

Stains imply the accidental. Cherry juice, pen ink, blood, sweat. Streaks of white from washing powder. Splashes hardened and crusted by lime in the water. Oil greasing under bottles, fattening on the counter. Dust gathering in the stick. Marks from living, from plants and plastics, a synthesis of synthetics and space shared, outward and inward pooling together, seeping beneath the fibres of canvas.

Ragna Bley harnesses the accidental, adding to it control, intention, attention. The seeping, the staining, becomes the point – spillages between chance and language, between text and texture. Bley often starts with words, not paint, collecting words she has read and overheard, and plays with associations between them to tease out openings. Words, unmoored from literal meaning, sail towards new worlds. Language can be another form of framing, of controlling how something might be read, but like paint it slips, refuses to be held, shoots forth unexpectedly.

Like Bley, I start with a list of words from our conversation, and from her poem for this show. I want to echo them, create encounters that ripple through both of our written encircling. What we are approaching is a way of looking rather than reading, a way of feeling the timbre, the pitch of the paint. From her poem, the line 'the tinted light of the tent canvas' conjures an image that comes alive through alliteration and sound and the idea that canvas can exhibit its own light. Colour can be of it, rather than done to it. This is true of Bley's canvases – what they are is how they are made. A tint, thinned, is poured on the floor, dragged with a spatula, a brush, a hand. Parts are removed, filled anew, new tints bleed into old tints. She makes small sketches first to select colours, to imagine how they might intermingle. The mixing is then meticulous and rigorous, enabling her to paint while it will still pool, erase, behave. Diluting without losing vividity of colour. Forms appear, disclosed and yet dissolving. Intangible tinges. A twinge of recognition. And then, as it dries, a quickening.

Bley's paintings transfigure: surface becomes image, and these images swirl in and out of form. And your images map on to them, too – a loose silhouette of a palm tree might conjure coconut milk advertising, desert island discs, honeymoons, home. In *Peripheral Bruise*, the palm is a portal towards a tangerine and violet sunset; in *Green-arm Hide*, it seems to ripple underwater like seaweed, overlaid with milky sun cream smeared on skin. Bley's visions – both saturated and illusive, effusive and diffusing – betray the tropical as trope. This place is imagined. Palm is an undertone, underhand. The palm of your hand. To palm off: to shed, to refuse.

Another line from Bley's poem: 'black hairs like hyphens'. Image becomes punctuation as shapes emerge from the pooling, but they are not singular like words themselves, but transitions. In *Tender Tender*, traces of these negotiations freckle the canvas, red fruit as ellipses. Move down the painting from left to right and these blots become a latch: an expectant suspense, a pause for effect. Dot dot dot, the finite made infinite.

Bley's paintings seem to move. They are lambent, they run lightly over. In *Pole*, below is matter, magma – geologies of form, striated furrows of colour. I think of the words iridescent, opalescent. Arborescent, resembling a tree. *-Escent* implies a tendency towards, a gentle boiling or growing, changing state in the ellipses between sight and thought, between image and language.

I return to the poem, to 'peripheral bruising', intimating a flourishing of pigment from within and from the edges. In *La Belle Epoque*, viridian colour blooms, pickles. Viridian, from the Latin *viridis*, meaning green, but actually intimating bluish-green. Language can miss what the eye cannot. My eye forms these washes of colour into a beast, a wolf, shadowy branches cast and blotted across its belly. The painting suggests an unknowing, a foreboding, the forest as fable and fairytale that lures characters and loses them. Bley's paintings approach nature, but as fiction, as poetry, as leaky shapes that appear to compost as they are composed. Arborescent forms do not stand still in landscapes but shiver and buffet, spin like pinwheels. Ghosts echo them, convene with them, as marbled blots of gauze that haunt the canvas from within, from under.

Bley leaves large parts of her paintings raw – neither empty nor unfinished, but free, unknown. The magic surprise when an image presents itself, spilled and blotted from within and without by Bley. Her images quiver in movement between states, as *-escent* images, tending towards but never quite settling. Image acts as both stained and imagined, accidental and alchemical, made anew by the viewer each time. Image as slaked, slackened, made looser and held together by language. Image as slippage, as slipstream, unmoored from words. Image as punctuation. Image as ellipses.

Phoebe Cripps, July 2022