

Lydia Blakeley: Leisure















Frank Stella or Robyn Denny. Several larger paintings bring to mind the British Pop artist, Pauline Boty (1938-1966). This is an influence Blakeley readily acknowledges, and a particularly important one. Eclipsed in art historical accounts, exhibitions and media coverage by her male counterparts Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton and others, Boty was the most conceptually and politically sophisticated of the British Pop artists. Her gender in the male-dominated world of 'swinging-sixties' Pop, her willingness to venture beyond art making into theatre, TV and film acting, and her tragically early death at only 28, all contributed to her relative but undeserved obscurity.

In her feminist perspective, her self-assured sexuality and the cultural and political critique inherent in her work, Boty represents a uniquely powerful voice in post-war British art and deserves to be seen historically in a wider international context. Many of her paintings have a similar collage aesthetic to that which Blakeley utilises, pre-dating but also pre-figuring a relationship with the digital screen. The two artists also share, for similar reasons, a preference for depicting women as the main protagonists in their paintings. Blakeley acknowledges her debt



Pauline Boty, *The Only Blonde in the World*, 1963. Oil paint on canvas. Tate Collection © Tate, London 2017. Copyright The Estate of Pauline Boty

visually by sometimes including motifs from Boty's work as compositional devices in her own.

A considerable strength of Blakeley's practice is the tension in the relationship it sets up between the aspirational and leisured lifestyles it depicts and the labour involved in its material production and technical accomplishment. It sets wistful aspirations for unobtainable ideals against a recognition of the minimalist pretence that conceals life's inherent messiness and disappointments. This dialectic is reinforced by another between control and abandon, both in the lifestyles the paintings depict and the technical precision involved in realising materially their joyfully diverse juxtapositions.

Blakeley exploits painting's ability to arrest and reanimate images and flatten their timeframe. Her juxtaposed images, as I have suggested already, mirror the experience of multiple windows simultaneously open on a computer screen, but they function very differently because of their relative stasis, the compositional fixity she has determined. This results in work that has much to say about how we view and consume images and objects now, reframing them not by harking back nostalgically to the historically specific sources of the images in her paintings, but by refashioning our ways of looking at them in the present, always with an eye to the future.

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PROFESSOR DEREK HORTON

For nearly two centuries, contrary to earlier generations' fears, painting as an art form has remained unthreatened by photography, but more recently painters have had to confront newer digital technologies for image making. The ways in which recent painting has made both sense and use of these technologies have not only ensured painting's survival but revitalised it for our times.

Today, artists and viewers alike share an experience of digital imagery as something familiar, available, and omnipresent, with our ways of looking, thinking and understanding conditioned by everyday interactions with screen interfaces. Lydia Blakeley's recent paintings contribute to contemporary discourse around this cultural experience in a very current way whilst simultaneously being suffused with nostalgia for other ways of imagining and representing the world.

The flat, rectilinear picture plane, on which most painting still relies, relates to other flat surfaces in the material world—walls, floors, tabletops, noticeboards, blackboards—surfaces on which images and objects



Photo: Lydia Blakeley, *Refine*, 2016. Oil on linen, 40x50cm. Photo Ciaran Davies

can be placed, data entered or information transferred, whether coherently ordered or haphazardly scattered. Increasingly, painting's rectilinear flatness also relates to the computer screen in all its forms (laptops, tablets, smartphones, flatscreen TVs) as the most significant mediators of our perception and consumption of information and imagery.

Paintings and digital screens echo each other's form and function—the canvas and the flatscreen share some essential similarities in their visual affect despite equally essential differences in their means of production. This is emphasised in Blakeley's juxtaposed images from popular culture, architecture and design of the 1950s and 60s layered against surfaces and motifs drawn from artworks of the same period, resonating with the ways we experience viewing multiple images on a 21st century computer screen as much as they do with the earlier tradition of collage so frequently employed in 20th century art.

Blakeley's traditional use of paint on a canvas support not only complicates her re-presentation of images that have first been mediated through digital technology, but also, importantly, establishes a critical distance between her paintings and their source



Lydia Blakeley, *For Export*, 2017. Oil on linen, 145x195cm. Photo Ciaran Davies

material. Painting's ability to arrest an image in a stasis absent from the constantly shifting screen allows for modes of contemplation that enhance critical appreciation of images and their meanings.

Blakeley's paintings hold suggestions about the fragmented and contingent nature of experience and desire in the ways we shape our identity through the stream of images we constantly upload and download. Although reflecting the aspirations and desires of a different age they have a contemporary relevance. Nostalgic her imagery may be, but not self-indulgently so, rather as a commentary on the nature of cultural desire, expressed through a wistfulness for the dreams and aspirations of an age that seemed to offer a future now largely unrealised.

The glamour of international travel, the promise of ever increasing leisure in a machine age, the sleek desirability of 1950's automobile design, the luxurious simplicity of modernist furniture or minimalist domestic architecture—all are richly present in Blakeley's paintings. But while they reflect current fashions for mid-century modernist design and nostalgia for 50s cool or swinging-60s chic, they also act as a chilling reminder of current realities. The aspirations they represented in their time are reflected back to us in



Lydia Blakeley, *Transmission*, 2017. Oil on linen, 90x152cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

ours as, for example, package holidays on budget airlines, cheap fashion brands manufactured by third-world slave labour, pollution-generated global climate crises and the proliferation of right-wing nationalist politics in reaction to modernist internationalism. These failures in our own dark times are, arguably, in themselves an explanation for our current superficial nostalgia for a time when aspirations were still seen to be realisable.

With their haunting glimpses of a future that never quite happened, Blakeley's paintings manage to hold in balance positive and negative aspects of nostalgia—holding onto desires for a better future set against past generations' idealised but unrealised aspirations. Allusions to earlier painting are significant elements in her strategies for achieving this. Icons of mid-20th century modern art, whether formalist abstraction or Pop, infiltrate the paintings to both echo the idealism and underline the emptiness of their advertising imagery culled from the same period's aspirational lifestyle magazines.

In a small painting, the kitsch bone china cat 'Lucky', made by Royal Doulton between 1932 and 1975, is set against a background generically reminiscent of mid-century abstract paintings by Barnett Newman,



Lydia Blakeley, *Year of the Cat*, 2017. Oil on linen, 40cmx50cm. Photo Alex Vann