

Lisa Wright – The Unversed

There's a pathos to Lisa Wright's extensive new body of work. Her paintings are home to youthful figures who stand out of context and nearly always alone. Sometimes they threaten to disappear into the background altogether. Either way, they stare out at you defiantly or bitterly or resignedly.

Much has been made of Wright's representation of prepubescents, often, though not exclusively, girls. The difficult physical and emotional in-between nature of the age, in the throws of heightened development and the sense of Wright's figures being on the cusp of maturity – not quite knowing themselves – makes perfect metaphorical fodder for a painter, and a painting in progress.

Wright's point of departure is eighteenth century French portraiture. Her cast of figures derive from art historical sources and reappear here meticulously observed and drafted, with impressive painterly handling. Ruffs, bows, structured domed skirts and shawls abound, all adding to the theatricality and time specific nature of her subject matter. But Wright uses colour to undercut this specificity. Her jewel like palette, of rich reds, royal blues, turquoise, baby pinks and deep blacks glows, often creating strong contrasts between her figures and their backgrounds. These anachronistic abstractions lead her figures to appear plucked from the flow of history and then cast adrift in unspecific colour spaces.

Moving beyond the sentimental overtones of Wright's source material, however, is not easy. There's a saccharine quality to the rosy-cheeked purity of her pre-pubescents which Wright works hard to negotiate. *Fête Galante* is a great example of this. This big, largely sickly turquoise green work sways between the intensely detailed and the sketchily unfinished. The ornateness of the semi-naked female figure's lacy skirt is balanced out by the shadowy greek or roman statue that looms above the girl. And then there's the harlequin clown that leans lasciviously in towards the unrobed girl, and whose legs appear as just charcoaled silhouettes.

Wright also builds on the historical props of her subjects' time to unsettle the otherwise uncomfortably voyeuristic position in which she places her viewers. Theatrical masks, elaborate fabrics, patterning and tattoo like embellishments allude to disguises and role playing.

But Wright is at her best in the detail. There are small but exquisite passages of green fluorescent paint that adorn the bell like baby pink dress of *Flesh Dress*, for example. Wright's use of fluorescent cuts satisfyingly through the lovely though polite palette that she uses elsewhere. It creates lurid patinas that might be either intricate embroidery overlaying a dress or a painterly add on. Disruptions like these, jolt her paintings out of their fairytale or dreamlike aesthetic.

Similarly the unpolished sections of paintwork lend a lightness that Wright's more heavily worked passages hold back. There are hints of unselfconscious oddness in her work, like in *Ribbon Wrists* in which the drawn red silhouette of a young boy looks awkwardly out from a murky grey and black streaked background. When Wright cedes total control of her image and her paint, when she starts to take a step back, letting her images be messy or even awkward, her work begins to take hold of you not by its staged loveliness but by its ineffable strangeness.

Lizzie Lloyd 2015