

Gwen Hardie

Essay from catalog for “Skin Over Bone”, by Lindsay Blair

Gwen Hardie set out from a very early stage in her career on a route from which her personal language would emerge, one which was true to herself, and which would be refined and consolidated through the medium of oil paint. Over three decades she has continued to materialize ideas of the female body. This exhibition presents a nucleus of the artist's production from the recent past through the distinctive round and oval canvases, which she favors. On the surface of the canvases the interest is in the lines, the folds, the creases of the landscape of the body, which the eye loses and then finds again. She is interested in the exactitude of the close-up. The paintings embody a spatial conundrum: how to translate the curve of the body and the depth of tissue matter beneath the skin onto the flat canvas without losing either the complexity or the play of limits which is formed in their interrelationship.

Hardie does not indicate the space upon which the body is articulated: whether it is seated or standing, leaning or reclining. The mediation of the reality or the situation of the corporeal space is no longer manifest as it was in earlier work. A painting *Fist I* from 1986, for example, which is housed in the Scottish National Gallery Collection, has all of the weight of the body concentrated in the hand and this gives weight to the rest of the 'inferred' body. In the painting of the breast, from this current series, space is relational. There is no context here for the body parts; she seeks the text of the space by the way she imposes herself on the given materials. So, in the depiction of the tissue mass of the breast in relation to the lower throat in *Body 03.30.09* or the protuberances of the nipple and areola in *Body 03.20.12*, an organic geometry is revealed, geometry intrinsic to the natural world, to life forms. The veins and capillaries create a linear dynamic - the lines of connecting tissues cut across and into the painterly spaces. Space is worked by drawing with paint but also by an 'imprint', a wash that marks a pale, radiant, luminous space.

Hardie studied at Edinburgh College of Art and some of her earliest paintings after leaving college were large scale images of standing figures or heads. She then went to Berlin to study with George Baselitz and a new, more elemental dynamic entered her work. On moving to the United States in 2000 she turned briefly towards abstraction. A key moment followed this when sharp observation re-entered her vision: the paintings on show in this exhibition belong to this latter period where there is an analogous relationship between the paint surface and the surface of the body. The outcome is a re-drafting of the map of what we would have thought of as the most familiar of all terrains - a reconfiguration of the human body which takes us onwards to fresh and vital considerations.

Hardie's representations of the body squeeze all the sentimentality and sexual ramifications out of the image of the female figure until only something pure is left. By the 1980's her work participates in what has become the total re-alignment of the female subject within the work of art - not just in painting, of course, but in literature and the cinema. Hardie's work emerges in the context of the feminist-inflected postmodernist scene where female artists are no longer the 'objects' within the artwork but have become, instead, the

'subjects'. The ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty were circulating during this period, one of which is particularly pertinent here: "my body is what opens me out upon the world and places me in a situation there".¹ The performance of the body becomes a strategy for artists to address identity politics and to question the way in which gender is culturally enforced. Cindy Sherman, for example, in her theatrical set-ups and film stills exaggerates her own passivity and objectification. Although Sherman's methods are quite opposite to those of Hardie's, she could be seen to share with Hardie, the desire to evolve another gaze: one that embraces rather than penetrates the female form.

Hardie's canvases for all their materiality are about fragility. Each painting of a part of the body – the wrist, the underside of the breast, the nipple, the crease under the arm – asks to be read as the arrangement of parts within the strictures of time and space. The use of synecdoche as preferred signifier makes not only the part stand in place of the body as itself but somehow for all that the body is subject to – that is the external world beyond. The narrow lines, threads, creases, capillaries run across the canvas as the rivers, burns, fissures run across the landscape. The life of the world beyond finds its reflection in Hardie's own body painting – like the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, Hardie's paintings suggest a world of echoes where the human and the outside world reflect each other creating different patterns in their shifting orbits. It is a world which allows for multiple refractions and textural variations but remains, finally, always relational.

John Berger says "In reality we are always between two times: that of the body and that of consciousness".² There is a distinction made in all cultures between body and soul. In the representation of the human body in these studies, Hardie explores the surface of the body, but takes us beyond. The space of our body is not only visual but tactile – a vital space. Hardie, in beginning with that frontier from which all our spatial relations grow, expands our consciousness and delivers form with eloquent and exquisite deftness.

Lindsay Blair, February 2013

Dr Lindsay Blair is a researcher and lecturer at Moray College, University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland.

She made a BBC TV Omnibus documentary, 'Joseph Cornell: Worlds in a Box' and wrote a book: Joseph Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order. She regularly writes for journals and publications.

¹ *Phenomenology of Perception*, (NY and London, 1962) trans. Colin Smith, p. 165

² John Berger, *and our faces, my heart, brief as photos*, (1984).