

## WE STOOD AROUND

Eddie Chambers

To encounter one of Mahali O'Hare's remarkable paintings is to enter a world in which multiple considerations are never far from our thoughts. In the first instance, perhaps, these paintings represent a compelling fusion of contrasting elements – the classical, the sculptural, the figurative, the pastoral, the autobiographical, and so on. A central and recurring motif in her paintings is the vessel, which we might view as a vase, a decorative or a utilitarian container - perhaps made of earthenware or some type of porcelain - utilised by successive civilisations from many different parts of the globe. There is, consequently, an almost tactile aspect of these paintings that transports us back through time, to far away places, even as contrasting aspects of these same paintings transport us to imagined or recreated pastoral spaces, perhaps closer to home.

Some of the vessels she depicts have decidedly small bases with much wider points in the body of the form, which might narrow to a mouth of various dimensions. Some of the vessels have distinct, elegant necks, while others are rendered as having larger openings. Some are rendered as being delicately, if not exactly precariously, balanced forms, and some are painted with looser brushstrokes, giving some paintings a distinctly non-figurative feel. Some vessels announce their presence discretely, others are much more assertive in the spaces they occupy.

The rendered vessels are a fascinating point of entry into the sorts of considerations mentioned earlier - the sculptural, the figurative, the pastoral, the autobiographical, and so on. We see about these forms the unmistakable depiction of pastoral scenes in which flora, such as woodland or forestry might dominate. Or we see mark-making that carries with it resonances of denser, entangled undergrowth. At all times though, we as viewers are made aware that the paintings contain stories, possibly even secrets, to which we might only have partial access. As much as we look, as often as we look, there are ways in which these paintings withhold as much as they reveal. This is of course a wonderful and well-developed skill on the part of the artist, in creating memorable paintings that not only hold our attention, but remain with us as particularly vivid and entangled memories.

In a number of these paintings, figures appear, as do faces, but the looser brushstrokes with which they are rendered give them a distinctly otherworldly feel, suggesting stories not fully told, memories not fully shared, or recollections only partially visually articulated. We might be inclined to read the words or letters that on occasion appear in the paintings as literal pointers to the stories being told, but ultimately, the marks are yet another intriguing element that might conceal more than they reveal. A painting such as 'Hampstead Heath' has what looks to be the word *SHEPHERDESS* rendered in an L-shaped formation, the word itself, much like other elements of Mahali O'Hare's paintings, is suggestive of distinct and particular pastoral narratives. Other paintings such as 'Boy in Field' have what appears to be the letters BHS on the shoulder of the shape onto which and into which she paints. For those of us of a certain

generation, the letters likely symbolise *British Home Stores*, a chain of shops selling all manner of clothing and household items, a ubiquitous presence in British shopping centres and precincts, from one end of the country to another, but one which has now disappeared.

Returning to considerations of the vessel-like shapes that so dramatically dominate Mahali O'Hare's paintings, we might read them as metaphors, as in, a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else. In a sense, this 'something else' might be the human form. After all, the words we use to describe the anatomy of a vase are equally employed to describe the anatomy of a figure – mouth, lip, shoulder, neck, body (or belly), and foot. Visitors to this exhibition have an important and valuable opportunity to see a wider body of work by this Bristol-based painter. These paintings (many of which have the appearance of being executed on dramatic black, or at least very dark, backgrounds) are an important and compelling reminder of what a painter can do, of what paint can do, when it's utilised with deftness, sophistication and energy, in the grand endeavour of the telling of stories.

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