THERE THEY ARE LOOKING RIGHT AT YOU

There they are looking right at you, or casting over your shoulder. Sometimes their attention snags, catching on an invisible elsewhere, deep in thought or ill at ease. You might not know it but 'The Gift of Nearness' is teeming with famous (usually historical) figures. You'll find: surrealist painter Eileen Agar hung alongside New Zealand born writer Katherine Mansfield; Guadeloupean dancer, model and muse Adrienne Fidelin alongside Northern English playwright Shelagh Delaney; gallerists like Peggy Guggenheim and Helen Sutherland alongside photographer Lee Miller. Men are there too: the eagle-eyed might spot Morrissey, Alberto Giacometti, Man Ray, Bryan Ferry, Marlon Brando, Dylan Thomas. One point of intersection for this miscellany of musicians, gallerists, dancers, writers and artists is Europe during the twentieth century. Another is the South West of England where some of the figures travelled or worked. But the most significant point of contact is Janet Sainsbury herself, whose own self-portraits are irreverently nestled in there too.

Sainsbury is an avid reader of biographies. Her studio walls, tables and floors are scattered with printouts of photographs of writers, artists, musicians and other famous personalities that she has scanned from books or scoured from the internet. She is fascinated by how such personas exert influence, and how they inhabit our internal consciousness because of how they are written about, discussed by our peers, or taught to us at school and university. Working from her black and white printouts she paints each figure over and over again. Each go is an attempt to pierce through the historical reception – mythologising, silencing, neglect (depending on their race, gender or social class) – to arrive at something that feels closer to the feeling of a body of flesh and breath, doubt and vanity, mischief and confidence. She gets to the point where she is on first name terms with her subjects: *Shelagh*, *Rita*, *Edna*, as some of her works are titled. Sainsbury is drawn to women writers, makers and thinkers, especially those who have in some way been mistreated, misunderstood or partially forgotten by the history books. But her attachment to them goes beyond that of a revisionist project; very often there is some other association, a resonance that chimes with Sainsbury's own experiences as a woman and artist living in the South West.

The female portraits that make up 'The Gift of Nearness' have a fascinating, often ambiguous quality: Delaney looks witheringly at you in *Lean on Shelagh*, quizzically in *Shelagh* and with an air that might denote boredom or suppressed amusement in *Terrible and Fierce*. Mansfield, is poised and self-assured in *Delicate Joy*, more combative or inquiring in *Sensational Life*, thoughtful and subdued in *The Gift of Nearness*. Sainsbury's own self-portraits – a body of work that she has rarely before shown publicly – run along a similar spectrum: assertive in *Ruler of my Heart*, uncertain in *Winter Break Up*, nervous in *Deep End*. That is to say they are human: multifaceted, paradoxical, complicated. Not one thing or the other but a jumble of contradictions. And why shouldn't they be?

There is a fundamental respect and admiration for her subjects at the heart of her portraits of women, but the position of men in her work is more ambiguous. Her take on the latter tends toward the equivocal, sometimes her criticism of them more overt. Here are the likes of Morrissey, Picasso and Man Ray, whose work Sainsbury has held in high regard at various points in her life, sometimes even adored. But her relationship to their oeuvre has, over the years been soured by revelations about their politics and personal lives (and mistreatment of women in particular). The question that Sainsbury tussles with is how to reconcile the personal politics and moral compass of creative figures with her aesthetic or technical appreciation of their work? As a result, Sainsbury's male portraits scowl, look haughty, or brooding, or faintly ridiculous (in *Veneer* a well-known male singer is decked out in particularly skimpy shorts paired with white jacket, chest hair firmly displayed as he looks at you doe-eyed). Not wanting things to become two dimensional or caricatured, she is at pains to ensure that her treatment of men is nuanced and yet her frustration with the mistreatment of

women throughout history is often barely disguised. She looks to Adrienne Fidelin – model, dancer, muse to Picasso and partner of Man Ray – whose image is ubiquitous in the avant-garde work of French modernists and yet who until very recently was almost entirely absent in historical accounts of the period. In Sainsbury's hands, however, Fidelin takes centre stage. In *I Promise you a Miracle* she appears luminous and besuited, hands held before her in the manner of a politician looking composed and thoughtful. To her left, Man Ray appears above a pillowy blue duvet glowering and frankly predatory.

Sainsbury's approach to the physical making of her images exemplifies her consideration of the cult of creative makers. Rough and impressionistic, her paintings are built up of thin layers of colour. Often outlines or broad strokes approximations of a bust, a hand, a hair style suffice. Her drawings in watercolour, acrylic and inks are worked quickly and unflinchingly; they are sparky, unhindered by the fear of misstepping. A few choice lines identify a nose, a jawline, the collar of a shirt, a brow, outlined in (more often than not) an unevenly loaded brush. In *Delicate Joy* she catches the slope of a shoulder, some facial features and a sketchy head of unfinished blue hair. Smudges and washes sometimes indicate areas of cast shadow or the underpainting of another idea that never quite got going or just… smudges and washes. Outlines often merge with surrounding areas of watery pigment making borders fuzzy, lines porous, sometimes releasing seaweed-like tentacles, that cast around, making a run for it as the wet pigments dry at different speeds. Sometimes Sainsbury allows these painterly incidences to go to an extreme. In *Bleeding Heart*, featuring Dylan Thomas, the poet's head of distinct red hair explodes beyond its contours in a mass of rusty tributaries. Similarly, the black of his eyes ruptures like mascara streaming down his cheeks in a gesture that smacks as exaggeratedly emotive for comic effect. Such painterly entrails are not always so conspicuous but versions of them are scattered throughout, a gentle reminder of her subjects' wayward quirks.

Her paintings in oil, slightly larger than her drawings, tend to the more measured and hesitant, marked by multiple decisions that have been made and unmade along the way. The surface of *Northern Soul*, for example, has been worried away by Sainsbury's interjections – rubbing, brushing, removing, layering, scraping, painting, peeling, wiping, scratching – so that the resultant image appears worn out as it is returned to again and again. This fluctuation between building up and removing paint means that the image itself is caught in a state of becoming. Colours collide: one layer nudges its way to the forefront, another is knocked back, another overpainted, another still revealed. Surprising combinations surface: the underpainting of a lurid green radiates around a dreamy lilac; a lemon-yellow wash butts up against an ice-blue and peach and fluorescent orange. In their merging, colour can feel mottled and bruised as in *Deep End* or like a whispered smear – translucent and delicate – in *Sweetly Sings*. Either way they bear the hallmarks of thought and sometimes indecision, of second guessing: is it too much or too little, too polite or too garish, too simple or too overworked?

'The Gift of Nearness' is an exercise in reading closely and looking again. It is a call not to take things and people at face value, to question what we think we know of the figures that we've been taught to admire. It does so with not a trace of didacticism. Here we witness Sainsbury quietly working things out as she goes along. We sense her feelings towards her subjects oscillate; they (and she) are inconstant and conflicting. She loves and is repelled, reveres and resents, emulates and rejects. If these portraits were sentences, they would end in never-ending ellipses, not for dramatic effect but because they weren't quite sure how to round up to a conclusion. Free from the certainty of a fixed position, Sainsbury's likenesses are protean: never captured but granted permission to elude. This is a feminism that isn't sure of itself, that is subtly unruly, allusive, and alive. These are portraits that can never be fully known, and she knows it.

Lizzie Lloyd 2024