

Felix like the Cat,
Culpa like a Guilty Gulp

*There's many a slip
'twixt cup and lip*



Seeing things

*Dale
McFarland*

They are like pictures of thoughts, some half formed, others on the verge of fullness. Some are hardly there and some nearly remind you of a small part of the world, of a certain type, a kind of feeling, a forgotten taste, a look, though it's nothing you could ever be definite about. Roxy Walsh's work both evokes and resists the familiar, she may play with ideas about abstraction and figuration but it's really far more complex than that. Her paintings have a particularity, a certainty even, each with its own seemingly unrelated character exuding a kind of happy self containment. We aren't told stories or enlightened, instead the artist has assembled a language and used it to articulate a very singular two-dimensional universe. In one piece a veil of pigment emerges as a grossly lolling tongue, in another one might discern the benign face of an elderly white haired gentleman or perceive pie-crust eyes imposed on what could be a yellow rubber glove serve to make it almost flesh. These often quite surreal occurrences have created a place which is as bizarre as it is mundane. It's also a decidedly mute place, dumb and somehow aloof, awkward and elegant and rather beyond description, it stirs up the

peculiar admiration one sometimes feels when confronted with the naturally and sometimes unavoidably inscrutable. Though often small in size some pieces may be the result of weeks of work – paint applied and removed, in part or in full. This evolution is quietly apparent; successive arrangements appear and disappear leaving behind faint traces of themselves and creating a slight patina. The surfaces of Walsh's paintings on gesso have an almost limpid quality, they are curiously tactile. Still, she never overstates the making of her work in such terms, never revealing anything that could be called as grand as history. These paintings are delicate without being in any way precious; they are formed out of a playful ease, difficult to pin down, nearly impossible to explain.

Sometimes there are eyes or what one might take to be eyes. Here and there small circles of colour placed precisely amid a tangle of lines, or an otherwise amorphous shape, conjure up a being; not anything which might have the potential to be real though they are sometimes crudely identifiable, a schematic mouse, a faun in the thralls of a sticky metamorphosis, a frog, or a cloaked eminence. Like bizarre



Cross My Heart
60 × 70 cm [Cat. 1]

For Mash
40×50cm [Cat. 2]



hieroglyphs these figures never become characters in their own right, they don't appear capable of thoughts or a rich internal life but neither do they stand for anything except themselves. Rather this strange cast is grown out of paint and intuition and their semico- incidental under-determination is endlessly satisfying. Painted in translucent, often pastel hues, the works may contain other shapes and forms which could bring to mind something slightly retro – the cartoons of the Eastern Bloc or Biba-esque florescences and maybe the odd baroque curlicue. But any sweet flossiness is held at bay by an intimation of things well used. Here charm is coupled with a slight grub- biness. The beings Walsh populates her paint- ings with have an often threadbare or washed out quality like toys in charity shops or a pebble from some far distant holiday given life by the addition of now dented boggle eyes. There is a highly developed strain of sentimentality at work in these paintings, it's a kind of mys- terious longing born from desire to know about or to create a world for the inanimate, teasing very particular forms of life from paint.

In a few paintings very identifiable human faces loom out of the canvas. They are vague



Bluebird, 40×50cm [Cat. 3]

and definitely other worldly, hinting at the mystical (a somehow uncomfortable word but an apt one nevertheless). In one work two ghostly faces with the pupil-less eyes of classical busts hover amid coloured spheres. Along the lower edge of the painting a miniature motif might evoke the mouth of a cave fringed with greenery – and having gone this far it's easy to start imagining the image having grown out of antique mythology. The faces with their empty eyes and gaping mouths could be masks

from a Greek chorus or wan envoys form the underworld and within the tiny cavern more orbs hang silently in the darkness. . . perhaps. In another painting a luminous head with faded pretty features smiles coyly in the direction of an egg shaped object, it could be a bulging eye or a planet, the marks on its surface suggesting capillaries or the familiar outlines of the continents. The hazy lyricism in such work is old fashioned in a way that is, for a moment, completely contemporary. These spirits are more decorative than they are portentous, evolving from the play on paint on the surface of the canvas. Still there is something in them that alludes to other types of fiction, maybe they did just happen that way, but some form of narrative can float to the surface if you wish it. In this way, it seems, such paintings come closer to some sort of illustration than most of Walsh's recent work. The tales they might accompany have never existed but they can almost be imagined.

The reappearance of certain images in Walsh's work – improbably cute animals, pallid faces, hands and even letters of the alphabet – never really function (except for a few cases) to create much of a link from one to

the next. Instead each piece retains its own distinctive and mostly separate personality. The similarities are obvious but it is curious that when seen together they communicate a collective lonesomeness which is totally captivating. Each work inhabits another plane, coming into being through different sets of circumstances, evolving according to their own discreet criteria. They are like a collection of ghosts haunting the same space, not quite aware of the others' existence, but roused by their presence.

Mickey/Midge
40×50 cm [Cat. 4]





Puck
60×70cm [Cat. 5]

Roxy's Words

*Adrian
Rifkin*

As much as it does anything, this painting also undoes something and maybe more so. How can it undo more than it does, unless that something is outside the image? It puts things together and it undoes them, and it does both of these things at once – obviously enough, and separately, but it undoes first, by putting things together and this is an undoing and is what we see first. So too with this second painting, and it's almost certainly a character of this whole series of works.

What its members have in common is both everything and very little, the delusion of an illusion, which is a certain perfection of the inauthentic relation to the image that is their manifest surface, something I have just tried to name.

This naming: an oxymoron, a cheap rhetorical turn on my part? A tiring, facile oxymoron that makes it easy to speak about these odd works? I do want to say more than that there is a contradiction here; rather that there is something contrary in the making of the piece, a contrariety that arises from its painting, from its being painted in the first place, and from the uneven memorising that flows from something that could be recognised as it is

painted (an animal head, an *E*) and something else that can't be recognised in its relation to the first. This something could be a red or a black, or a stain in the gesso ground; yellow and blue smudging into a barely relevant or accidental green, or a ragged edge of overlaid colours round the circular panel of the second, that separately revivifies the colours after their separation and overlaying and showing through in the body of the work; though at this instant also they show nothing – unless it is the memory of another, grander kind of painting that dripped and flowed to betray itself at the edge. And is the *E* something? Apart from the play with illusion of line and ground, the old eye-tricking beloved of psychologists who are infatuated with the duplicity of vision, where the black U flips in and out of the *E*, a little rococo shadow play; apart from this, which is an unimportant memory, is the *E* a thing, a thing like an *E*, for example? After all illusion is something, but not necessarily an interesting thing, more than a mere accident or conjuncture of shape and colour that enables the psychologists' 'discovery'; while here, rather, the animal head makes me forget whether it is a childhood

thing that comes back to me or a coincidence that it looks like this, something indifferent to a memory of the attachment of the marks to something else, an animal head, some rabbit ears; an arbitrary intrusion that is at once material to the matter in hand, of seeing and of wanting to see, and incidental. So there it is, these paintings bring me – force me – to a strategem of writing as these contradictions pile up into a general contradictoriness, a sense of contrariety, of writing contrarily, of making my own figures (of speech, of writing) accumulate edge to edge, palimpsestically too, so that they begin to read like what I think I want to see in Roxy's work. But is there not something austerley philosophical as well as indulgent about this? of saying that the painter thinks by being contrary and by contradicting herself, as if in my pleasure I wanted her to be someone other than her own protagonist.

How they do this, what the things are that they put together and what it is that they then undo makes for a queer (rum?) series of questions that I am trying formulate, all the while, I imagine, still doing what I have done before with Roxy's paintings; which is

to try to describe one fully and to fail to do so. I did think that this would somehow be a simpler thing to do with them, now that they have settled into a standard format, now that they are what we might call a reasonable size. Neither so small that we have to peer and pry to get a hold on them, nor so large that we have to stand back and scan them, the matter of the format seems to have fallen into the redundancy of the standard, for many of them are on identical stretchers, or they make for a comforting and regular distribution of oblongs, squares or circles. The fragmentary objects, rioting penises or random verbal phrases that once she painted, on undistinguished little pieces of board, the clutter of clutter, the ex-votos, or relics, whatever it is that they were or have now become, have fallen away before this curious respectability of her current pictorial formats. If tracking across those old ones was always difficult, making a way in an undergrowth of burgeoning distractions; if seeing them on the gallery walls led to an act of faith in their bare presence, so distracting was their mingling of signs and marks; then at least there was an enquiry for a presence, an enquiry as a substance of the work. For if

E, 16cm diameter [Cat. 6]



these seem to take the eye in a more persuasive manner, or so it seems, nothing, finally, could be less sure. Or so it seems? The pleasure is just this, that they put together and they put apart, and this too makes for a difficulty in tracking what the thing might be, other than a now, other than in the instant of seeing that what you see is not quite there. A painting that is a circle, a circle that is like this painting but part of another painting. An instance, or the instance of a recognition that fails, once more in distraction, but a new one. A collapsing geodesic form that is neither leaf nor architecture, nor the one pretending to be the other, trailing and fading, or hands that are a semblance of a gesture, as if what is left of a hand when it becomes representation, teetering on the edge of the symbolic, a leftover from having been recalled rather than seen. Roxy's paintings, then, have things that look like things, but they do not have an iconography. And all those faded ripples of a transparent flow, as if a trace of something once solid, around and under the *F* and in its surrounding colours, have a seismic quality – but in miniature, as if caused by something absent from the work, or hardly figured in it;

the washing of the gesso, the flowing of a tap, the sliding of a brush. It is important here to remember this – perhaps most obvious thing of all in painting – that the signified comes into being with image in the delusion of the referent, and that this is the bringing together and putting apart of which Roxy's work records the process.

Sometimes, I think, a storm in a teacup, sturm ohne drang. . . and therefore a higher form of bliss than the turmoils of expression. Here the drives and their appeasement find a liquid balance of pleasure on the edge of finding and of the found.

Tongue
50×60 cm [Cat. 7]





*To Be Written on the Mirror
in Whitewash*

*I live only here, between your
eyes and you,
But I live in your world. What do I do?
-Collect no interest-otherwise what
I can;
Above all I am not that staring man.*

Elizabeth Bishop, 1937

An Agent of the Letter

Sharon
Kivland

Dear Roxy,
I have been thinking about your new work since we last met. I am writing, and thinking about writing, and in starting to write – always an uncertain beginning – it seems that a title is a useful thing. I have been thinking about titles, yours – that is, those of your paintings – and mine, that is, what I might call what I am writing. A title, then, is what is given to a composition – essay or work of art. I have been imagining what I would write for several weeks now, and I am surprised to find that what I am writing has turned into a letter. As I thought about your work, and what I might write about it, I thought each word carefully, imagining it as coming out perfectly formed, complete and precise and lovely – each a *mot juste*, correct and fair. I imagined each word as followed by another, equally exact, then another, joining together into a sentence, a paragraph, a page. I would be happy at the end of it, and so would you, for there would be a careful writing that tells another reader something about your work, which he or she may be encountering for the first time. And then there would be more happiness at the comfort of these elucidating words. How-

ever, comfort – and the adequate provision of comforting strangers – does not seem possible in my thoughtful encounter – a re-encounter through thought – with your work.

I have the eight jpgs you so kindly sent me in a folder on my desktop; the folder is called ‘Roxy’. While they are neatly tucked in there, I cannot see them as they are in QuickTime. I know what they are called, and as I have seen them in your studio – and these are the images I requested – I should be able to imagine them, to re-construct from memory. The words, their titles, should allow me to form an image. If I were to open the jpg, I would see how close my recollection has brought me through a word to the image. I suppose that I have some knowledge already, and that I am merely testing that knowledge, my memory of a recent perception, in seeing the work and listening to what you had to say about it. It should be a simple matter, a click on a document, not cause for hesitation, or for an exaggerated speculation. If I were to open ‘Two Heads’, for example, what would I see?

Until I do so, I think I might see two heads. The work’s title leads me to believe something about it; it establishes a reading

before seeing the painting. It is reassuring, for as I look at the painting, it is far from comforting. I am discomforted, in fact, uneasy and unsettled. In ‘Two Heads’ there is a certain formlessness, a refusal to hold shape, and clicking down the documents, I find that also in ‘Angelismus’, ‘Bluebird’, ‘Puck’, ‘Puppy’, ‘Tongue’ – in works whose titles indicate that there is a subject, a form in which I might precisely locate meaning, interpretation, and a point of view. In short, Roxy, these are elusive, slippery, floating paintings that pretend to lend themselves to language, to an accurate framing in words, as words, but evade and resist a coherent capture. I am not excusing myself, seeking to find a justification for my failure. Rather, this leads me to think something else about them: that in thinking or writing about them, the words I might use come from another place, other than a conscious location, and that place is at work, in the work, and also in the work as their viewer (receiver?) I may have to do with them.

In writing, I am supposed to be articulate about your paintings (that is why you invited me to write about them, of course). While I want to do my work, there is something in the

work – I know a lack of distinction in whose work, what work, is creeping in – that refuses a nice exegesis, and rather, remains inaccessible, while irrupting nonetheless in expressions that seem more readily assimilated. This painting (click) shows a thing like a puppy, for instance, while this one is a bit like a tongue, and yet clearly neither is puppy or tongue – or two heads, better than one. I suppose one might say this of any painting – representation/mimesis – but these are particularly like foreign bodies, internalised yet estranged, as tropes of speech that elaborate the laws of language while playing with words, diverting them from normal or literal use. A trope comes from *tropos*: turning away from what is known of a word and how to use it, turning it – like a painting – into something else. It is a rhetorical figure, enfolding metonymy, metaphor, and synecdoche: association, comparison, parts substituted for a whole. . .

Forgive me if I am departing from clarity, like a figure of speech, like a painting (‘Cross my heart’: three fingers, a rabbit’s ears, a ring, finger nails, eyes, and none of the listed and something like all of them). It is

Io Solo
40×50cm [Cat. 8]



an elocution that turns away from the literal, the straightforward, the interpretable. Roman Jakobson defines metaphor and metonymy as the two axes of language: paradigm and syntagma, substitution and linkage. One element may take the place of another, and one element may join with another, and Sigmund Freud calls these the processes of condensation and displacement in his theory of dreams. The theory of dreams and the theory of linguistics transform through each other into a theory of the unconscious. We can read this in the work of Jacques Lacan, hearing it in his famous *dictum* that the unconscious is structured like a language; indeed, that to be structured and to be like a language is the same thing. In language, in structure, there is always a missing element, and meaning will always flow. There is always something that cannot be named in the system, a formulation of the impossible in the unconscious structured like a language. Meaning is suspended in the face of two heads, or two black eyes (or dots), some flower petals (or petal-like forms), a blue wash, a green stain, and a heavy black mask ('Io Solo'). In thinking – and in writing – about your work, I am alone, *io solo*, in the limits of representation, and

I remember that the paradigmatic relation holds *in absentia*, as the syntagmatic holds *in praesentia*. I wonder if this letter is metonymic, denoting your work to which it rarely literally refers, but with which it is joined, so closely that without your work, this letter could not exist. In that case, your works might be said to provoke unconscious formations, operating out of my control, my choice of words, choosing, in fact, my words for me.

I am still thinking of titles. My letter is to be an essay in a catalogue about your work, and if it must have a title, then I will call it this: 'An Agent of the Letter'.

Cordially, as ever,
Sharon



Puppy
16cm diameter [Cat. 9]



Best in Show
32cm diameter [Cat. 10]



Tigger
32cm diameter [Cat. 11]

*Becoming-
Adolescent
(Eight
Paragraphs
on Roxy
Walsh's
Paintings)*

*Simon
O'Sullivan*

1. *On adolescence.* Adolescence names a stage of growth, a specific period in a life course. But it is also an orientation and a very particular kind of body, in effect, a particular set of capacities to affect and be affected. What is at stake in this adolescence? A fraught time after the innocence of childhood (if such a state has ever existed) and before the onset of adulthood (read: the solidification of habit, the repression of desire), adolescence is an in-between, an interzone, a place of specifically different potentialities that will always threaten the adult world, and in turn be threatened by that world (and this adolescence will involve a certain kind of indifference, even a nonchalant resistance, to the signifying/affective assemblages of grown-up existence). This is a time of fluidity and a time of events. It is also the time of art.

2. *On authenticity.* Authenticity is an attitude and an intention. A way of being in the world and of making one's own particular way in that world. These paintings by Roxy Walsh are not ironic; there are no pastiches, no parodies, no second-order abstractions here (art theory will always be stymied by dumb paintings like

these). But this is not a simplistic 'return to painting', a retreat from modernity and from the vicissitudes of contemporary life. For these paintings *are* modern – produced in this moment and for those who dwell in this moment (they are complex objects for complex subjects). Authenticity also means inventing your own languages, saying it how you see it (after all, the languages on offer proffer only more of the same, more so-called reality that sucks dry the dreams of anything different). And thus these paintings will oscillate between figuration and abstraction, indeed, they will use anything to get their point across.

3. *Faces and landscapes.* Perhaps all painting is landscape-painting. World-creating, every artist demarcates a specific region of Being, stakes out their own private universe. Perhaps all painting is portrait-painting. Subject-constructing, every artist gives us a different diagram of subjectivity, a different model of how we might be in the world. Landscapes and Faces – but not those we habitually recognise as our own – these paintings demarcate new territories, new worlds (and call forth a new subject for these worlds). These paintings are



Moonface
122 × 152.5 cm [Cat. 12]

germinal; they invoke another space-time, one that is always present within our own but is masked, hidden, by common sense, everyday doxa and the cliché of images that surround us. Each painting then a fiction, its own particular myth-system; a specifically *different* organisation of elements to those we habitually encounter. These paintings allow something else to emerge from the landscape-face that constitutes our habitual world.

4. *The figural*. From within this world other worlds can and do emerge. Within painting this might involve the productive utilisation of chance; the odd mark, stain, shape... suddenly (perhaps after days, weeks, months)... as if from nowhere... another world emerges. This realm of the figural is impossible to predict, arriving as it does from an altogether different regime to the every-day (an underground seething world of yet-to-be-actualised virtualities). Painting *might* utilise cliché but only as a first step; ultimately it undoes the clichés and ready-made opinions that surround us. Painting is this exploration, the discovery of these unseen worlds hidden within the seen. These paintings then are controlled,



Two Heads, 40×50cm [Cat.13]

measured (they are the careful contours of worlds-in-process) but at their heart they involve this productive utilisation of chance, this confrontation with chaos (how else could the new emerge?). A balance then between accident and intention, between formlessness and form. This is the rhythm of art.

5. *Motifs (and repetition)*. Peopled by different creatures, other part-objects and stranger motifs, these paintings are inorganic life. Bunnies and puppies (but not as

we know them), fingers and tongues... seeds and foliage... eyes and tears. Motifs repeated within a painting and motifs repeated across paintings (a repetition always with difference). Looked at all at once, a shimmering web of alien life forms, flitting from painting to painting. A joke stuttered and stammered, rephrased again and again (not obsessional but playful, not neurotic, but certainly, at times, psychotic). And then, at times, windows within painting – microscopic landscapes – homing in on the detail of our own representational (read reproductive) systems. These paintings clone themselves, they hum, resonate – turn towards each other, smiling, greet one another – and then, saying their farewells, move away once more. Each painting here is caught in a relational network of, an interplay with, paintings already painted, and paintings still to come.

6. *Sense and nonsense*. Sometimes a proliferation of forms, of meanings (almost too much to read), at other times a pale sparseness, a toughness (almost nothing to see). Poetry has always had these two modes (I will break sense by giving you too much... I will break sense by

giving you too little). Poetry, here painting, is always inhuman in this sense, always at odds with the world (here, any sense emerges from, and merges with, nonsense). These paintings are indifferent to you as you see yourself reflected in the Spectacle's hall of mirrors. They operate under their own logic, obey their own rules. And what is the relation between language and paint, between word and image? A tension, a mutual interest, but ultimately an incommensurability (you go your way and I shall go mine). Any title here will be a feint, a smoke screen. Words, in this place, are not what they seem.

7. *Matter-events*. But after all these paintings – like all paintings – are just matter, nothing but matter. They are organised, intentional objects (they are made things in the world), but they go beyond any authorial control (they are cleverer, quicker than their mistress). There is an erotics of painting; of paint, of canvas, of the application of paint to canvas. These paintings evidence a desire given solidity. Fragile, they depict abstract diagrams of states of mind and body. I paint with the light of a pale autumn day. I

paint with a brush dipped in moonlight. I am mortal but my paintings are eternal. There is a ritual time of painting, a certain speed of manufacture (these paintings move fast but are painted slow), a whole genetic history that provides the platform for each painting's event. Painting is always a solidification of this human time, and always something that goes beyond this labour.

8. *Community*. These paintings by Roxy Walsh constitute a gathering, a collectivity (listen very carefully, you can hear the children laughing. . .). This is my collectivity – *you are all my children* – that I have made for my own company and now wish to share (painting is always an expanded practice in this sense). When hung together there's really quite a crowd, quite a cast of characters clamouring, albeit softly, for attention. These paintings are then a community that calls forth a community (indeed, who are these paintings for? Who are their 'missing people'?). At times this involves a melancholy wistfulness (a looking back to pasts that never were), at others it is something less full of regret and more full of promise (a look forwards towards futures yet to

come). If becoming-adolescence names a transitional body, then it is *this* body, a body on the cusp between these different times, these different states, that is being invoked here.

Bunny and Tree
40×50 cm [Cat.14]





Bubble
16cm diameter [Cat. 15]



Robin
16cm diameter [Cat. 16]



Hart
40×50cm [Cat. 17]



*And in this vision he showed me
a little thing, the size of a hazelnut,
lying in the palm of my hand, and to my
mind's eye it was as round as any ball.
I looked at it and thought, 'what can
this be?' And the answer came to me,
'it is everything that is made.'
I wondered how it could last, for
it was so small I thought it might
suddenly disappear.*

Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love
(short text, Circa 1373)

Roxy Walsh: Felix Culpa, 2006–2007

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Bastart, Bratislava

Dorothy W. and C. Lawson Reed, Jr. Gallery,
University of Cincinnati

Seeing Things, Dale McFarland

Roxy's Words, Adrian Rifkin

An Agent of the Letter, Sharon Kivland

Becoming-Adolescent, Simon O'Sullivan

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Cover

Detail of *Two Heads*, 40x50 cm [Cat.13]