

# Not Waving or Drowning



Maria Lassnig, *You or Me* 2005, oil on canvas, courtesy the artist © 2008 Maria Lassnig

*Peter McCarthy looks at the work of four women artists at either end of the career divide*

College of Art is so rarely used as a title these days, it's in danger of extinction, but when they were originally conceived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, colleges would often be sited near a significant gallery or museum. Unlike the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Royal College of Art did not share the title of its companion institution, the Victoria & Albert Museum, even though they were in the same building. The college had in any case, the un-regal title of the Central Training School of Art when it became part of the equally un-regal, South Kensington Museum in 1857. The thinking behind this policy of integration was clear enough. It was assumed, not unreasonably, that the cultural aura of all those iconic artefacts and aesthetic wonders would find its way down the corridor linking the two institutions and benignly influence the students at their work. In the past, the strategy might have occasionally gone to plan but in the post-pop and now post-digital eras, the assumption behind this type of thinking seems more like wishful thinking than wise planning. So few tears were shed when the significant but rarely exploited link between the two institutions was broken in 1992, when the RCA's Fine Art course joined the design courses at the far end of Exhibition Road.

There were and are, though, other compensations for being where they are now, and it's not just the comparatively fresh air of Kensington Gardens. It's something more tangible that's hidden there among the greenery in summer but visible from the RCA's windows in winter. It is, of course the Serpentine Gallery. It doesn't have the rich collection of the V&A or the space of Tate Modern, but there can be times when this doesn't seem to matter. And this summer offered one such occasion - an exhibition of exceptional work by the 89 year old Austrian artist, Maria Lassnig. The exhibition, her first public showing in Britain, would not have appealed to everyone at the RCA. Her work is rooted in a tradition of expressive handling that belongs to Modernism's distant past - an aesthetic framework that might seem too remote for the present generation of students. But it impressed at least three of the RCA's postgraduate image-makers, Cristina Cojanu, Ruth Murray and Leonora Hamill, whose Finals exhibition coincided with the Serpentine show. Their work seemed to chime with that of the older artist, even though their combined ages and therefore, one might assume, their combined experience, doesn't yet equal that of her current life-span.

The obvious connection is their interest in the female figure, represented singly in the work of all three artists and occasionally in small groups or huddles in Murray's work. But what this also reflects is a deeper connection, a belief in the potential for a female agenda that in the case of the two painters, Murray and Cojanu, flies in the face of the dire warnings about the death of painting as a viable medium of expression that were being put about before they were even born and have been repeated ad nauseam ever since. They

are all persuasively articulate about the rationale behind their different approaches to practice. Cristina Cojanu talks simply but disarmingly about painting as the habit of her "trained and agitated fingers" that keep what she calls her addiction to paint on track and drives it towards "its transformative contingency" by moving away from "...a static visual towards a performative tactile pictorial field." This she explores through "bold colours and an indolent opulence of marks" - a luscious phrase that the paintings themselves fully justify.

Ruth Murray sees adolescence as "...an intense force that is both fascinating and entertaining...an uneasy mix of confidence and vulnerability" that she tries to play out in her paintings. She hopes "...to seduce the viewer with simple youth and insidious beauty, but also leave a residue of bewilderment by hinting at darker, more alien passions that dwell in adolescence." Leonora Hamill uses a 16mm camera, mounted overhead, to turn a body of water into a virtual picture plane in which a naked figure struggles to stay afloat, not waving or drowning despite the clever references to Stevie Smith, but engaging in what she emphatically describes as "...an exploration of female emotional identity through gesture and a reminder of how restricted we are in conveying real situations and inner states of mind."

I'll come back to their work later except to say that there is an element of self-portraiture in all of them, both direct and indirect, which is also the case with Maria Lassnig whose most famous self-portrait, painted in 2005, *You or Me (Du Oder Ich)*, accosted visitors at the entrance to the Serpentine show. Accost is the wrong word but it's as near as I can get to describing the shock this image is able to deliver when seen in the flesh. Flesh, though, is the right word. Her body is not just exposed, it is in imminent danger of annihilation. But so too, the painting unmistakably says, are you, the spectator. There is as much of a threat in her two eyes as there is in the two guns she holds. Their graphic simplicity lends urgency to the challenge to our assumptions about the ageing female body that her angry, wide-eyed stare represents. She means business and to prove it she shows us everything she's got. Suddenly being there, being a spectator, being dressed even, seems all wrong.

The uncompromising frankness of the image and its forceful message is typical of Lassnig. Her work is generated from within. She won't use photographs. She has said in an interview with Jorg Heiser, (Frieze, 103, 2006), that she only wants to paint what cannot be captured by the camera. It's an acknowledgement of the potential for expression that the gradual build-up of an image might allow or even encourage. But perversely, the action being described in *You or Me* seems tailor-made for the camera. The theatricality of the gesture, the

awkward tilt of the body that extends even down to her boldly exposed vulva, is the sort of thing a photograph can effortlessly convey. But the speed of the camera and its superficiality disconcerts her. Francis Bacon's dependence on photography is the one thing she doesn't like about him. She considers him to be otherwise a genius. It's the word she uses in the interview and its use reveals something important about her.

She is a rare survivor from a generation of artists who didn't shy away from terminology that is now largely confined to the art historical dustbin. It comes as a shock to realise that the Nazis were occupying Austria when she was at college. The status that their list of 'degenerate artists' enjoyed in the rest of the world, beyond the confines of Fascism, and even their very existence, were unknown to her. It says a lot for her that, already in her thirties, she was able to respond emphatically when she finally encountered the Expressionists and Surrealists after the war. These were cathartic times. The destruction in mainland Europe was even more extreme than in Britain because of the ravages and horrors of carpet bombing and the aftermath of invasion. The Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, where she studied, was itself badly damaged. It is not difficult to understand why in the wake of these events,



Maria Lassnig, *Hospital* 2005, oil on canvas, 150 x 200cm, private collection, courtesy the artist, © 2008 Maria Lassnig

the emotional extremes of Surrealism and Expressionism should have struck a chord. The thrust, style, pace and energy of her subsequent work, her use of heightened colours, grotesque forms and the bittersweet flavour of her observations on humanity are all in tune with the characteristics of Expressionism.

They also avoid some of the formal indulgencies of the second wave of Expressionists, the so-called Neo-Expressionists of the 1980s. Her strategy is less rhetorical and more direct than, for example, that of Georg Baselitz. Her approach to figuration is not moderated by the influence of Abstract Expressionism in the way his can be. There is no strategic formula like his reversed orientation and no diversionary, self-referential picture-building. The paint is thinly applied, made to do its job energetically but in as practicable a way as possible. Experience has taught her a great deal about paint-handling. Her directness is simple but it's never shallow. She manages to achieve economy without compromising the energy of her approach.

*Hospital (Krankenhaus)*, 2005, has all the hallmarks of a neo-expressionist work - the rapid brushwork, the abbreviated, almost casual style of drawing, but it probably has twice the impact. The clout of the painting is in the treatment of its subject-matter. Lassnig depicts one diapered body as undignifiably exposed even though the visual grammar of the upper half of the painting might lead us to expect otherwise. It's an achingly sad but funny, ugly but beautiful image whose beauty is not in its appearance but in its raw, graphic energy. Her snoring figures are perched on the edge of death like gargoyles around a church tower. But the impact of the painting is in the stark,



Maria Lassnig, *Self-Portrait with Cooking Pot*, 2004, courtesy the artist, © 2008 Maria Lassnig,

existential bleakness of the work itself rather than its narrative details. Lassnig has the authority, gained through decades of experience, to produce such an

emotionally charged image without it seeming mawkish or sentimental.

After the rigours of *Hospital*, the painting, *Self-portrait with Cooking Pot*, (*Selbstportrat mit Kochtopf*), 1995, might come across as mere black humour. But we shouldn't be misled by the air of clownish self-mockery. The cooking pot reads like a helmet and the cloth a blindfold that together evoke images of the blind leading the blind, like the gassed 'gun fodder' of Flanders - resonances that are only moderated by the humour of the work itself. We could also make something of the paint-marks that dribble from a slash of scarlet across her throat. But perhaps that would be an inference too far, because the meaning of her figurative work is usually more emphatically stated. The full-length image of a paedophile in *Don Juan d'Austria*, 2003 is typically brutal. It prompts different treatment than it would have done if it had portrayed him as, say, the boss of some business concern, (which he might well be.) This naked sex addict has a huge belly, a small prick and an adolescent girl wrapped around his middle. It's a shocking image that is painted with shocking directness, and was painted incidentally long before Josef Fritzl's abused victims emerged, blinking from their cellar.

Lassnig was told she couldn't paint by one typically tactless and, as things have turned out, foolish American dealer. But we've been here before. It's another example of work being judged according to the wrong criteria. Her stark, rudimentary style is right for the ideas she explores and might well seem unacceptably crude without them. Her work is also physically determined. Much is made in the show's catalogue of her lying on the floor next to the model she might be working from or painting with her eyes closed in order, one assumes, to experience the act of painting more intensely and thereby produce more authentic results.

There were echoes of this in Cristina Cojanu's work across the road at the RCA. It chimes with her desire to take the canvas by surprise by coming at it from the 'wrong' direction, in her case as "a transfer of a bodily trace." Of the three younger artists, she is the only one who was familiar with Lassnig's work before it arrived at the Serpentine. But Cojanu's strategies are more indirect than Lassnig's and her meanings more heavily encoded. She would, of course, have been subject in her formative years to different influences than the older artist, even though she also studied for her first degree in Vienna. Lassnig's formative influences came late, if you remember, from the Expressionists and Surrealists - she even met Andre Breton in Paris. The Modernist period of the time might not have seemed as bewildering to her then as ours might seem to us now. The goalposts would have shifted as one movement succeeded another, but at least there would have been just one dominant style or approach to be taken into account at any one time by artists with avant-garde ambitions, or should that be, pretensions. There were bandwagons galore but

there were also individuals - Pollock, Johns, Stella, and the like - who were capable of riding the groundswell of collective energy surrounding their approach. In the current melting pot there is no such succession of clearly defined movements representing a zeitgeist. Film, photography and installation may be enjoying a revival right now, but it should be remembered that it is just that, a revival, or more accurately, the proliferation and digitisation of ways of making art that were well advanced as artforms even in the 1970s.

As with any contemporary postgraduate student with an interest in painting, Cojanu's influences will be more scattered than they might have been in modernist times, and also less hierarchical. So the stylistic mix in the work shown here is more diverse. There are echoes of early Peter Doig in her colouration and her way of orchestrating her imagery. But there is also, I can't help thinking, a correspondence with Hockney's exploration of his sexuality in his RCA years and Kitaj's forays into culture. It is significant that the early styles of Hockney, Kitaj, and indeed Doig, developed because of their personal interest in eclectic mixtures of methods, ideas, sources, life-styles and influences, and not through any allegiance to a dominant movement. All three were acting as individuals, out of step with their times but independent enough to redefine their practice in accordance with personal interests. Now that being out of step seems to be a necessary condition of practice, and



Cristina Cojanu, *Dusty Rose That Grew from Clumsy Roots Around Your Heart*, 2008,

celebrity more of a goal than integrity, their independence seems less remarkable. But in the case of Hockney in particular, it came across at the time as youthful, radical and refreshing.

So Cojanu's paintings, *Dusty Rose That Grew From Clumsy Routes Around Your Heart*, 2008, and *Mal-Hatun*, 2008, might not break new ground but they are strikingly good – full of invention and with a mystery at their centre that's hard to fathom. Their shallow space lends itself to the graphic flattening of form that she seems to favour. There's scarcely a hint of modelling even in the most clearly defined areas where the paintings come into focus and the central figure emerges. This is brought about by the use of emphatically drawn lines and an improvised printing technique where boards and bits of rug do the sort of job that screens and presses would normally do. The tamping of the canvas with these rough tools reinforces the graphic feel of the work by packing families of accidental marks into specific areas where their function becomes descriptive. It's a more teasing route to intensity, an open, improvisatory method with no place for the traditional clarities of representational modelling. She is "...interested in retaining a tension between the immediacy of expression and the perfection and polishing of surfaces" and is "...deliberately manhandling paintings and then again handling them quite tenderly, transforming memories of childhood from narrative structures into visual structures." Her figures come across as troubled fashion-victims with a penchant for boots, only truly real within her memory and our imaginations.



Cristina Cojanu, *Mal-Hatun*, 2008, oil on canvas, 240x250 cm, collection, the artist, © 2008 Cristina Cojanu

This is the other side of the coin to Lassnig's approach where the reality of her figures is more baldly stated. Lassnig's figures are presented as relatively realistic beings that are modelled in paint and are either benignly or maliciously active. In some of the paintings I have concentrated on, their presence is made absolute by the absence of marks in any other part of the painting. A loop of green might sometimes appear around a figure but it will invariably end in mid-stroke, leaving the rest of the canvas bare. Cojanu, in contrast, does not model her forms or isolate them from their backgrounds, she obeys, unconsciously perhaps, a convention of late modernist painting that Lassnig has always ignored - the distribution of marks through shallow space to create pictorial unity. It's a nod in the direction of the holistic approach that eventually led to the tyranny of flatness. In Cojanu's hard-won images it is used for healthier purposes, for dramatic emphasis and the establishment of context, the meaning of which has to be guessed at. Like many painters before her, Cojanu, does not so much establish her figures, as encourage them to emerge from a complex matrix of marks.



Ruth Murray, *Sur le Fil*, 2008, courtesy Parallel Media Group © 2008

in which enigmas and mysteries remain as part of the magic. There are similar references in Ruth Murray's work to things going on behind the scenes that the image itself might really only hint at. The clues are there in her choice of ingredients but colour plays an important role too. In terms of drawing, the photorealist conventions are rarely challenged but the colours sometimes fly off at tangents, like stropy teenagers trying it on. Adolescence is in fact her area of interest. "By using confrontational, unspoiled women," she hopes to "...seduce the viewer with simple youth and insidious beauty and leave a residue of bewilderment by hinting at darker, more sinister, more alien passions that dwell in adolescence." The painting, *Sur le Fil*, 2008, is a case in point. The camera angle enlarges a girl's head, already distorted by a pig-mask slung behind that has "...obvious connotations of the common attributes of vain adolescents, of greed and selfishness." It's an extremely successful image, clustered with details that reinforce the mask's incongruity. It is ironic that the overt use of photography should produce a sense of unease that differs from the challenges



Leonora Hamill, *I was much too far out all my life*, 2008, production still, 16mm film, transferred digitally, 5mn 50s, © 2008 Leonora Hamill

of Lassnig's work, where, in spite of her opposition to photography, the meaning is more often stated as a known fact than an irresolvable enigma. There are stronger echoes in Murray's work of the dramatic set-ups that Paula Rego often works from, but nothing as extreme or angry as her abortion series where the girls are represented as the victims of repressive laws and traditions. Murray's subjects are in transition rather than extremis. She treats them as fellow travellers – "I feel empathy with my subjects, but as I drift in flux between mourning innocence and aspiring for womanhood, my perspective is becoming more removed. I sometimes notice fleeting moments of seemingly unearthly qualities in them, a curious magical power. I enjoy infusing the familiar with eeriness, sometimes using domestic spaces or nostalgic triggers associated with an idealised, utopian childhood state."

For her RCA installation, *I was much too far out all my*

*life*, 2008, Leonora Hamill filmed the actress, Verity Hewlett, in extreme circumstances that might seem to have more in common with religious notions of redemption, spiritual ecstasy and romantic ideas of death, than the confusions and longings that Murray's adolescent characters seem to be experiencing. But her work does incorporate elements of a childhood memory, of being taken to see her mother's favourite painting, Millais' *Ophelia*, 1852. She had already made references to the image in an earlier work after she had come across Tom Hunter's photograph, *The Way Home*, 2000, from his series, *Life and Death in Hackney*, in which the components of Millais' masterpiece are faithfully transcribed to a murky East End ditch. Hamill's stretch of water is that same unhealthy colour that is often found in stagnant urban water. The high angle of the camera forces us to experience its grimy viscosity head-on, with few redeeming features to communicate the avowed idea of a

redemptive state. The naked body is therefore the sole vehicle for such an association.

It is a strikingly simple but ambitious project that has the actress turning in the water with an ambivalent action that fluctuates dangerously between immersion and submersion. It reflects the ambiguities at the heart of the title, the penultimate line of Stevie Smith's poem, *Not Waving But Drowning*. The overhead camera-angle turns the projected image into a giant picture plane and the naked, isolated figure into a compelling image of exposed, struggling womanhood. The saturation of an undefined, nondescript stretch of water and the continuous, almost languid movements of the performer suspends the action in a state of quasi-perpetual motion that "might trigger suggestions of the purification and cleansing effect of water" or "...the womb-like state one can return to in water. And of course with water as a source of danger, maybe even death."

It is the most lyrical and possibly the most abstract of the works we have considered. It is certainly the most generalized in terms of its parameters and its effect. It has something in common with Lassnig's image, *3 Ways of*

*Being*, 2004, where she represents her naked self three times over in a similarly undefined space but with an air of self-mockery that's taken to comic lengths by the addition of a devil's tale. I wouldn't pretend to a definitive reading of the specifics of each figure but that's true of everything here. Not one of the images we have looked at is easily resolved in terms of its meaning. The general intentions of the artists are clear enough but their strategy often leaves their protagonists in a deliberately ambiguous state that gives them their edge and depth. Their references might be drawn from different sources but their content derives from the irresolvable nature of the questions that each work throws up. The only exception is Lassnig's *You or Me*. Or so you would think. It doesn't come clearer than a pointing gun, it seems, but at the painting's heart there lurks another and potentially more difficult dilemma that might only be resolved by the answer to yet another question – what happens when the stand-off ends? We will of course never know.

Peter McCarthy



Maria Lassnig, *3 ways of being (3 Arten zu Sein)* 2004, Oil on canvas 126 x 205 cm, Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Zürich, London, © 2008