

Andrew Marr on Clare Woods

There is a problem with modern painting that ridiculously easy to state and intricately hard – sometimes, it seems, impossible – to resolve. What, in 2016, should a proper painting look like? So much has already been done by so many extraordinary hands, fingers and brains, that it can often seem as if there is nothing left to be said. The contemporary painter is allowed to quote and pastiche: originality appears impossible. Except that, thank God, time and again people come along and show that there are still new worlds to explore. Clare Woods is among them. Her art looks like nobody else's and yet seems somehow inevitable, as if it's been lying around for ages. She has famously said that, having started as a sculptor, she didn't feel good enough to be a painter. But as her fresh work clearly shows, the three-dimensional training is the clue as to why her "flat work" works so well. She is obsessed by the "thinginess" of paint – its gloop, flow, texture and weight, almost as if paint is material for sculpture – but also with hard edges, the complex, fritillary lines the eye discovers as it reaches the ends of three-dimensional space. So, when she is painting what might or might not be wood, what might or might not be stone, there is a ribbed, stippled immediacy no other painter seems to have reached for, at least recently. She is a surface painter, in the way that Velasquez or De Hooch were painters of surface. Grain; compression; flow. In her hands it seems to me interestingly 21st-century materiality.

Behind and alongside that, however, is this enthusiasm for hard line, which gives her paintings at their best remarkable depth. Painting on aluminium, and using a lot of masking tape (and the materials are central to her achievement) Woods plunges the eye yards and even miles back through her surfaces. These are pictures you want almost to punch through – in a good way.

I don't mind saying that because the final thing that strikes me about Clare Wood's paintings is her lightness and humour. There are haunted woods, scary masked predators and rapacious vegetables all around but, as are titles show, we are allowed to smile and laugh. She's a bit less stony than her revered Barbara Hepworth; she reminds me more of Gillian Ayres. We are living through time when so many of our best painters seem to be women and I wonder whether this is partly due to their irreverence, standing slightly at an angle to the male solemnity and self-importance of 20th-century painting. What should a painting look like now? Flick on, or look around to find some answers.