

Extremes of Feeling

'The worst thing is to be numb — I'd much rather feel terrible.'

Clare Woods

Deborah Levy's novel, *Swimming Home*, revolves around a character called Kitty Finch, who explodes like a human volcano into the lives of a family. Her name vibrates with conflict — if you put a cat and a bird together you're asking for trouble. Clare Woods' name also contains an opposition, 'Clare' having its roots in the Latin word 'claritas', meaning light or brightness, while woods are dark places where bad things happen in fairy tales. Cratylic naming is a long literary tradition, perhaps most crassly exemplified by Martin Amis's 'Lionel Asbo'. Sometimes written off as a cheap trick, it's surprising how often people's names seem to suit them.

Although it might not be obvious at first glance, Woods' paintings are fraught with paradox and contradiction. While each canvas may initially present itself as a pleasingly unified surface, it can soon start to seem as though something frighteningly chaotic is trying to break through. If the chromatic harmony gives us a sense of something seen through a filter, it perhaps also alerts us to the presence of the very thing that's been filtered out. At the same time as thinking about what we're seeing, we're drawn to think about what we're *not* seeing.

On one small wall of her studio — a large, bright set of rooms on an industrial estate in Herefordshire — Woods keeps a collection of extremely unsettling images. Many of these are photographs taken in war zones, or in the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks. Some are well known, such as the image of Marcy Borders, the 'Dust Lady' of 9/11, or Davina Douglas's bandaged face after the 7/7 London bus bombing. (Incidentally, Woods was nearby when it happened.) Other images, less immediately recognisable, show various injuries, and the dressings and prostheses that might be used to treat them. One photograph depicts a ballerina's feet; her left foot perfectly poised in its pink pointe shoe, while her unshod right foot is revealed to be chafed and disfigured from years of crippling misuse. One can recognise elements of these images in the paintings in the next room; angles of limbs or outlines of faces appear in the swooshing brushstrokes and jewel-like colours of Woods' work. But while the wall of photographs is grisly and bleak, the paintings are luscious and seductive.

In the late nineteenth century, at The Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, Dr Jean-Martin Charcot was hard at work trying to understand the mysteries of so-called 'hysteria' — a commonly diagnosed illness with no known somatic cause. Its symptoms might include paralysis, dumbness, seizures, fainting fits or dramatic loss of memory. Charcot developed a theory of 'traumatic hysteria', arguing that psychological symptoms might develop in the aftermath of sudden, violent incidents such as train crashes or explosions; the things people tried to push out of their minds came back in other forms. It was as if his patients were being made ill by the intrusions of industrialisation. The human mind couldn't keep up with the new horrors the world was throwing at it; it didn't have the capacity to process them.

In his famous essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919) Charcot's student, Freud, took this idea and developed it further, stating that the mind was designed to filter out what was upsetting, concealing it and/or converting it into more palatable form. Some traumas, say

those brought about by the incessant catastrophes of the First World War, proved too much for the psyche to soothe. In dreams, soldiers might find themselves repeatedly revisiting cataclysmic moments, as they tried and failed to grasp them cognitively. What's more, all humans were doing this sort of thing all the time — attempting to tolerate the difficulties of life using a desperate process of ignoring, negating, filtering and, when all else fails, obsessively focussing on the problem as if to scrutinise it out of existence. How else could we bear our own lives? (People today can perhaps add social media to the list of buffering activities — photographing things and putting them on Instagram is excellent protection against experiencing them too directly. And image filters are becoming ever more sophisticated, many now using A.I.) Contemporary neuroscientists seem to agree that the human brain is far from a straightforward organism. It is liable to be tricky in terms of what it lets in, and also what it lets go of. While some surprising things might apparently fail to register (an attractive person's name) other — unwelcome — thoughts will be fiercely clung onto. The elaborate system of glutamate molecules and NMDA receptors in our heads is beyond our control.

Clare Woods' paintings appear to be doing something very purposeful with perception and trauma. They filter out what's disgusting and somehow convert it into something that can be enjoyed. Still, the paintings don't make for easy viewing. Rather than offering up simple pleasures, they push towards the more difficult forms of enjoyment referred to in French psychoanalysis as *jouissance* (a kind of agonising delight). The images hint at something more than we can see. But if we begin to think about this 'more' we might rather we hadn't. What is that masked purple figure doing? What has happened to the red man's eyes? Is that reclining figure experiencing sexual ecstasy, or are they dead? Even inanimate objects can start to look sinister; cloths evoke smothering, a cluster of baleful plinths give the impression of *waiting*. It's fascinating and also disturbing, perhaps more so because we are led to imagine things for ourselves. Whatever atrocities we are seeing here are, at least partially, coming from inside our own heads.

So why not just run away screaming? In a sense, it wouldn't be a foolish reaction (although you can hardly get away from *yourself*). For all I know, it sometimes actually happens. But maybe there are rewards that come with sticking around to look. Like inoculations, Woods' paintings can help us to feel better by making us a bit sick first. We can touch the horror without being overwhelmed by it. They can frighten us just enough that we can still restore our equilibrium afterwards. They call out the monstrosities inside us in a gentle, tolerant way. 'Do you sometimes think about these things, because I do?' they seem to be asking. 'And I don't really know what to do about it either. Except this.'

Tucked away in Woods' studio is a jar containing a section of her colon, preserved in formaldehyde — a relic of an operation. She doesn't inflict it on visitors, but she'll let you see it if you ask. It's almost unthinkable that this grotty, grey thing was once inside her, and that everyone else has one too. It's easy to live as though the surface is everything. And in a sense it is. But below the surface of the body is another set of surfaces, and if you rip the body open you will see them. Horror movies play endlessly with this idea, drawing out the possibility of its happening: Has the baddie spotted her? Is the door locked? Can she get through the window on time? The action feels unbearable. But when someone's pickled colon is right there in front of you it somehow doesn't seem so bad. It's the timing, the sequence, the story that makes the difference. If things can just stay still once in a while you

can take a minute to get used to them. But nothing stays still really. Even dead things are subject to change.

In Woods' work, the idea of rupture lurks everywhere. Reality, it seems to say, can be broken into at any moment. A plane might fly into your office. Your bus might explode. Your face might not be your face any more. But what can we do in the meantime? Wait anxiously for things to go wrong? Or carry on regardless, accepting the volatility of existence, the fact that 'normality' is paper thin. Woods' paintings allude to the fact that terrible things have happened, do happen, will happen. The surface of reality breaks, but a new surface is already there waiting. You can look at it. It has a shape and a colour, light and dark. Sometimes it's even strangely beautiful. The paintings manage at once to frighten us and to calm us down, just like the best fairy tales. They evoke disorder in the most harmonious way. As their maker's name might pre-warn us, they pull in opposing directions, nudging us towards dynamic, lively ways of looking. Woods' paintings coax things out of us — our worst fears are somehow lodged there, waiting to be imagined. But maybe they also store our secrets for us, keeping them safe and external, as if it's the pictures that are scary and not ourselves.