

Sharon Thomas: the making of a painter
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Over the course of the next pages we will follow the career of one young painter, Sharon Thomas, whose work is committed to the exploration of still un-charted territories such as class, gender, identity and faith in contemporary society: a quest which, on occasion, is not without humour. In reconstructing the enigmatic and winding path this career has taken, that over the course of a decade, has led from Cheshire in England to Glasgow in Scotland and onto New York City and Rome, before returning to Glasgow where she now lives, we will in this essay, encounter Thomas' own energetic accounts of the events that have influenced her work and, explore the main issues that animate it.

The work of Sharon Thomas produced over the past half decade has certainly taken a visually plural approach, where often familiar, stylistically divergent sources such as Renaissance figure drawing, British nineteenth-century landscape painting, surrealism and conceptualism are combined to articulate issues apparent in contemporary life. It is these qualities of intuitive flexibility and stylistic sophistication that render her work vital and exciting – each style she appropriates is a bearer of independent meaning (rooted in its own history), that when juxtaposed with another, suggests a further new meaning: in this way she is able to create images that generate multiple levels of significance to comment on the existing world we inhabit. To us as viewers all these possible meanings may not be immediately visible, but on further viewing what on the surface may appear candid, may reveal darker undercurrents and what may at first appear serious may actually contain humour or human tenderness, or perhaps even anger. In effect through the appropriation of multiple stylistic languages Thomas is able to comment on the ever-shifting hall of mirrors, the product of centuries of evolution, that is our contemporary western society. This achievement is food for serious thought.

Her work, now in its early maturity, is beginning to reveal a distinctive pictorial idiom: with preferred sources of appropriated styles established to elaborate her conceptual, interior dialogue. To penetrate as fully as we can, the multi-layered meanings of this narrative, it will be helpful to look at the genesis of Thomas' work, to explore her initial creative stimuli and identify some of the sources that these preoccupations stem from.

Among the earliest works that Thomas made in Glasgow in 1999 (aged 20) are two large-scale 'academies' of the female nude drawn in charcoal on paper, measuring approximately 100 cm x 150 cm. These early *Body Portraits* already reveal considerable technical and compositional sophistication as well as introducing the predominant subject of Thomas' work over the next several years: the female figure [fig.1].

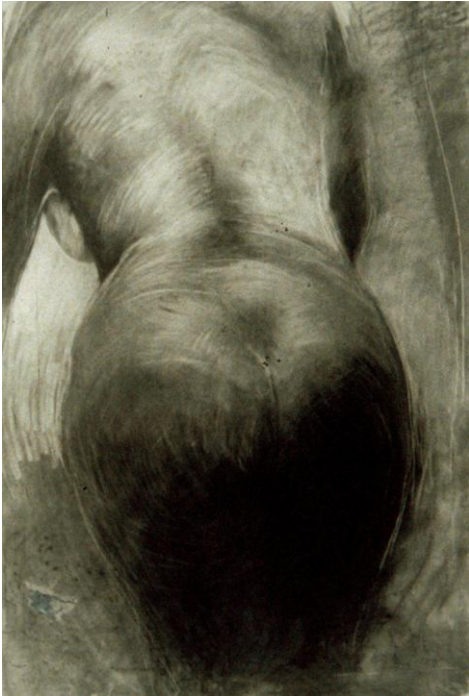


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Compositionally these drawings owe a significant debt to the British painter Jenny Saville whose early works represent large scale female nudes, viewed from acute angles (also predominant in Thomas' drawings) but fractured by serpentine contour lines, mapping the surface of the women's represented bodies like a landscape [fig.2]. While this notion of mapping the body is not literally taken up by Thomas, it perhaps served a catalytic effect for her subsequent body of works: the *Snatch* series of 2000.¹ These small-scale works (of about 40 cm x 40 cm) painted in oil on board abandon the figure as a whole to focus in on the partially dressed crotch and rear of the figure, therefore drawing the viewer's attention to the intimate regions of the female body. In these works Thomas' departure from Saville's pictorial style is total and her choice to veil her subjects contrasts sharply with the aggressive full title of her paintings: *Snatch* or *The Sun Shines Out of Mine* [figs.3, 4].



Fig.3



Fig 4.

This series inaugurates a specific interest in Thomas' work: her compositions are cropped, intimate close-ups of the female figure intent on suggesting but revealing nothing to the viewer, who is forced into the position of voyeur. In this way Thomas comments on a significant aspect of gender politics: women are all too often only valued for their physical attributes – by keeping these veiled in her paintings, she alludes to the potential power this can harness for women, suggesting that society needs to go beyond such a limited valuation of women as mere physical subjects. Thomas' *Snatch* series may then be viewed as a polemical reaction to works such as Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (1866) or those by John Currin that focus on women as ignorant reproductive instruments of the species [figs. 4, 23].

In the period separating Thomas' first and second series of early works she made her first journey to New York City, where she would later live for four years. This first brief visit to the then economic capital of the world in 1999, proved a significant catalyst to the development of her work as a potential instrument for provoking debate, first discernible in the *Snatch* paintings. In her own words Thomas describes one significant episode in Glasgow prior to her departure:

'Moyna Flannigan, my tutor was very helpful with my work. One day after having a rant with my studio mate about the film *The Godfather* I came into my studio to find an entire conversation from the movie written in thick marker pen across the whole wall of my studio executed by the self same studio mate! Bear in mind that I was about to have a studio critique! At this sight Moyna said to me, pointing at the wall, that my conversations, my demeanour and pretty much personality were not talking in my work, which at that time was talking about sexuality but in a rather muted way. And she was right. It was then I started to focus on not only what my opinion was but exactly how I was to get that across in my work to make an impact on the viewer. Basically: 'Look who's talking.'

The *Snatch* paintings are the first evidence of this change in direction towards the creation of eloquent images engaged in the hard task of expressing specific opinions visually. Around this time several other significant external influences were also coming into play: Thomas was looking at the works of Lisa Yuskavage and she had travelled to New York [fig.8].

'Yuskavage was one the biggest influences in my art's direction. It was seeing her work in the Saatchi collection in London that inspired me to get to New York City. I visited the New York Whitney Biennale in 2000 where she had two large paintings on show that blew me away. My tutor Moyna was amused that I liked her as it turned out that she studied at Yale with her along with John Currin and – in fact they were all good friends!'

For Thomas New York was energising: it helped focus her ideas on the means of expression available to her and the city asserted itself as the ideal environment to pursue her objectives: 'I came back from that trip to the U.S with a renewed vigour to live in New York – where the work that I wanted to make and who I related to lived. I was not remotely interested in what was happening in UK. The YBA's were yesterday's news and their concerns were not mine.'²

While in New York one event of particular importance had also occurred to Thomas: 'I'm not sure if I told you the story of meeting Lisa Yuskavage at an art opening where there was a sauna of naked men? She prompted me to join her flashing her breasts at them to see what reaction we would get... it took a moment but then I worked out who she was! So without another thought we both bore our breasts to the men on display – who wisely just ignored us!'

For Thomas this 'flash' episode, 'getting semi-naked chest-to-chest' with one of her 'painting idols' was an 'inspirational moment': it 'wasn't about sensationalism – it was about solidarity' because it was 'refreshing to see a woman address female sexuality with jocularly and daring; glorying in the comedic value of the naked body, which without minimising respect and celebration of it, was opportunity to enjoy its hilarity.'

Yuskavage's example of honest frankness, clearly revealed a path to Thomas: 'I realised when I met her that Yuskavage practiced what she preached – her work is very much in line with her personality and there is wonderful honesty in it. There are no holds barred and she is not reluctant at all to be direct and says things how they are – be they right or wrong.' In short, this brief moment of meeting had catalysed for Thomas the realisation of how she could achieve a new transparency in her work: the results precipitated a direct eloquence in Thomas' work, that continues to inform and energise her work into the present.

With the collection of *Snatch* paintings, seemingly made as an immediate reaction to her meeting with Yuskavage in New York, Thomas began to introduce issues of gender

politics into her work, while it was not until a later series that she was to enter into a more direct dialogue with the works of her 'painting idol'. Before this was to occur Thomas produced a further group of six small works, the *Girls Next Door Series* (30cm x 40 cm, oil on board, 2001) that continue the prevailing theme introduced in *Snatch* but also reflect the influence of John Currin; however, above all, because of their derivation from re-appropriated photographic material, they have their conceptual roots in the work of Gerhard Richter [figs. 5, 6].



Fig. 5



Fig 6.

Richter's photo realistic works: particularly the *Eight Student Nurses* series of 1966 in which he portrayed eight trainee nurses murdered by the American serial killer Richard Speck, are an obvious influence, where black and white frontal head and shoulder compositions are transformed from basic photographic representations into heroine figures.³ This series, and others conceptually related to it (such as the series *48 Portraits* exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1972 or the 15 paintings that constitute the *18 Oktober 1977* series of 1988, concerning the capture and arrest of Baader-Meinhof members in 1977) are significant, because they call into question the notion of truth in photographic reality.⁴ Richter's subversion of this so-called objective photographic 'evidence' calls into question the role of

photography as a truthful record while reaffirming painting's offer of a possible vision of reality. In terms of Thomas' relationship with Richter's work she elaborates:

'Richter was a crucial influence in comprehending the important differences between photography and painting as art forms, in terms of the political and party political aspects of making art where these two forms of recording reality intersect. Richter prompted me to understand how your own personal history shapes your practice and in doing so enriches and informs it.

'The beauty of Richter's work is his determination and passion to keep making and deal with subjects that aren't easy to discuss, such as the series of terrorist paintings that he made. His subversive blurring techniques level the works that he appropriates and in doing so [he] taunts and frustrates the viewer that demands to be informed with fact.

This attitude of anti-conformism and cheekiness is understandable and dually admirable when considering the very complicated political times he lived in, when Germany was still a divided country. Richter's work is about making and breaking rules, that we as humans are constantly set on establishing, and in doing so expresses the fallibility and inconsistency of the human mind.'

Thomas' *Girls Next Door Series* develop a direct dialogue with this approach – the subjects are taken from pornographic magazines and by only representing their head and shoulders, Thomas limits the viewer's vision and forces us to consider the features of the subject. As a result the viewer recognises these people as individuals as opposed to objects: as a female artist Thomas makes this point forcefully. However, despite this, these images are not sympathetic to their subjects, on the contrary they are revealed to be gaudy, grotesque performer-figures, while also instantly recognisable as average people off the street: housewives, office workers, students – *girls next door*. As such these images become a powerful critique of the society from which the subjects have emerged. While these paintings are conceptually dependent on Richter's pioneering reinterpretation of the photographic image, their grotesque element is derived from Currin's crude work of the mid-1990s. About the making of these paintings Thomas recalls that:

'porn was the primary source for this group of works focusing on *Girls Next Door* and *Readers' Wives* magazine. Up to this point my work had been occupied with the idea of fragmentation of the female form, my own at the time, in order to control or frustrate the gaze of the viewer. It was a tutor of mine that kept bringing up the subject of porn at group critiques in reference to my work. I had come across porn before in my dad's wardrobe and strangely abandoned in a cardboard box in a field behind my house! But I had never legitimately looked at it to understand it. Therefore with £10 in my pocket I resolved to buy as much porn as I could carry, which in fact only got me three magazines from the corner shop in the West End of Glasgow. It was a bizarre yet valuable experience, for certainly in order to criticize a system of thought you have to see and understand it first. What I consequently saw simultaneously fascinated and revolted me

as it was clear how controlling the male gaze is in defining what 'sexy and desirable' is in a woman. This exposure made me grow up in that it provided me an insight into what a huge chunk of the species was looking at (considering the magnitude of the porn market) and legitimised me as witness to make work about subjects not normally discussed in polite, open society.'

With the *Girls Next Door Series* Thomas challenges the viewer to examine the subjects she critiques in these paintings: the sitter and the social environment from which she is evolved. Unambiguous in her forthright and direct representation of her subjects as gaudy performers, pandering to a specific audience, Thomas also draws our attention to a mute, vacant quality in the sitter's features that reveals a sub-text of helplessness beneath the brash posturing of the subject in the surface image. The result is that where the sitters from the original photographic sources presented themselves as empowered, in the paintings, under Thomas' painterly analysis, they are revealed as quite the opposite: we are, metaphorically speaking, shown the cracks in the sitter's make up, and by extension those in the society from which they emerge.

In a second series of paintings dated to 2001 called *Sitting, Looking* Thomas was to explore different themes: having experimented with fragmenting the body and controlling the viewers gaze in her earlier works, in this series she returns to the un-fractured female figure to explore another aspect of her experience [fig.7]. In these mostly monochromatic paintings (size variable, from 40cm x 30cm to 200cm x 200cm) a woman is shown seated on a chair or on the ground within a perspectively defined space. Formally the spatial setting derives from similarly austere works by Luc Tuymans, while the monochromatic palette and dream-like atmospheres of the lighting appear to be a specific homage to Yuskavage's works of the mid-1990s [fig. 8].⁵



Fig.7



Fig.8

In 2001, a month before the catastrophic events of 9/11, Thomas moved to New York City where she enrolled at the New York Academy of Art, remaining there until 2005 – this residency was to prove vital to the future course of her work. The city was not only an exhilarating place to live and meet people, it provided the opportunity to look back at Europe and its tradition of art afresh, it raised important questions of national identity and it allowed Thomas to distil the American dream from its reality: in short New York was an art education in itself.

‘It wasn't really until I was in New York’ Thomas says, ‘that I began to realise whom Yuskavage and Currin were influenced by! They had been trained at Yale and had had Poussin and Fragonard thrown at them! It was hilarious that all my big influences were actually European but it took an American to re-think them for me to see them freshly and out of context.’

Clearly the distance provided by seeing British and European art through the filter of her American ‘painting idols’, along with her first-hand experience of living in America and witnessing how ‘Europe is conceptualised’, provided Thomas with a critical realisation that she could return to the ‘old-master’ sources of her European heritage and appropriate them as her own influences. Thomas’ objectives in doing so however were profoundly different. From her viewing post in the USA Thomas could now look at Gainsborough and Constable (now two of her most important influences) and see how they became emblematic of ‘British culture’ – by being able to see these artists works from this context, they became potent carriers of meaning – symbols of identity and the values up-held by such identity. Thomas was certainly helped in this interpretive process by being in New York. From England she had seen the finely crafted mythical surface polish giving America and the ‘Big Apple’ their aura, and when she arrived in the city she experienced this first hand: ‘NYC was freedom. It is sexy, hard working, fast and dog-eat-dog city. I wanted energy, power and a bit of a fight. And that is certainly what I got and more. As a city it can't really be defined. I met some of my best friends there – painters, musicians and composers.’ Undoubtedly New York City was an invigorating place to be, yet the longer she stayed there the clearer it became apparent that the myth and the reality of the city were two quite different things: ‘... In the standard that America flies everyone is equal’ Thomas has remarked ‘In reality though America is very different and the longer I was there the more depressed I got...the terrorist attacks on NYC that I witnessed amplified this gradual realisation and whilst I saw great beauty in NYC I also witnessed great sadness and darkness that I will never shake off’. Just as being in America allowed her to see beyond its surface myth, being there so long also allowed her to see how Britain and Europe are ‘mythologized’ across the Atlantic. A significant element in much of Thomas’ subsequent work would from then on be concerned with making and controlling the idea of identity, in particular that of national identity.

Thomas says that her ‘work really began its walk’ in New York – the analogy is apt as she has described the series of narrative works she began there, and continues to add to in

the present, as being like steps along a 'path': 'The path is truth, conviction, life with its various destinations and destinies – it is a means to have a breath of fresh air and remember we are still alive and human – it is a real and metaphysical space.' In New York she found the means to capture this 'real and metaphysical space' on canvas – her interests in contemporary American painting led her back to the European 'old master' tradition and particularly to the early landscapes of Gainsborough and those of Constable whose influence in her landscapes is evident both in its own right and as a codified national ideal passed down through a painterly tradition [fig.10]. Here she was also able to reevaluate William Blake's paintings, prints and poetry that have also all played an influential role in her development, both as a figure painter and as someone concerned to see the push and pull of how the people of a nation construct their identity (or how it is constructed for them).

In paintings like *New Jerusalem* of 2004 (oil on canvas, 101.6cm x 152.4cm) these influences are all identifiable: the glowering sky cut by a 'prophetic' rainbow (which becomes a familiar motif in Thomas' work) is inspired by Constable; the pattern of fields and hedges of her landscapes are like birds-eye views of the pretty English scenery we see in the backgrounds of Gainsborough's early portraits, while the title of this painting is a direct reference to Blake's poem *Jerusalem* [fig.10].⁶ While these references appeal to the idea of a British Arcadia, the combination of the dark cloud covered sky, the diminutive scale of the landscape, and the figure of a modern woman on a cliff-edge in the foreground- symbols that re-occur in the contemporary *Regina Res Publica* (oil on canvas, 167cm x 224.8cm - the protagonist also turning away from the landscape stretched out at her feet, suggest that despite the rain-bow, all is not well [fig. 12]. It is perhaps in the 'grey area' between the ideals evoked in Thomas' painting and the changing reality inferred, that we find much to think about. Here the traditional image of British self identity inherited from the imperial age and exemplified by 'green and pleasant pastures' is given a mirror – the reality is that the landscape is changing and the ideals of the people of Britain with it.⁷

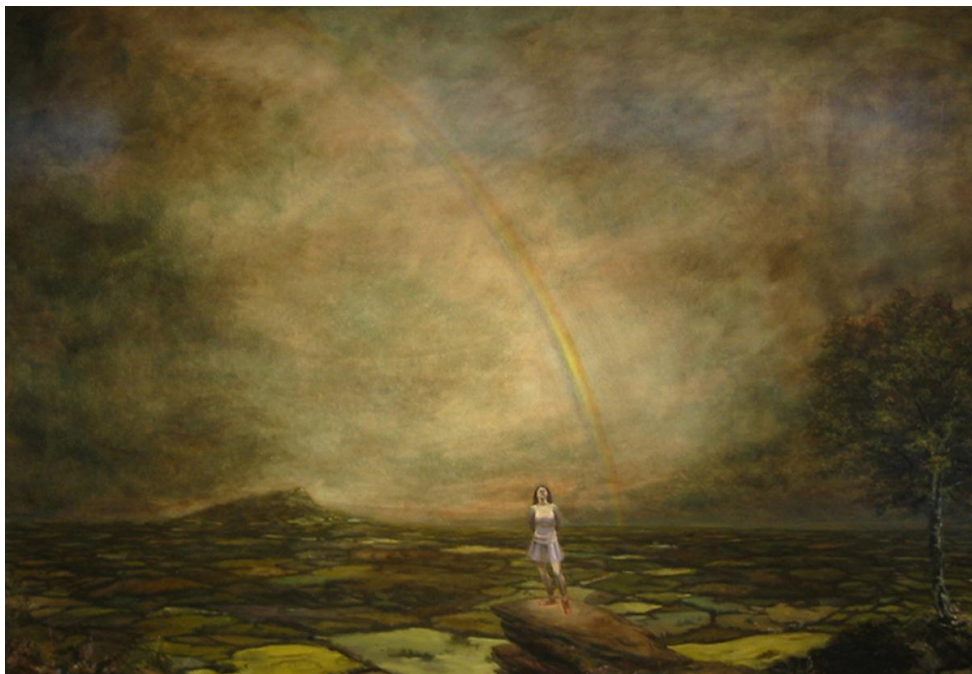


Fig.10



Fig.12

In one of the last works made by Thomas in New York, *Kate's Progress* (oil on canvas, 89cm x 127 cm, 2005) we are brought into direct contact with a landscape that is depicted according to the pictorial conventions established by Constable following his youthful study of Ruisdale [figs.9, 13].



Fig. 9



Fig.13

Tall silver birch trees to the left and right frame the bend of a country track, beyond which opens out a view across large open fields divided by hedges; the extensive cloud filled sky is again divided by rainbows – we are in the folds of an idyllic British landscape. The typical picturesque landscape, combined with the rich layering of glazes from which it is composed, for a moment create the illusion that we are looking at an ‘old master’ painting. This effect is dispelled by the oddly surreal presence of the protagonist, *Kate*, a young woman dressed only in a red shift riding a horse bareback – she might be a figure out of a fairy tale or dream such is the fragile nature of her presence – yet she appears at ease in her landscape. The prevailing serenity of this scene is only disturbed when we look closer: hiding behind the hedge dividing the wooded path from the fields in the middle ground, are three men spying on the girl, their threatening presence marks the first appearance of the sinister ‘crow men’ (from the crow beaked masks they wear) in Thomas’ work. Based on a real, exclusively male ritual-festival that takes place annually in Thomas’ mother’s hometown, these figures will subsequently continue to reoccur in her work as a threatening element. Here they suggest dangers narrowly missed by the painting’s protagonist, while also inferring that there will be more along her path.



Fig.14

In the long charcoal drawing *Apotropaic* (80cm x 300cm approx., 2005) made after Thomas' move from New York to Rome, the protagonist a young woman, now on foot and off the path visible to the left, encounters a group of 'crow men' [fig.16]. At the centre of the image she is surprised and surprises one of them: his kneeling pose, Thomas has asserted, is she derived from an Annunciation.⁸ To the right of this group, another three men unaware of the protagonist's presence, appear to be asleep: again the compositional model for these figures results from Thomas's studies in Italy [fig. 14].⁹ Finally, the peacock in the centre right foreground is an ancient emblem of renewal that suggests hope and a continuation of the narrative, as does the light streaming through the cloud cover beyond.

The drawing, which appears to be a continuation of the narrative begun in *Kate's Progress*, was first exhibited as part of an installation with leaves on the ground in front of the picture accompanied by the sound of low-tech recordings of traditional and patriotic songs. A traditional form of British identity was evoked both by the songs, drawn landscape and leaves included in the installation – yet the figures animating the drawing do not sit easily with these elements and a sinister atmosphere of magic-realism akin to that of writer Angela Carter's dark fairytales comes into play. In her installation *Nights at Fairy Hill* (mixed media, 2006) also made and exhibited in Rome, Thomas developed the theme of menacing atmospheres further by creating a series of stacked card boxes to contain small back-lit sculptures of threatening 'crow men' lurking behind trees, thereby emphasising the unsettling element of her subject [fig. 15].



Fig. 15

When Thomas introduced her protagonist in *Kate's Progress*, it was not incidental that she was shown mounted – traditionally in art, the equestrian figure is reserved for the representation of men – usually rulers or figures of power. With this painting Thomas subtly evokes a gender based role reversal to confer power on her female protagonist thereby bringing into play one of the principal themes of her work: a call for the revaluation of the role of women in images as in everyday life.

The male figures encountered in Thomas' narratives, such as *Apotropaic*, also have their origin in a painting begun in New York (but completed in Rome): *Ridicule (is nothing to be scared of)* (38cm x 35 cm, 2005) [fig. 16]. Here the protagonist, a man dressed in the traditional out-fit of a Morris Dancer appears a somewhat surreal apparition in a landscape similar to that of *Kate's Progress* only here there is no path for the figure to follow, instead he appears to glide across a ploughed field like an apparition.¹⁰ Unlike the 'crow men' there is nothing sinister about this figure, instead, in his red, white and blue garb he represents the modern descendent of an ancient, eccentric British tradition that has its roots in pre-Christian nature-worship rites. Here both the figure of the Morris dancer and the landscape Thomas represents him in, serve to suggest a received tradition of national identity and ritual. This is subtly subverted however by the title of the painting which is significantly drawn from a lyric of the camp early nineteen-eighties song *Prince Charming* by 'New Romantic' band *Adam and the Ants*: like the song and its accompanying video – the figure in Thomas' painting also evokes the provocative, carnivalesque element of men in 'fancy-dress' – a theme that has its roots in works such as Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy* who is represented dressed in clothes of the previous century [fig.17].



Fig 16.



Fig.17

In the large painting *It's all about the fun of the chase, Bob* (oil on canvas, 200 cm x 305 cm, 2006) three men appear to have been stripped of their fancy-dress and chased away – two of them are shown bent double and out of breath, a third still running, turns to look over his shoulder at the extensive 'idyllic' landscape, littered with tiny stripy marquees, that he has left behind him [fig. 18]. Surrounded by flowers on the ledge of high ground where we find them, these three disrobed and threatened men are at once strange, funny and sad, and quite dissonant with the landscape they find themselves in. Furthermore, here the metaphorical value of the 'English landscape' established in Thomas' paintings is itself undermined by the disturbing presence of an organic, imposing pyramid shaped mountain at the centre of the canvas that suggests an upheaval of the land: this visually destabilising motif also reoccurs in *Apotropaic* and *Fruits of the Forest*. The prevailing quality of innocent humour that invests the traditional rituals evoked by *Ridicule (is nothing to be scared of)* is replaced in *Its all about the fun of the chase, Bob* by an almost poignantly sardonic atmosphere, which like the painting's protagonists may be traced back to the compositions of William Blake [fig.19].



Fig 18.



Fig.19



Fig. 20

In the monumentally scaled painting *Fruits of the Forest* (oil on canvas, 186cm x 142 cm, 2006) the protagonist is a pregnant man: his double gender, his crown of flowers, the over ripe fruit surrounding him and piled in his lap, the heavily scented blousy flowers past their best, blooming around him, are all suggestive of un-harnessed fecundity, of excess and the corruptible nature of things [fig. 20]. Here the figure has all but lost his identity: the traditional elements of national and ritual identity seen in *Ridicule* are absent and now even the figure's gender is called into question.

No women are present in these paintings, however having been made by a woman, Thomas herself, we are placed in her shoes as viewers. In these scenes we are witness to a subtle transition in gender roles: if the man in *Ridicule* is a figure in traditional fancy dress 'having some fun', for the men in *It's all about the fun of the chase*, *Bob* the fun is over and they have become bare objects to be looked at; while the 'man' in *Fruits of the Forest* has begun to take on the body and burdens of womanhood along with her gender's anonymity.

In the *Coffee Morning Series* (A4 size, 2007-2008) Thomas explored further the themes of identity, ritual and gender introduced in the paintings we have just discussed [figs. 21, 22]. She has pointed out that with this series the analysis of the concept of motherhood is developed: these works were made with coffee dregs and pigment during the first year of her motherhood, whilst her daughter was sleeping each afternoon. Unable to use the chemicals she normally used in her studio work, due to her pregnancy and breast-feeding schedule, her daily ritual of coffee drinking became the literal medium for her work. This daily ceremony with its links to the clichéd ritual of ladies' coffee mornings everywhere became a 'painterly retort' to the 'crass' paintings by John Currin of ladies stuffing turkeys (*Thanksgiving*, 2003) and sipping elevenses (*Stamford After-Brunch*, 2000) in which female social activities are criticized [fig. 23]. Thomas has said that these 'coffee breaks' and their by-products became a vehicle to toy with gender play and analyse the current state of her own situation as artist and creator of a new life. While women are not the principal subjects in this body of work, with men remaining the dominant focus, the fusion of the conceptual and physical properties of this work: how it was made and what it represents, determine it an actual analyses of the female condition with all of its gender baggage. Thomas has also remarked that at this time the work of luminary Mary Kelly and particularly her seminal: *Post Partum Document* of 1973-79, exploring the role of motherhood in light of Lacanian doctrine, suddenly made sense to her, and that as a result she felt her own work entering a new phase of significance and maturity.



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

With the *Coffee Morning Series* we are able to penetrate the world of Thomas' strange men whose group rituals belie their re-codified identity under the incisive and comedic examination of Thomas' observant eye. Here, in lush birch woods, predominantly naked men are caught in action while performing ritual dances, plunging into river water or exposed in fields beyond the cover of the forest: these images, like fleeting moments of movement are caught by Thomas' brush, heightening the voyeuristic impression of our having seen things that were supposed to remain private and hidden. These fleshy, middle-aged men recall modern commuters stripped of their off-the-peg suits, engaged in seemingly bizarre acts – some related to the rituals of the 'crow men' that appeared in Thomas' works such as *Father and Son* [fig. 25].



Fig. 25

Looking further we also begin to recognise echoes of familiar scenes from art history: Édouard Manet *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (1862-63) is particularly evoked in the *Coffee Morning Series*, but where the French master has nude women lounging on the grass among clothed men in top hats, in her work, Thomas instead shows stark naked men engaged in bizarre activities [fig 18]. But, unlike the classical nudes of artists such as Nicolas Poussin or Guido Reni, Thomas' men are far from representing any kind of ideal male beauty – instead they are absurd. Not all the people in scenes of this series are naked: a vicar waving ghoulish puppets makes several appearances as does the figure of a seemingly pregnant man, while a girl in a frock-dress is also a re-occurring motif, she is sometimes seen up a tree out of reach of the men below [figs.21, 22]. What exactly is

going on in these pictures is uncertain, however often beneath a surface of frivolity, run deeper undercurrents that alert us to darker disturbing atmospheres in which received values passed between generations seem to jar chaotically.

In one drawing from the series called *The Journey* an older woman and two girls are seen from between the trunks of two tall silver birch trees, the robed elder woman suggests a sibylline figure of wisdom or guidance, while the two girls, one dressed the other not, suggest meanings of experience and innocence: perhaps indirect references to both Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (1513-14) and William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) [fig.24].. Perhaps in this double child figure we see both the principal, knowing, viewer (and maker) of the scenes that make up the *Coffee Morning Series* and Thomas' innocent protagonist that follows 'the path' in her paintings.



Fig. 24

In the six magnificent *tondi* that make up the new works called *Ripe for the Picking* (oil on panel, approx. 80 cm diameter, 2008) Thomas brings us face to face with the types of personality that make up the masculine ritual dancers of her previous narrative paintings [fig. 26].



Fig. 26

She has said that their features are as much drawn from those of people she knows or has seen on the street, such as farm-hands and office workers, to found photographs of people represented in the media. By levelling the distance between labourer and media star, Thomas focuses attention on the protagonist's essential presence in her narrative, as the men who make society. Represented against backgrounds of bright, blooming roses, or as in one case, Thomas' trade-mark silver birch wood with a carnivalesque striped marquee beyond, the men in these pictures are caught in animation, lips parted as if in speech, or eyes glaring as if brooding some dark thought [fig. 27, 28]. These representational methods recall those of a Franz Hals or a Van Dyck, but unlike these old masters, Thomas' object is not that of portraiture, but that of creating iconic 'types', similar to the ancient process of using models to represent the Madonna: the model may have been the painter's lover or an aristocrat but once she was represented in her new sacred role her real identity, in most cases, was lost to all.



Fig. 27

Face to face with the male protagonists of Thomas' narrative, we recognise a series of powerful male types: confident, concerned or confrontational they are bound by an air of commanding superiority, yet they are also rendered absurd by their self-assertive posturing – a point that in several of these images is further confirmed by the 'effeminate' floral backgrounds that impose on our reading of their features, and in one case is made explicit, by the presence of the red and white striped circus tent. Undoubtedly these paintings are laced with a rich vein of dark humour, however as the works of an assertive female artist they are also a powerful comment on the comportment of her male counterparts in society.



Fig.28

In essence, with these works Thomas invites us to go beyond this simple reading of her subjects, proposing the idea that each character is like an actor on stage, simply performing the parts that are expected of them (and each performing with greater or lesser degrees of pleasure or relief) thus revealing that her protagonists, like the women in her earlier paintings, are the products of a force greater than themselves, that confines them in set roles, that they may find hard to escape. With paintings such as these Thomas reveals the cracks in social veneers: demonstrating that through the act of image making routes can be found beyond the mundane to reveal the extraordinary and true. Asserting the purpose of her role as an image-maker Thomas has said that: 'My work is about anger, love, empathy and beauty – which laughing is part of. Laughing can unravel many things in life. It can even undermine dark, tightly hidden secrets and fears that need to be shared in order that they are dispelled and life lived truly and fully.'

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¹ *Snatch* is a colloquial British term for female genitalia

² YBA: Young British Artists is the name given to a group of conceptual artists, painters, sculptors and installation artists based in the United Kingdom. The term Young British Artists is derived from shows of that name staged at the Saatchi Gallery from 1992 onwards, bringing artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin to fame.

³ Richard Franklin Speck (1941-1991) was a mass murderer who systematically killed eight student nurses from South Chicago Community Hospital in Chicago, Illinois in 1966.

⁴ The Baader-Meinhof Group was West Germany's most violent and prominent post-war militant left-wing terrorist organisation, later known as The Red Army Faction (German *Rote Armee Fraktion*) or RAF.

⁵ Examples of such works by Tuymans are: *Ceiling* oil on canvas 1992 or *Silent Music* 1992, oil on canvas.

⁶ Thomas points out that: '*New Jerusalem* was a concept used by Clement Attlee when he won the 1945 British General Election, declaring that his government would build 'New' Jerusalem. Considering the UK to be 'Jerusalem' is a stirring and emotional concept, that holds strong with the eponymous song, composed by Charles Hubert Parry using William Blake's Preface to Milton (1804) which is often preferred to the British national anthem 'God Save The Queen'.'

⁷ The verse Preface to William Blake's *Milton* reads: 'And did those feet in ancient time / Walk upon England's mountain's green: / And as the holy Lamb of God / On England's pleasant pastures seen! // And did the Countenance Divine / Shine forth upon our clouded hills? / And was Jerusalem builded here / Among these dark Satanic Mills? // Bring me my Bow of burning gold: Bring me my Arrows of desire: / Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold! / Bring me my Chariot of fire! // I will not cease from Mental Fight, / Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand / Till we have built Jerusalem / In England's green & pleasant Land.' from *Poems and Prophecies*, Everyman's Library-Alfred A. Knopf, New York London 1991, pp. 120-21.

⁸ As her source for this pose, Thomas cites frescoes such as *The Annunciation* by Fra Angelico of 1438-45, (Convent of San Marco, Florence).

⁹ Thomas comments that these figures are loosely derived from those of sleeping soldiers in Piero Della Francesca's fresco *The Resurrection* (225 cm x 200 cm) that she saw when she was younger in the *Museo Civico* at Sansepolco.

¹⁰ Morris dancing is a form of English folk dance usually accompanied by music. Choreographed figures step in time to music whilst wielding variable implements such as sticks, swords, hoops or handkerchiefs.

Sharon Thomas Essay Illustrations

NB. In the essay, where Sharon Thomas' paintings are listed I have given them figure [fig.] numbers that correspond to the list below.

Sharon Thomas: making of a painter

1. Sharon Thomas: *Body Portrait*, 1999, Charcoal on Paper 100 x 150 cm (court. of artist)
2. Jenny Saville- *Plan*, 1993 oil on canvas, 274.5cm x 213.5cm, The Saatchi Collection. London
3. Sharon Thomas: *The Sun Shines Out of Mine* 2000 oil on board 40cm x 40cm approx (Private Collection, UK) (court. of artist)
4. Sharon Thomas: *Snatch*, 2001, oil on canvas on board, 40cm x 40cm (court. of artist)
5. Sharon Thomas: *Girls Next Door Series* 2001 30cm x 40 cm, oil on board (court. of artist)
 - *Clare from Acton Bridge*
 - *Sophie from Milton Keynes* Oil on canvas on board 23 x 23cm
 - *Lucy from Leamington Spa*
 - *Corrina from Stoke-on-Trent*
 - *Vanessa from Hereford*
 - *Dolores from Dagenham*
6. Gerard Richter: *Eight Student Nurses* series, 1966, 95cm x 70cm oil on canvas, Private Collection, Zurich, Switzerland
7. Sharon Thomas: *Sitting, Looking, With Mirror*, 2001, Oil on board, 178cm x 158cm (Private Collection)(court. of artist)
8. Lisa Yuskavage: *Wrist Corsage* 1996 Oil on linen, 182.9cm x 213.3 cm. MOMA, NYC, U.S.A (Fractional and promised gift of David Teiger)
9. Constable: *Dedham Vale*, 1802 oil on canvas 145cm x 122cm Victoria and Albert Museum, London
10. Sharon Thomas: *New Jerusalem* 2004, oil on canvas, 101.6cm x 152.4cm (Private Collection, USA) (court. of artist)
11. Sharon Thomas: *Girl in Fur Coat and Crinoline* 2003 oil on board 45cm x 35cm approx (court. of artist)
12. Sharon Thomas: *Regina Res Publica (Gina)*, 2004 oil on canvas 167.6cm x 224.8cm (court. of artist)
13. Sharon Thomas: *Kate's Progress (Mounted)*, 2005 oil on canvas, 89cm x 127 cm (Private Collection) (court. of artist)
14. Sharon Thomas: *Apotropaic* 2005 charcoal on Fabriano paper 100cm x 340cm (Private Collection) (court. of artist)
15. Sharon Thomas: *Nights at Fairy Hill* (mixed media, 2006) (court. of artist)
16. Sharon Thomas: *Ridicule (Is nothing to be scared of)* 2005 oil on canvas 40.5cm x 35.5 cm (Private Collection) (court. of artist)
17. Gainsborough: *The Blue Boy* (c 1770) oil on canvas, 177.8 x 112.1 cm The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, U.S.A
18. Sharon Thomas: *It's all about the fun of the chase, Bob*, 2006 oil on canvas, 200cm x 305 cm (court. of artist)
19. William Blake: *The Ghost of a Flea* circa 1819-20 Tempera heightened with gold on mahogany, 21.4cm x 16.2 cm Bequeathed by W. Graham Robertson 1949 to The Tate Gallery, London
20. Sharon Thomas: *Fruits of the Forest*, 2006 oil on canvas, 186cm x 142 cm (court. of artist)

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21. Sharon Thomas: *Coffee Morning Series: A Useful Conversation*, 2008, coffee and pigment on paper, A4 (court. of artist)
 22. Sharon Thomas: *Coffee Morning Series: He's Behind You*, 2008, coffee and pigment on paper, A4 (court. of artist)
 23. John Currin: *Stamford After-Brunch*, 2000, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 152.4 cm collection of Andrea Rosen Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery.
 24. Sharon Thomas: *The Journey*, 2008, coffee and pigment on paper, A4 (court. of artist)
 25. Sharon Thomas: *Father and Son*, 2005 Charcoal on paper, 100 x 110cm
 26. Sharon Thomas: *Ripe for the Picking (band of brothers)*, 2008 oil on panel, 60 cm diameter approx (court. of artist)
 - *Jack and Jill*
 - *Man With Two Finches*
 - *Nice Peonies Mister*
 - *Sweet Cheeks in Blue*
 - *Circus Master*
 - *The Clown*
 27. Sharon Thomas: *A Bird's Eye View #1*, 2009, oil on canvas, 122cm x 97cm
 28. Sharon Thomas: *A Bird's Eye View #2*, oil on canvas, 101.5 x 76cm