth*, 2020, ink on calico, acrylic, thread, sapele and ply frame. 32 x 42 cm, 12 5/8 x 16 1/2 in.



Fig. 2 *Thunderstone*, 2020, ink on calico, acrylic, wool, thread, sapele and ply frame. 32 x 42 cm, 12 5/8 x 16 1/2 in.

She retrieves the plate from the press and sets about re-inking and re-painting it - so as to re-print it. Working in this way sees her work with, rather than obliterate the ghostly, residual image left on the plate. She refers to this as a 'hand-me-down'<sup>2</sup> process, therefore the image left on the plate can be thought of as an 'inherited' image. The newly 'refreshed' monotype can now be either printed back onto an earlier print or onto new pieces of calico. As a result, offspring images can be seen layered on-top of each other or appear in other paintings. These familial echo's bind her bodies of works, together. In this particular body of work the same leaf/pursed lips/shell motif appears in *Thunderstone*, *Hull*, and *Mouth* (all 2020).

When the plate is printed back onto earlier prints, the plate or weave of the calico might slightly move position, à la Warhol. This misalignment creates drop shadows, can bring about double-vision, and as a result give the forms weight. This can be seen overtly in the work *Loam*, (2020). Here you can observe a

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<sup>2</sup> Aimée Parrot quoted from a email exchange between author Sarah Kate Wilson and Aimée Parrot.

slight shift between the brown ink marks originally laid down, and the re-printed second layer of brown marks. This subtle offsetting gives the impression that the second layers of marks are levitating above the original. The visual noise of the printed 'offsprings' in *Loam* are similar to the light trails we see in long exposure night photography.

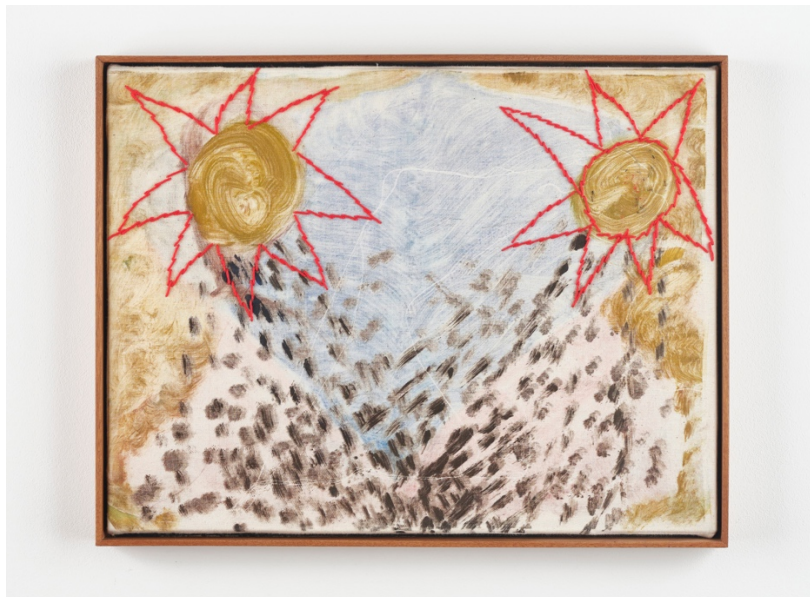


Fig. 3 *Loam*, 2020, ink on calico, acrylic, yarn, thread, sapele and ply frame, 32 x 42 cm, 12 5/8 x 16 1/2 in.

These paintings (unlike the majority of painting circulating digitally) resist becoming, as John Kelsey in his text *The Sext Life of Painting* put it, 'virulently retinal'<sup>3</sup>, precisely because, they are difficult to immediately see. The imagery contained within them is similarly enigmatic. Built up in printed and painted sedimentary layers, these works are infused with images of knots, glaciers, wounds, mouths, stars, volcanoes, water, lava, larva, lichen, soil, rain, legs, bones, moons, horizon lines, hair, tongues, excrement, stones, blood, crystals, walls, trinkets, tendrils, eyes, veins.

The vital energy that her works harbour, is palpable. Titles, *Torrent*, *Thunderstone*, *Matrix*, *Spring*, *Hull*, *Mouth*, *Incantation* and *Loam*, signal that something is about to happen. Storms are brewing, the ground is being excavated, things are growing, warnings are being whispered, spells are being cast, the soil is pulsating. The slim wooden frame that houses *Matrix*, (2020) can barely contain it. The work depicts an eruption so volatile it kicks up a smoke bomb, that snakes itself into a frenzied figure of eight that threatens to drag everything in its path. Upon closer inspection, which means using my fingers, zooming into the digital image, rather than stepping closer to the work - I notice three teardrop-shaped appendages. They have been forcibly tacked to the surface of the painting. Perhaps these curious amulets, are *ex-votos*, sacrificially hammered into the work to appease the gods, as a way of keeping the unfolding scene of disaster at bay.

<sup>3</sup> Kelsey, J (2015). *The Sext Life of Painting*. In: Hochdörfer, Achim, Joselit, D and Ammer, M (2015), *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*. Munich: Museum Brandhorst, Bayerische Staatgemäldesammlungen. pp. 268–270.



Fig 4. *Matrix*, 2020, ink on calico, acrylic, polymer clay, pins, thread, sapele and ply frame. 42 x 32 cm, 16 1/2 x 12 5/8 in.

We understand these objects to be paintings. We could just as easily understand them as tea leaf readings, Rorschach tests or scans of archaeological pits undergoing excavation. With the latter in mind, I remembered Dave Hickey's writing on Pia Fries's paintings made in the mid-noughties. Hickey recalled something a friend had said:

The earth doesn't care if it's ruined...depopulated...it will still be the earth and it will go around the sun.<sup>4</sup>

Following this memory, Hickey writes,

'...if alien aesthetes arrive someday on this ruined and depolluted earth, if they decide to wander around, like tourists at Machu Pichu, and, if they are free of memory and expectations, they will probably find the wreckage of this world and what we did to it enchanting, full of terrible beauty and brutal grandeur, and if, amid the rubble, they should come across a painting by Pia Fries, they will most certainly take it home as an unsentimental memento of the ruined planet.'<sup>5</sup>

Who would blame them? Fries' paintings are bloody gorgeous, but they are not soulful. They appear machine-made, hyper-saturated, glossy and as a result, sterile. Perhaps too similar, to the objects found on the planet the aliens are day-tripping from, which would explain the nonchalant encounter Hickey predicts they might have.

Parrott's works have soul. Printed, painted, stitched, embroidered, weathered, they reinforce Meyer Schapiro's statement made in 1957 that '[P]aintings...are the last handmade, personal objects within our culture.'<sup>6</sup> I imagine, if aliens unearth one of her paintings, their reaction would be akin to our responses to the discoveries of; the cave paintings of Lascaux, a new species of amphibian, or the fact that within a 'single teaspoon of soil there exists a microscopic universe of complex interdependent lifeforms, invisible

<sup>4</sup> Hickey, D. *Pia Fries, Schwarzwild*. [Catalogue of an exhibition held Bernard Jacobson Gallery 2006] London. p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Schapiro, M, (1957). The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art. *Art News* 56, no. 4 (Summer 1967). pp. 36-42.

to the human eye.<sup>7</sup> Each of these revelations have been mind-blowing! Parrott's paintings would be gathered up, studied, discussed, treasured, because they do not depict our world, rather they seem to actually contain it and the lives we have lived upon it. **Therefore, these paintings ought to be thought of as distilled records of our lived world, an exquisite one, full of animals, plants, minerals and magic.**

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<sup>7</sup> Parrot, A. *All that the Rain Promises and More...* [Catalogue of an exhibition held at Arusha Gallery, Guest Curated by Aimée Parrott, 25th July - 14th September 2019], Edinburgh.