

Karen Lang

'Clare Woods, Reality Dimmed'

When reality is dimmed, what comes to light? This sounds like a metaphysical question and one pertinent to our time. On a metaphysical register, the answer might be, 'being, god, spirit or an emanating life force'. Then again, it might be, 'nothing, death or an enveloping darkness.' Perhaps the answer is a crap shoot. Life like Beckett envisioned it, after all. To paint is to take a chance on the darkness and to make visible what is found there. To paint is to dip into reality and haul up what is perceived only when reality is dimmed.

If this is so, then how does painting square with our time? We live in an age of never-ending reality, of reality made and measured in a seamless world of images. Billboards, illustrated magazines and photographs, to be sure, although these are appearing rather quaint. Cascading news pictures, Facebook feeds, Instagram pages, yes and more, always more, to come. Our new condition prompts the question, 'what is an image? If images are everywhere, perhaps they are nothing or everything or one and the same. 'What is an image' is an obvious question, pondered frequently. But within it lurks a more ominous, less noticed, query: if images now make a seamless world, is there a world apart from the image? I believe we would agree there must be, if only because we cannot imagine ourselves wholly aligned with, entirely enveloped within, a seamless image world. Something of us must stand apart. In her latest paintings, Clare Woods forces apart the image world to reveal what remains. Offering the last for our contemplation, her painting presents what remains when reality is dimmed.

A wall in the artist's studio is filled with images clipped from newspapers, magazines and other sources. We naturally notice the human faces in these images first. What joins them visually, however, is wrapping, binding, folding and overlaying of bandages, cloths and limbs. Woods began as a sculptor and these images suggest an affinity with the work of artists like Phyllida Barlow. On the studio wall, images of beheading and maiming are only part of the menace. Wrapping, binding, folding and overlaying suggest injury, too. These actions imply narratives captured midstream, still unfolding. One wonders at the cause; one wonders what exists within and underneath the layers. While the artist quotes these images

in her painting, quotation appears of minor utility. The studio wall is filled with images of cracks and slippages, with human bodies, form, space and time all subject to the wrenching. If the artist quotes from the images on her wall, it is to work the seam of the seen and the unseen, and to find a space between the two, in a world of endless representation.

Woods has been inching closer to this territory over time. While her recent turn from landscape to figurative imagery has garnered attention, it is important to recognise this transformation within an ongoing exploration of what can be achieved in paint. An abiding interest in boarder zones has ushered the work from sculpture to painting, from landscape to figurative imagery, from self to world. It's easy to say Woods feels the trauma in those images on her studio wall and to revert to biography to find instances of personal injury. All the same, it is important to notice that Woods has never painted herself. If she feels the trauma in images of the world, as an artist she feels out from herself and into paint. Painting bears the trauma of the world: the analogy is not between artist and painting, it is between painting and the world. The progression from landscape to figurative imagery brings another aspect of the world into view.

A similar desire underlines the artist's recent switch from household gloss and enamel on aluminium to working in oils on the same support. Where the smooth, reflective surfaces created by gloss and enamel hide the work of the brush, oil paint is sensitive to its weight. Where gloss and enamel reflect light off the surface, the light within oil paint takes on contour and depth according to the tension and movement of the brush. Moving to the complex medium of oil paint on a white gesso ground has tested her facility, and the work in the Mead exhibition shows the emotional range she is able to achieve with paint. In the new work, one still finds a predominant use of greens, browns and blues, as in her landscape painting, but also a new riot of yellow, pink and red.

English Murder and *The Dementor* most closely recall a photographic source. As in photography so in these paintings, time is suspended and a scene is captured. And yet *English Murder* and *The Dementor* also intimate deaths past and foretold. The opening of time heightens the malevolent mood, for here there exists nothing more specific regarding time and place than that the murder would be English and the Dementor a young man outfitted in Adidas stripes. Still, this is enough to steer the imagination back to Jack the Ripper murder sprees or forward to stereotypes of young men and their threat to civil society.

But there is more. Notice how the sinister mood elevates in pitch by the use of paint to cut the figure in pieces. In *English Murder*, a pool of black shadow carves a profile in

the face of the figure. As one side of the face takes on the weight of darkness, the other hovers ethereally, morbidly, away from the body, the profile now a separated pool of snaking acrid yellow and green paint.

In *The Dementor*, the weight of darkness insinuates itself between the mouth and neck. It cuts around the figure's pointing finger. Without a face to meet our own, mouth and pointing finger, pointing finger like a handgun, set the scene and provide the emotional cues. Here there is confrontation without emotional relief. That *The Dementor* is clearly made by laying paint beside paint and by swirling and overlaying colour does nothing to undercut the sense of foreboding. For the painting is a palpable presence, nearly its own subject in the world, and it reeks of danger.

The recognition of a photographic source does not detract from what paint does in *English Murder* and *The Dementor*. On the contrary, this recognition only amplifies what painting achieves. It is not photography which has given life to these paintings, but painting which lives where photography has died.

The ability of paint to take on a life of its own comes to the fore in *Smoke and Daggers*. The collapsing of smoke and mirrors and cloak and daggers in the painting's title thickens the sleight of hand. While we can readily imagine a photographic source, paint overtakes the source to generate its own course through the painting. Here the figure is not cut to pieces but joined and separated by paint. Woods reveals her facility with oils at these joins and separations, which is to say, around the fingertips and at the back of the neck, where mixed paint is modulated by the pressure and direction of the brush to create texture on the surface and depth of shadow simultaneously. This nod to modernism's play with perceptions of surface and depth demonstrates the smoke and mirrors possible with the oil medium.

Our imagination of a photographic source for the painting adds a further layer to the game, however, prompting us to ask after the painting's title: does *Smoke and Daggers* refer to a photographic source, reminding us that photography is not the medium of objectivity once supposed? Or does it point to the artist's capacity for mimesis or life-likeness, putting on trial the old chestnut about Zeuxis and the grapes? Then again, does the painting's title suggest a contemporary condition in which we find ourselves captive to the smoke and mirrors of the image, unable, or unwilling, to tell the peddler from the artist, the spectacle from reality, source from reproduction, fact from fiction? Perhaps it is the idea of truth itself

that is the fiction. Either that, or the idea of truth stands apart from the hall of mirrors of contemporary life, remaining something we may never grasp but do well to hold in mind.

In 1927, the German cultural historian Siegfried Kracauer published a short essay on photography in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Commenting upon a world newly saturated with images, he noted how, in the illustrated magazines, ‘people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving’. What did the new ‘blizzard of photographs’ in the illustrated magazines and elsewhere enable people to see and yet prevent them from perceiving? Kracauer noticed that photography provides ‘the reproduction of the world accessible to the photographic apparatus’. As he said, photography portrays ‘the sum of what can be subtracted’ from the person, not the person itself. Endless photographs bring the world in to view, but they do not capture what is inaccessible to the photographic apparatus, namely, ‘the memory image’.

In a beautiful passage Kracauer compared the memory image to ‘a monogram of remembered life’, a condensing of human particularity, ‘that person’s *actual history*’, scent, laughter, foibles and passions—the sum of what cannot be subtracted from the person because it is the person. Living in a newly saturated image world, he feared the eclipse of the memory image. ‘In the illustrated magazines,’ he wrote, ‘the world has become a photographic present, and the photographed present has been entirely eternalized. ... What the photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image’. Death stakes out the difference between an eternalized present and individual life. For Kracauer, the devouring of photographs was ‘a sign of *the fear of death*’.¹ It was also a sign that the memory image, the monogram of individual life, was being outpaced by the portrayal of life in photography.

Just as Kracauer warned of the shrinking space between photography and the memory image in his time, we might sound an alarm in our own. The race to post images of our every waking moment may be the symptom of a new state of catastrophe—a desperate attempt to capture the individual and ‘that person’s *actual history*’, the memory image, in mediums and on platforms that cannot contain it. As life accelerates to become one glimpse after another, an endless sea of images may reflect this condition, but it cannot encompass the memory image. What remains when this reality is dimmed? Can we perceive what is inaccessible to the photographic apparatus?

The phrase ‘reality dimmed’ comes from Victor Frankel’s memoir of the Holocaust. Of everyday life in the German concentration camp, he wrote: ‘Reality dimmed as all

emotion was centred on the task of preserving one's life and sometimes the life of another'. Apathy, a blunting of feelings, 'a kind of emotional death,' redirected what little remained to the task of preserving life. At the extreme awaited the discovery that 'this body here, my body, is really a corpse already'. A living corpse is the embodiment of life in death and death in life. With existence in the balance, what gave hope to human life? 'Had I known then that my wife was dead,' Frankel recalled, 'I think that I would still have given myself, undisturbed by that knowledge, to the contemplation of her image, and that my mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and satisfying'.² Frankl's memory image of his wife sustained him. Memory opened a space between death and life, between the corpse-making apparatus of Auschwitz, the portrayal of Frankel as a numbered prisoner and the individual person he still was, reminding him of his existence as a human being and of meaning in human life.

In her own way, Clare Woods opens a space between death and life to discover the memory image in painting. *Reality Dimmed*, *Short Bad Day* and *My Horrible Head* outpace their photographic sources, bringing to view the emotional range she can achieve with paint. Twisted pillows and sheets evoke a human being, now physically gone but present, suggested, in the movement of paint and the life it takes on. In *Short Bad Day* and *My Horrible Head* light radiates from a mythological or spiritual elsewhere, recalling Rembrandt's Danae or Bernini's Saint Teresa, or our own here and now. Still, these paintings are fringed with foreboding. Where light lives, light encounters darkness.

These paintings work the seam of the seen and the unseen, opening a space between photographic portrayal and individual sensation and memory. When reality is dimmed, darkness and light, death and life, appear in these paintings and this is how it must be now. After the events of the twentieth century, the human must take its measure from the inhuman and the present from the past. This ensures a space for the memory image, and for painting, in a new world of representation.

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography' [1927] in *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, tr. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

² Victor Frankel, *Man's Search for Meaning* [1946], tr. Ilse Lasch (London: Rider, 2004).