

# Amanda Ansell: Transference

*It is such a secret place, the land of tears.*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

The creation of a work of art is the creation of a metaphor. It is the formation of an object or performance which appears to be about one thing, but which is actually referencing something quite other. This 'other' may be a comment on the nature of our society, the semiotics of language or an allusion to our own emotions. It is an understanding which offers us the framework we use when we seek to assess the output of an artist, when we ask ourselves; how does their work speak to us?

When we look at the paintings of Amanda Ansell we notice the emergence of a coherent theme which underpins her oeuvre; it is the subject of shifting forms on the point of convergence.

Ansell's early paintings are gestural abstracts rooted in a minimal aesthetic. Paintings like *Seventh Happening* (2000) and *Some Way Down* (2002) which see the gentle collision of two muted colours handled in a monochromatic and even manner. With *Seventh Happening* for example, we observe a large soft brown, rounded form, descending gently into the mass of a grey impasto body of paint. Like the confluence of two rivers, the muted brown shape appears to be making an attempt to merge with the grey, but the colours and brush marks on the surface of the canvas reveal this union has yet to occur. The two forms appear malleable, yet solid, they are evenly weighted in mass, tone and hue and encounter each other on equal terms. Each element exists side by side with the other, separate, yet in harmony, revealing a tentative quality which meditates on the moment before a union occurs. The threshold of a merger offers a natural period for reflection, as it brings with it the promise of growth as well as the paradoxical risk of a loss of the self. In this way Ansell's paintings are informed by the subject of emotional and physical transference.

Following these abstracts, Ansell developed the theme of 'the promise of transference' in a series of paintings which depict foam bubble islands. These works create a visual realm based in realism, yet one which remains distinctly disconnected from it. In paintings such as *Evening Sail* (2006) and *Bubble Rock* (2006) we encounter images of moulded lather based upon the landscape of the human body in the bath, at the point where it breaks the surface of the water. In conversation<sup>i</sup>, Ansell described how the shape of the islands are informed by her own physical appearance, taking on profiles inspired by her knee, shoulder or hip as she observed them while bathing. In doing this she presents us with the moment when the fluidity of liquid appears to assume a solid form. But like *Seventh Happening* and *Some Way Down* these bubble islands remain isolated and poised at the threshold of being subsumed by a secondary mass. They remain resolutely self-contained. When we look at *Bubble Rock* we are presented with the image of a small, hill-like form of foam situated near the lower right hand side of the painting. At its base we see some of the foam is turning to water, melting back into the surface upon which it rests. Behind, an abstract horizon presents a dark void,

which reminds us that whilst this form maintains an appearance of solidity, it also exists on the edge of consumption, on the verge of dissolving in to nothingness.

William Shakespeare explored the themes of emotional loss and transference in his play *Hamlet* (c. 1601). In this Shakespeare introduces us to a young Prince of Elsinore who encounters the ghost of his dead father, the former king. When the phantom monarch reveals he has been murdered by his own brother, the young Prince Hamlet is thrown into an emotional turmoil, as within two months of becoming a widow, his mother, Queen Gertrude, has already married the uncle who has now been installed as king. What Hamlet thought he knew of those closest to him has been thrown into question and the result sees the prince descend to the edge of madness. Yet Hamlet does not fall into madness, but instead chooses to play the part of insanity as a means of attempting to contain his turbulent emotions. In this, *Hamlet* exposes a truth that our emotions take shape in response to the actions of external events. We have no control over how we feel, only an ability to make decisions on how we behave in the light of our state of mind. These actions in turn impact on the desires and sentiments of others. It is the metaphorical interpretation of what this emotional impact contains which lies at the heart of Amanda Ansell's paintings.

Shakespeare expands on this theme in *Hamlet* in the character of Ophelia, daughter of Polonius. Ophelia believed Hamlet loved her, but during the course of the story Hamlet becomes so consumed by his own mental state that he appears to lose the ability to relate appropriately to her. In this state, Hamlet seeks to confront his mother while she is in her bedchamber. Once there he hears a sound coming from behind a tapestry which he believes to be made by his uncle. Acting on impulse, Hamlet stabs the veiled figure who turns out to be Ophelia's father Polonius. Now, just as Hamlet is tormented by his emotions in the aftermath of his father's death, so Ophelia in turn becomes overwhelmed with grief in the wake of Hamlet's actions. Her subsequent fate is not witnessed on stage, but is instead referred to in a conversation between the Queen and Ophelia's brother Laertes, where Gertrude describes how Ophelia fell into a river while out picking flowers. There, Ophelia slowly drowned whilst lost in song.

This scene became the subject for a painting in 1851 by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Sir John Everett Millais. In his depiction Ophelia is presented half submerged in a dark stream. Her eyes look up towards the heavens, her mouth half open, perhaps still singing. Around her neck a string of blue flowers and in her right hand a small bouquet slips from her grasp. She wears a grey dress which has trapped some air; this allows her to temporarily float before it will pull her down for good. Behind Ophelia lies a fallen willow tree, its leaves brush the surface of the water and in its branches sit a robin, which, like Ophelia, appears to be engrossed in song. Ophelia has become a metaphorical receptacle for Hamlet's distress, a vessel to hold his grief. In to Ophelia the fluid nature of Hamlet's feelings have been poured, and then, like tears, the stream has washed away their sorrow.

Just as Ophelia acts as a vessel for Hamlet's emotions, so Ansell's paintings act to visualise in the abstract the moment our own emotions find expression in a solid state.

Shortly after the bubble island series reached their conclusion, Ansell painted *Willow Land 1* (2012). This eventually formed part of a small series of realist paintings featuring the leaves of weeping willow trees as they brush against the flow of moving water. It is a series which at first seems out of keeping with her other paintings, and perhaps this is because they were produced in response to the onset of her mother's terminal cancer. They have adopted a language of melancholic sadness, yet as with her other paintings they maintain a theme of shifting forms poised on the point of convergence. With *Willow Land 1* we see a wall of leaves dangling in front of a darkness which lurks behind them. They present a curtain alive with colour and movement, yet we also observe that they hang in sorrow, weeping as their name suggests; they are veiling a void of sadness.

In 2014 Ansell partially overpainted a number of her willow and water pictures. In doing so she decided to incorporate the abstract gestural marks she had employed in the early 2000's. With this undertaking, what was once seen as seemingly solid began to melt and Ansell instigated a convergence of realism and abstraction. In *Graze* (2014) we observe how the leaves of a willow tree dangle and move in an attempt to touch a watery surface, but instead of the water they expect to meet they now encounter the nebulous abstract swirl of green paint. This mass seems to assume a role similar to Ophelia's dress; it reminds us that whilst something may rise up it can also be subsumed. That what is at one point solid can also transfigure into something flowing and that just as we can stand strong, we can also be reduced to tears.

Crying in art is rare, because emotions are seen as largely sentimental. Aside from renaissance lamentation paintings which depict the Virgin Mary crying over the death of Christ, there is very little on the subject in serious painting. Picassos *Weeping Woman* (1937), Roy Lichtenstein's *Crying Girl* (1963) and (1964) and Ary Scheffer's *Paolo and Francesca* (1856) are amongst the few exceptions. In Scheffer's *Paolo and Francesca* we witness a scene from the first volume of *The Divine Comedy* (c. 1308) by Dante Alighieri, in which Dante and Virgil meet Francesca and her lover Paolo in the second circle of hell. The second circle is reserved for the lustful, and here, wrapped in each other's arms, the couple are trapped in an eternal whirlwind, doomed to be forever swept through the air, just as they had allowed themselves to be swept away by their passions. Dante calls out to the lovers, who are briefly compelled to pause before him. When he speaks with Francesca she obliquely states a few details of her life and death for him; and a tear issues from her left eye. In this moment we are reminded that just as the body of Ophelia became a receptacle for Hamlet's torment, so Francesca's body became a vessel for Paolo's desire and in both cases the result was tragedy.

When we consider the narratives of Hamlet, Ophelia, Paolo and Francesca we may reflect on the way life has a habit of presenting us with events which can disturb our emotions. These dislocations of feeling, both good and bad, often find an external mediation when we listen to music, watch films and read stories with which we find a personal resonance. The ability we have to externalise our emotions, allows us an opportunity to examine our inner realities at a safe distance. It is this externalisation of our sensitivities which enables us to make sense of our emotions in a safe way, especially when they

threaten to overwhelm us. Amanda Ansell's paintings clearly speak to us in this context. They say that our own feelings can find visual expression in solid forms through a process of metaphorical transference and for an artist this can include the object of a painting. That painting itself can act to mediate our emotional experience.

In her work, Ansell has managed to fuse the visual languages of minimalism and realism to create a new form of painting which appears to make manifest the profoundly emotive in a way which is devoid of sentiment. In doing so she presents us with a new aesthetic which positions universal truths regarding the nature of loss and sorrow as a central component of the human condition. More specifically she offers us a meditation on the composition of transference, and how, when we stand on the threshold of change, the potential for loss weighs as large as the promise of gain.

Robert Priseman, 2014

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<sup>i</sup> From a conversation between Amanda Ansell and Robert Priseman on the 21<sup>st</sup> June 2014.