

To stand before a painting is, of course, to exist in close proximity to it. Nevertheless, this embodied witnessing – this “being with-ness” – is something that almost always fades from our conscious awareness the moment our eyes meet with the work. Most paintings’ first order of business is to persuade us to forget, if not quite ourselves, then certainly the physicality (and indeed the temporality) of the ocular encounter. Unlike, say, a mirror, a canvas does not customarily acknowledge our gaze.

With their abundance of visual incident – a initially disorienting yet ultimately unified field of near-immaterial abstract marks and solidly rendered, sporadically repeated figurative motifs – Rannva Kunoy’s paintings are very far from limpid pools in which we glimpse nothing but our own reflection. Still, they call constant attention to the fact that we are looking at them, and to the fact that looking is a contingent, even fugitive process. This is perhaps demonstrated most clearly in the way these works’ colours, which appear stable in photographic reproduction, are revealed to be radically mutable when the unmediated eye travels across the canvas. Over a few moments looking, vinous reds change into sylvan greens, dull mints into radiant blues, each dynamic hue interacting with the painting’s surface, marks and motifs to produce an almost holographic effect. These colour shifts – the result of the artist’s use of light-responsive, duo-tone crystal pigment, which is often employed to coat the paneling of luxury cars – seem to register us as viewers, to track the specific speed and trajectory of our visual approach. Kunoy’s paintings, however, point to much more than the corporeal, time-stamped nature of perception.

Looking at these works, seeing reds transform into greens, greens into reds, we are witnesses to (and also, in a sense, the authors of) contradictory and perhaps irreconcilable chromatic realities. The writer F. Scott Fitzgerald famously observed that holding “two opposed ideas in mind at the same time” indicates a “first-rate intelligence”. It is also a text book definition of cognitive dissonance. We might wonder whether the double nature of her pigment is perhaps one reason Kunoy gave a recent series of paintings the politically telling title *Post Truth* (2020).

What leads us to place our trust in an image? One common condition is that we understand how it was made. Kunoy prefers not to speak publicly about the precise details of her painterly process, and any attempts to decode it from the near-frictionless surfaces of her work will only get us so far. What these canvases seem to demand is an openness to the experiences they prompt (retinal, intellectual, emotional), a surrender

to the unknown and the perhaps unknowable. Examining the thin, texture-less marks – too intangible to call gestures – that seem to float suspended in Kunoy’s pigments, we realise there’s no Rosetta Stone that might help us to decipher their meaning. Maybe meaning, at least in any conventional sense of the word, is beside the point, and what they communicate is atmosphere, feeling-tone, their own ineffability.

And yet, Kunoy does provide us with what a first glance appear to be interpretative footholds. On an extrinsic level, there are the titles she has given her new series of paintings: *Yellow* (which seems to be a simple chromatic allusion); *Mano a Mano* (a Spanish phrase that translates literally as “hand to hand”, used to indicate a competition or fight between two adversaries); *Five Eyes* (which points to multiple perspectives, and also to a joint global surveillance operation by the US, UK, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand governments) and the aforementioned *Post Truth*. Then there are the stenciled, largely silhouetted images, texts and numbers that appear, and reappear, in the paintings themselves: a neo-classical female portrait bust; a fabric head covering pierced with two narrow eye holes, like a ghost’s shroud or executioner’s hood; a face that seems, with its poked-out tongue, to belong to the Hindu goddess Kali; what might be the word “Venus”, in the script of a well-known brand of women’s razor; and grids of numbers between 20 and 29 that perhaps allude to the next few years, or the next few centuries.

What to make of this welter of imagery, with its suggestions of love and death, time and change, (female) divinity and a kind of phantom Pop? Perhaps it’s our troubled times, but there’s something that feels vaguely apocalyptic about these paintings – looking at them, we might get to thinking of the eerie shadows of incinerated bodies and objects produced by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. But if Kunoy’s canvases suggest sudden explosions, or (conversely) palimpsests of gradually accreted and almost accidental visual information, then we should note how meticulously controlled they are, something that’s underscored by the painted “frame” that runs around the edge of the picture plane.

Back, for a moment, to the idea of “being with-ness”. In a contest for human attention between the abstract mark and the legible image or symbol, there is only ever one winner. As Kunoy is well aware, our eyes are ineluctably drawn to the elements of her paintings – the faces, the letters, the numbers – for which we have a pre-existing mental model, and she plays on our hierarchical habits of seeing to guide, even

discipline, our ocular experience. And yet, these are canvases that draw us in not to divulge a concrete truth, but to open us up to misty ambiguities, to forms and ideas that lay just beyond our grasp, to – in the end – our own complex, contradictory selves.