



Published on the occasion of the exhibition: *Light the lamp rarely, let the shadow come* by Emma Tod at IMT Gallery, London.

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Cover image: Emma Tod, *Incanto* (2022), oil on Belgian linen, 25 x 20 cm, unique

Other images as ordered in the text:

Emma Tod, *Sensa* (2023), oil on Belgian linen, 30 x 25 cm, unique

Emma Tod, *Caprio* (2023), oil on walnut cradled wooden panel, 28 x 24 cm, unique

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do not hold firm when looking at Tod's work. Perhaps this floating time scale is another side effect of not being able to fully believe in descendancy. For many cultures in the global south, this is the norm, but it is a deeply destabilising, fresh awareness in the West. We carry on as if it isn't too late. We know no other way to be in time. What is this image asking of us? To slow down, to let change happen – to allow decomposition and restoration – the way mould puffs into dust, then nothing, when you touch it.



'How in the Ruins of Our Dreams', Cherry Smyth

'Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
Should startle most –
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.'

Emily Dickinson (1)

In *On Freedom*, Maggie Nelson examines what freedom can possibly mean in relation to the terrifying loss of futurity that irreversible global warning has delivered. Invoking Donna Haraway's dilemma of whether to 'succumb to despair or to hope', Nelson argues that we can occupy a middle, less binary place, to attempt to negotiate the new and unforeseen material and psychological constraints on our lives.

The profound and subtle paintings by Emma Tod appear to navigate living and thinking on a precarious brink, both the consciousness of mortality itself, as well as imagining the earth before humans, and after us. There's a tender eeriness to their indeterminate presence, as they hover in a half-light of burnt umber and worn moss green, with blurred forms emerging or receding from view. In one painting, what looks a hollow bone of murky pink is suspended in a field of quiet orange. A shape that could be a wilted pansy spreads like an afterbirth towards the bottom of the canvas. There is a quiet hum. Is it dusk, or post-dusk – this is the light we are left with. It seems as though the light is failing to rise or fall. Tender. How do I know this? Am I seduced? The smear of presences occur in a kind of layered light event that keeps clarity just out of reach, a happening we cannot yet make sense of. There's the sense of a chronology that has or will have or had consequences, but can we read it? The tenses

In another canvas, there is the green murmur of lush, underwater summer light, slipping into hazier silt-light, with a fringe of golden dapple making a ladder for the eye out of the top of the image. Here you begin to gather how Tod layers the colour through optical colour mixing, using transparent glazes one over the other, so that you can see through as well as look at the hues. As the green seeps into rust, you pick up the aura of the painting – an aura of moving through water as we move through time, hearing movement, the synaesthetic sound of enclosing green. How do you know it's water you are in? We know the feel of entering and leaving it – the splash and ripple, or the peeling off out of it, but being inside water is hard to describe. It has an amniotic, pre-verbal feel to it. Is death like this? Tod is working towards finding a haptic form for the cognitive dissonance of living in a 'planetary hospice', as Nelson terms it, through pushing the materiality of the image until you can barely read it, but are familiar with its substance, weight and volume. By constantly erasing and building the image, Tod wants to recall the earth, and the ground of landscape painting itself, and then revoke it, showing how climate catastrophe has irrevocably altered both.



A mad orange fireball throttles towards us out of the green shade of another painting. It spins its ragged edges out of the smoothed surface with the sticky impasto blast of rage or panic traversing a still mind. But stay looking longer and it pulls you into its dark red core, like a split gem that invites you to gaze into the earth's crust. As Sean Borrodale puts it so forbiddingly:

'Geology is dreaming in the earth mined up./I feel the shapes of it/in the voice struggling in angles and distance./I feel the voice in unsurfaced volumes./The colours do not dare to shine/but are broken into/so they bleed red light cut from the molten./The north melts.' (2)

We are reaching the future more quickly than we imagined. It is not the magic wonder we foresaw, of ease, comfort, faster and cleaner travel, a world of post-sickness and harmonious tolerance and justice. Something interferes with our dreams like a crusty edge of sickly orange advancing into a blameless yellow expanse.

Tod talks of her process as akin to photographic development: she waits for an image to occur, to make nothing something, while still letting its nothingness stand. You look into a steamed up mirror and see an approximate self – what gives it shadow and meaning? What is the action behind the action? We notice a glimmer being lost in fog. A grey apology. An apology for what? Being. Being provisional. Can we remove our traces starting with what we have seen? She explains that she makes 'little changes through marks' and 'wonders can I change one bit of it without changing the whole? No. It keeps rebounding through all these different dimensions. Uncertainty is the key.'

Tod's paintings hinge on just-aboutness: just-about legible shapes; just-about states of mind that swing between the supremacy humanism granted, with its hierarchy over plants, animals and minerals, and the implacable consciousness of what that has wrought. Some paintings suggest evidence, a residue of something that bothers us coming to light, but is not quite there yet, the way beads of grit accrue in an oyster or sunlight soils the hems of a blank page in a closed book. Sometimes a marine intelligence seems to feel its way through a blue-green underworld, overworld. Are we deep down or far out? Its pale feelers are palpable. In others, we are in and yet outside the sky as if looking from a plane at a great distance that is beyond us, through technology or fear, and we chase the air.

- (1) Dickinson, Emily, from 'One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted', *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Faber: London, 1970, p.333
- (2) Borrodale, Sean, from 'Air as a Mineral Disturbed', in *Out of Time: Poetry from the Climate Emergency*, ed. Kate Simpson, Valley Press, 2021